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Knowledge, Epistemic Possibility,
and Scepticism

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Keith Douglas DeRose

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Chapter 1:

Contextualism, Knowledge Attributions, and Scepticism

A. Contextualism: Initial Exposition. Consider the following cases.

Bank Case A. My wife and I are driving home on a Friday afternoon. We plan to stop at the bank on the way home to deposit our paychecks. But as we drive past the bank, we notice that the lines inside are very long, as they often are on Friday afternoons. Although we generally like to deposit our paychecks as soon as possible, it is not especially important in this case that they be deposited right away, so I suggest that we drive straight home and deposit our paychecks on Saturday morning. My wife says, "Maybe the bank won't be open tomorrow. Lots of banks are closed on Saturdays." I reply, "No, I know it'll be open. I was just there two weeks ago on Saturday. It's open until noon."

Bank Case B. My wife and I drive past the bank on a Friday afternoon, as in Case A, and notice the long lines. I again suggest that we deposit our paychecks on Saturday morning, explaining that I was at the bank on Saturday morning only two weeks ago and discovered that it was open until noon. But in this case, we have just written a very large and very important check. If our paychecks are not deposited into our checking account before Monday morning, the important check we wrote will bounce, leaving us in a very bad situation. And, of course, the bank is not open on Sunday. My wife reminds me of these facts. She then says, "Banks do change their hours. Do you know the bank will be open tomorrow?" I reply, "Well, no, I'd better go in and make sure."

Assume that in both Case A and Case B, the bank will be open on Saturday. It seems to me that (1) when I claim

to know that the bank will be open on Saturday in case A, I am saying something true. But it also seems that (2) I am saying something true in Case B when I concede that I don't know that the bank will be open on Saturday. Yet I seem to be in no better position to know in Case A than in Case B. It is quite natural to say that (3) If I know that the bank will be open on Saturday in Case A, then I also know that it will be in Case B.¹

Is there any conflict here among (1), (2), and (3)? I hope not, because I want to investigate and defend a view according to which all three of them are true. Of course, it would be inconsistent to claim that (1) and (2) are true, and also hold that (4) If what I say in Case A in claiming to know that the bank will be open on Saturday is true, then what I say in Case B in conceding that I don't know that the bank will be open on Saturday is false. But there is a big difference between (3) and (4), and this difference is crucial to the view I want to investigate and defend.

¹(1), (2), and (3) at least all seem true provided that there is nothing unusual about the two Bank Cases that has not been included in my descriptions of them.

We may, following Peter Unger, call the view I want to investigate a "contextual"² theory of knowledge attributions: it is a theory according to which the truth conditions of sentences of the form "S knows that p" or "S does not know that p" vary in certain ways according to the context in which the sentences are uttered. The contextualist can deny (4) even while admitting that I am in no better position to know in Case A than in Case B. The contexts of my utterances in the two cases make it easier for a knowledge attribution to be true in Case A than in Case B.

There are important contextual differences between Case A and Case B which one might think are relevant. First, there is the importance of being right. In Case B, a lot hinges on whether or not the bank will be open on Saturday, while in Case A it is not nearly as important that I be right. One might think that requirements for making a knowledge attribution true go up as the stakes go up.

Second, there is the mentioning of a possibility. In Case B my wife raises the possibility that the bank may have changed its hours in the last two weeks. One might

²I take the terms "contextualism" and "invariantism" from Unger's book Philosophical Relativity.

think that if this possibility has been mentioned, I cannot truly claim to know that the bank will be open on Saturday on the ground that two weeks ago it was open on Saturday unless I can rule out the possibility that the bank's hours have changed since then. On the other hand, perhaps I don't have to be able to rule out this possibility in order to truly say I know if, as in Case A, no such possibility has not been suggested.

Third, there is the consideration of a possibility. Since my wife raised the possibility of the bank changing its hours in Case B, I have that possibility in mind when I utter my sentence. Perhaps, since I am considering this possibility, I must be able to rule it out in order to truly claim to know that the bank will be open on Saturday. On the other hand, in Case A, I am not considering the possibility, so perhaps I do not have to be able to rule it out in order to truthfully say that I know that the bank will be open on Saturday. (Of course, it must still be true that the bank will be open on Saturday in order for me to know that it will be.)

Examples in which our standards for attributing knowledge change could be multiplied. In "Other Minds", Austin writes:

Sometimes, it is said, we use 'I know' where we should be prepared to substitute 'I believe', as when we say 'I know that he's in, because his hat is in the hall': thus 'know' is used loosely for 'believe', so why should we suppose that there is a fundamental difference between them? But the question is, what exactly do we mean by 'prepared to substitute' and 'loosely'? We are 'prepared to substitute' believe for know not as an equivalent expression but as a weaker and therefore preferable expression, in view of the seriousness with which, as has become apparent, the matter is to be treated: the presence of the hat, which would serve as a proof of its owner's presence in many circumstances, could only through laxity be adduced as a proof in a court of law.

While we might say we know on the basis of the presence of the hat in one case, we would not so say in a court of law, but in neither setting is claiming to know as weak as is merely claiming to believe. Here one might think that the importance of being right is what moves the standards. But the setting (in a court of law) might also be an independent source of standard raising. One might think that standards for claiming to know are higher in such a setting regardless of how trivial is the matter being decided; even if the case is only over a \$10 fine, the standards might be quite a bit higher than are the standards in another setting, even when the stakes are somewhat higher in that other setting. In "Other Minds", Austin seems to be interested in the

³"Other Minds", p. 76, fn. 1.

conditions under which knowledge claims are justified or appropriately made rather than in the conditions under which they are true, and in fact gives indications of being sceptical about knowledge claims having a truth value. But we may take his example as another case in which the standards for true knowledge attributions change according to various contextual factors.

Again following Unger, we may call someone who denies that the types of contextual factors we have just looked at affect the truth conditions of knowledge attributions an "invariantist." According to the invariantist, such features of an utterance of a knowledge attribution do not affect how good a position the putative knower must be in for the attribution to be true. In considering the Bank Cases, for instance, the invariantist will assert (4), which seems very plausible, and therefore deny either (1) or (2). Typically, the invariantist will deny (1). In fact, Unger uses the term "invariantism" to denote the position that the standards for true knowledge attributions remain constant and very high -- as high as they can possibly be. This position I will call "sceptical invariantism," leaving the more general term "invariantism" to denote any position according to which the truth conditions for knowledge

attribution do not vary in the way the contextualist claims they do, whether or not the standards are said to be very high. I will then use "non-sceptical invariantism" to refer to a position according to which the standards are held to be constant but relatively low.⁴ The sceptical invariantist will deny (1). She may admit that I am warranted in asserting that I know in Case A or that it is useful for me to say that I know, but will insist that what I say in claiming that I know is, strictly speaking, false. On the other hand, similar maneuvers can be used by the non-sceptical invariantist to deny (2). A non-sceptical invariantist may admit that I should not say that I know in Case B, because my wife mistakenly thinks that I must be able to rule out the possibility that the bank has changed its hours in order to know that the bank will be open on Saturday, and saying that I know will lead her to

⁴While Unger does not even consider the view that the standards for true knowledge attributions don't change but are held constant at a fairly low level, non-sceptical invariantism is defended (at least conditionally) in Robert Hambourger's "Justified Assertion and the Relativity of Knowledge." Hambourger argues that if the standards are constant (Hambourger does not believe that this antecedent is true), then they must be fairly low (pp. 256-257). In the terminology I have introduced, Hambourger is arguing that if some form of invariantism is correct, it must be a form of non-sceptical invariantism.

believe that I can rule out that possibility. Still, my wife is mistaken about this requirement, and if I were to say that I knew, I would be saying something that is, though misleading, true. Thus, it is useful for me to assert that I don't know. But for all its usefulness, my assertion is, strictly speaking, false.

Contextualists, of course, can disagree about what types of features of the context of utterance really do affect the truth conditions of knowledge attributions and to what extent they do so. I will not here enter into this thorny issue, although I have a preference for the more "objective" features -- like the importance of being right and what has been said in the conversation -- and tend to discount as relevant to truth conditions such "subjective" features as what possibilities the speaker is considering.⁵ In this chapter I address

⁵My main reason for discounting as relevant to truth conditions the matter of what the speaker is thinking, at least with respect to spoken interactions between people, is that I don't think that one should be able, merely by a private act of one's own thought, to drastically "strengthen" the content of "know" in such a way that one can truly say to someone who is quite certain that he is wearing pants, "You don't know you're wearing pants," without there having been anything in the conversation to indicate that the strength of "know" has been raised. There might yet be a fairly tight connection between what raises the truth condition standards and what speakers tend to think or perhaps what they should think of the standards as being. Perhaps the truth condition standards are what a typical speaker would take them to be or should take them to be,

general issues that confront any contextualist. In Part B, I distinguish between contextualism and what has been called the "relevant alternatives" view of knowledge; in Part C, I respond to an important objection to which any form of contextualism seems to be vulnerable. Then, in parts D and E, I explain the connection between contextualism and scepticism, and out the outline the rest of this dissertation more fully than was possible in the Introduction.

B. Contextualism and "Relevant Alternatives". The most popular form of contextualism, I think it is fair to say, is what has been called the "relevant alternatives" view of knowledge (RA). But we must be careful here. As we shall see, it is a bit tricky to say just in what sense RA is a contextualist view. According to RA, a claim to know that p is made within a certain framework of relevant alternatives which are incompatible with p. To know that p is to be able to distinguish p from these

given what has gone on in the conversation. But it seems unfair to one's interlocutor for the truth condition standards of a public, spoken knowledge attribution to be changed by an idiosyncratic, private decision. It is far more plausible to suppose that when one is thinking to one's self about what is or is not "known", the content of "know" is directly tied to the strength the thinker intends.

relevant alternatives, to be able to rule out these relevant alternatives to p. But not every contrary of or alternative to p is a relevant alternative.⁶ In an ordinary case of, say, claiming to know that some animals in a zoo are zebras,⁷ the alternative that they are cleverly painted mules is not a relevant alternative, and one need not be able to rule it out in order truly to claim to know that the animals are zebras. But in an extraordinary case, that alternative might be relevant. How can it become relevant?

In one of the standard presentations of RA, "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge," Alvin Goldman presents various factors which affect the range of relevant alternatives for knowledge attributions. These factors may be divided into two groups. First, there are features of the putative knower's situation; these I will call "subject factors."⁸ A subject in an ordinary

⁶See A.I. Goldman, "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge," p. 772; G.C. Stine, "Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives, and Deductive Closure," p. 249; and F. Dretske, "Epistemic Operators," p. 1022.

⁷This is Dretske's example; see F. Dretske, "Epistemic Operators", pp. 1015-1016.

⁸Please note that by "subject factors", I do not mean subjective (as opposed to objective) factors. I rather mean factors having to do with the putative subject of knowledge and her surroundings (as opposed to the attributor of knowledge).

situation can be truly said to know that what he sees up ahead is a barn even if he cannot rule out the possibility that it is just a barn facade. But, Goldman claims, if there are a lot of such facades in the putative knower's vicinity, then the possibility that what the person is seeing is just a facade is a relevant alternative, and the person does not know that he is seeing a barn, even if what he sees happens to be an actual barn (pp. 772-773).

Second, there are features of the speaker's situation, which I will call "attributor factors." Goldman writes, "It is not only the circumstances of the putative knower's situation, however, that influence the choice of alternatives. The speaker's own linguistic and psychological context are also important." Goldman suggests that "if the speaker is in a class where Descartes's evil demon has just been discussed," then certain alternatives may be relevant which ordinarily are not (p. 776).

Insofar as a relevant alternatives theorist allows attributor factors to influence which alternatives are relevant, he is a contextualist. An invariantist can be a relevant alternatives theorist if he only allows subject factors to influence which alternatives are

relevant. Consider two situations in which Henry has a good, clear look at what he takes to be -- and what, in fact, is -- a barn. In Case C, there are no barn facades around; in Case D, the whole area is filled with barn facades, but Henry is luckily looking at the only actual barn in the area. This does not seem to be a pair of cases in which Henry is in equally good positions to know that what he is seeing is a barn; the conditional, If Henry knows in Case C, then he knows in Case D does not seem to be true, so the invariantist can agree that a sentence attributing knowledge to Henry in Case C can be true, while one attributing knowledge to him in Case D is false. And he can use the idea of "relevant alternatives" to explain the difference.

Thus, although most versions of RA allow attributor factors to be relevant and are therefore contextualist views, an RA theorist need not be a contextualist. Of course, in first-person present tense knowledge claims, the attributor of knowledge and the putative subject of knowledge are in the same situation (they are the same person at the same time). If Henry says, "I know that that's a barn," we cannot distinguish the speaker from the putative knower. In this situation the invariantist will allow only factors that attach to

Henry qua putative knower (eg. the presence or lack of facades in his vicinity) to matter in evaluating his claim for truth, while the contextualist will also allow factors that attach to Henry qua knowledge attributor (such as whether or not the issue of facades has been raised in the conversation) to matter.

Although Goldman draws the distinction between what I am calling subject factors and attributor factors, he does not explain the importance of this distinction. I am stressing it because it is crucial to some of the important claims RA theorists have wanted to make about the meaning of knowledge attributions. In a discussion of RA, Gail Stine writes:

In Dretske's zoo example, the animal's being a mule painted to look like a zebra is not a relevant alternative. So what one means when one says that John knows the animal is a zebra, is that he knows it is a zebra, as opposed to a gazelle, an antelope, or other animals one would normally expect to find in a zoo. If, however, being a mule painted to look like a zebra became a relevant alternative, then one would literally mean something different in saying that John knows that the animal is a zebra from what one meant originally and that something else may well be false.

But here we must be very careful. Much depends on how the animal's being a painted mule has become a relevant

alternative. Suppose that it has become a relevant alternative because there has been a zebra shortage and many zoos (even reputable zoos) have been using painted mules in an attempt to fool the zoo-going public. This could come about without the speaker's knowing it. Would one then mean something different by saying that John knows that the animal is a zebra? I think not. The meaning of "meaning", of course, is difficult to get hold of. But there seems to be a fairly straightforward sense in which one does mean something different if the range of relevant alternatives has been changed by attributor factors but does not mean something different if the range of relevant alternatives has been changed only by subject factors.

Stewart Cohen provides a nice statement of the view I am calling contextualism. Cohen writes that he construes "knowledge" as an indexical. As such, one speaker may attribute knowledge to a subject while another speaker denies knowledge to that same subject, without contradiction.

This lack of contradiction is the key to the sense in which the knowledge attributor and the knowledge denier mean something different by "know". It is similar to

¹⁰S. Cohen, "How to be a Fallibilist," p. 97. See also S. Cohen, "Knowledge, Context, and Social Standards."

⁹G.C. Stine, "Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives, and Deductive Closure", p. 255.

the sense in which two people who think they are in the same room but are in fact in different rooms and are talking to each other over an intercom mean something different by "this room" when one claims, "Frank is not in this room" and the other insists, "Frank is in this room -- I can see him!" There is an important sense in which both do mean the same thing by "this room", in which they are using the phrase in the same sense. But there is also an important sense in which they do not mean the same thing by the phrase; this is the sense by which we can explain the lack of contradiction between what the two people are saying. To use David Kaplan's terminology, the phrase is being used with the same character, but with different content.¹¹ Similarly, in my example from Part A of this paper, when, in the face of my wife's doubt, I admit that I don't know that the bank will be open on Saturday, I don't contradict an earlier claim to know that I might have made before the doubt was raised and before the issue was so important because, in an important sense, I don't mean the same thing by "know" as I meant in the earlier claim -- "know" is not being used with the same content.

¹¹See D. Kaplan, "Demonstratives," esp. pp. 500-507.

But if the range of relevant alternatives is changed by subject factors, the meaning of "know" is not in the same way changed. If very many banks have discontinued their Saturday hours in the last two weeks, then it seems that my original claim to know may well have been false, and if I admit that I did not know after the surprising fact about banks is called to my attention, I may well be taking back and contradicting my earlier claim to have known.

Recall the two cases in which Henry has a good, clear look at what he takes to be a barn. (In Case C, there are no barn facades around, but in Case D, the fields are filled with barn facades, but Henry is luckily looking at the only actual barn in the area.) In each case, insert two people in the back seat of the car Henry is driving, and have the first say to the second, "Henry knows that that is a barn." It seems that, in the sense under discussion, what the first person means by "knows" in each of the two cases is the same. In Case C she is saying something true, and in Case D she is saying something false. The presence of the barn facades has changed the truth value, but not the truth conditions or the meaning, of the first person's knowledge attribution.

So subject factors affect the truth values of knowledge attributions in a different way than do attributor factors: attributor factors working in such a way that they affect the meaning of the attribution, but subject factors working in a different way that does not affect its meaning. What are these ways in which the two types of factors work? Cohen, who stresses attributor factors, writes:

An essential aspect of the version of the theory of relevant alternatives I wish to defend is that the standards that govern relevance are context-sensitive. How probable an alternative must be in order to be relevant will depend on the context in which the knowledge attribution is made.¹²

According to Cohen, then, aspects of the context of the attribution -- like, perhaps, whether the painted mules possibility has been raised in conversation -- affect "how probable an alternative must be in order to be relevant." Expanding this idea, we might then take aspects of the putative knower's situation -- like whether many zoos are using painted mules to fool zoogoers -- to affect how probable a given alternative is.

I have grave misgivings about RA's ability to explain the contextual aspects of knowledge attributions, and I would hesitate to put the stress on probability that

¹²S. Cohen, "How to be a Fallibilist", p. 96.

Cohen does. But the way of dividing factors derived from Cohen in the above paragraph can be put into the more general (and, perhaps, vaguer) form with which I have been working. What I have been calling attributor factors can be said to affect how good a position the putative knower must be in to count as knowing, and thereby to affect the truth conditions and the meaning of the attribution, and subject factors can be said to affect how good a position the putative knower actually is in.¹³ According to this more general form of contextualism, we may say that the context or the attributor factors determine the strength of a given knowledge attribution by determining how good a position one must be in to count as knowing. To make use of the character/content distinction, the "character" of "S knows that p" is, roughly, that S has a true belief that p and is in a good enough epistemic position with respect to p; this remains constant from attribution to attribution. But how good is good enough? This is what

¹³Unger makes a similar division in "The Cone Model of Knowledge," esp. pp. 139-140, where he distinguishes between the "profile of the context", which corresponds roughly to how good a position the putative knower must be in to count as knowing, and the "profile of the facts", which corresponds roughly to how good a position the putative knower actually is in. In the article, Unger does not discuss RA, and so does not use the distinction to distinguish contextualism from RA.

varies with context. What the context fixes in determining the "content" of a knowledge attribution is how good an epistemic position S must be in to count as knowing that p.¹⁴ The mentioning of alternatives like painted mules, or barn facades, or changes in banking hours, when there is no special reason for thinking such possibilities likely, can be seen as raising the strength and changing the content of "know" because the ability to rule out such alternatives would only be relevant if one were after a strong form of knowledge (if one were requiring the putative knower to be in a very good position in order to count as knowing).¹⁵

RA theorists have thought that the meaning of knowledge attributions changes from case to case depending upon various factors, and they have thought that this change in meaning amounts to a change in the

¹⁴See Kaplan's "Afterthoughts," pp. 591-599 for some helpful remarks on the relation of context to content for demonstratives and indexicals. Some of these remarks are relevant to our contextual theory of knowledge attributions.

¹⁵David Lewis presents an interesting account of how the mentioning of sceptical possibilities can affect the range of relevant alternatives by means of what he calls "rules of accommodation" in "Scorekeeping in a Language Game." This account, I believe, can be adapted to the more general form of contextualism with which I am working in order to explain how the mentioning of these possibilities affects the strength of knowledge attributions. See section I of Chapter 3.

range of alternatives that are relevant.¹⁶ But we can now see that one cannot explain the strength of a knowledge attribution by citing what the range of relevant alternatives is, because this range is a function of subject factors (which do not affect the meaning of the attribution) as well as attributor factors (which do). There can be a drastic change in the range of relevant alternatives from one attribution to another without there being any change in meaning between the two attributions, because the change in the range of relevant alternatives can be the result of differences in subject factors.

¹⁶In addition to the Stine passage we have looked at, consider the following from F. Dretske, "Epistemic Operators": "To know that x is A is to know that x is A within a framework of relevant alternatives B, C, and D. This set of contrasts, together with the fact that x is A, serve to define what it is that is known when one knows that x is A. We have subtle ways of shifting these contrasts and, hence, changing what a person is said to know without changing the sentence that we use to express what he knows" (p. 1022; emphasis added). See also A.I. Goldman, "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge", pp. 775-777 (esp. p. 777), where Goldman seems to think that what proposition is expressed by a given knowledge attribution is specified by what the range of relevant alternatives is. Something similar seems to be suggested in D. Lewis, "Scorekeeping in a Language Game", esp. pp. 354-355. Lewis seems to think of the "conversational score" of a given context, with respect to knowledge attributions and epistemic modal statements, to be something that can be specified by giving the range of possibilities that are relevant in that context.

C. The Objection to Contextualism. Having isolated contextualism from its close relative, RA, I will in this section seek to defend contextualism from a certain objection. The obvious attraction of contextualism is that it seems to have the result that very many of the knowledge attributions and denials uttered by speakers of English are true -- more than any form of invariantism can allow for, and certainly more than sceptical invariantism can allow for. Thus, recalling the Bank Cases, contextualism allows us to assert both (1) and (2), and many of us will find both (1) and (2) compelling. Unfortunately, contextualism seems to be vulnerable to a certain type of powerful objection which is closely related to the appeal of (4). Suppose, to recall an example we've already considered, that two people see some zebras in a zoo. Palle Yourgrau constructs the following conversation, and claims that "something is amiss" in it:

- A: Is that a zebra?
B: Yes, it is a zebra.
A: But can you rule out its being merely a cleverly painted mule?

B: No, I can't.

A: So, you admit you didn't know it was a zebra?

B: No, I did know then that it was a zebra. But after your question, I no longer know.¹⁷

This absurd dialogue is aimed at contextualists who think that the mentioning of a possibility incompatible with what one claims to know is enough to require that one rule the possibility out before one can truly claim to know. But this type of attack can work against other contextualists, also. Dialogues much like the above dialogue but with the following last lines seem equally absurd:

B': No, I did know then that it was a zebra.

But now that it has become so important that it be a zebra, I no longer know.

¹⁷P. Yourgrau, "Knowledge and Relevant Alternatives", p. 183. The absurdity of such a conversation, along with the worry that it causes problems for theories of knowledge attributions like the one I am investigating, was originally suggested to me by Rogers Albritton, who has been making such suggestions since well before Yourgrau's article came out.

B': No, I did know then that it was a zebra.
But now that the possibility of its
being a painted mule, has occurred to
me, I no longer know.

The general point of the objection is that whether we
know something or not cannot depend on, to use Peter
Unger's words, "the contextual interests of those
happening to use the terms on a particular occasion."¹⁸

How shall the contextualist respond? The objection
as I have put it forward, though it may explain some of
the initial resistance one feels toward contextualism,
is based on a mistake. The contextualist believes that
certain aspects of the context of an attribution or
denial of knowledge attribution affect its truth
conditions. Knowledge claims, then, can be compared to
other sentences containing other context-sensitive
words, like "here". One hour ago, I was in my office.
Suppose I truly said, "I am here." Now I am in the word
processing room. How can I truly say where I was an
hour ago? I cannot truly say, "I was here," because I
wasn't here; I was there. The meaning of 'here', is
fixed by the relevant contextual factors (in this case,

¹⁸p. Unger, Philosophical Relativity, p. 37.

my location) of the utterance, not by my location at the
time being talked about.

Similarly, the contextualist may admit that the
mentioning of the painted mules possibility affects the
conditions under which one can truly say that one knows
an animal to be a zebra: one now must be able to rule
out that possibility, perhaps. But the contextualist
need not, and should not, countenance the above
dialogue. If in the context of the conversation the
possibility of painted mules has been mentioned, and if
the mere mention of this possibility has an effect on
the conditions under which someone can be truly said to
"know", then any use of "know" (or its past tense), is
so affected, even a use in which one describes one's
past condition. B cannot truly say, "I did know then
that it was a zebra"; that would be like my saying, "I
was here". B can say, "My previous knowledge claim was
true", just as I can say, "My previous location claim
was true." Or so I believe. But saying these things
would have a point only if one were interested in the
truth-value of the earlier claim, rather than in the
question of whether in the present contextually
determined sense one knew and knows, or didn't and
doesn't.

Yourgrau writes of the zebra case, "Typically, when someone poses a question regarding whether we really know that P obtains rather than some alternative to P, if we cannot satisfactorily answer the question, we conclude that our earlier claim to know was faulty" (p. 183). But do we? We do not stubbornly repeat ourselves, to be sure: "Still, I know that it is a zebra!" We might even say, "I don't know" or "I didn't know." (Actually, in this zebra/painted mule case, if there were no special reason for thinking that the zebras might be painted mules, I would not go so far as to make these admissions.) All of this the contextualist can handle. But do we admit that our earlier claim was false? I am on the witness stand being questioned.

Lawyer: Were there any zebras in the zoo on April 23?

Me:

Yes.

L: Do you know that?

M: Yes.

L: How do you know?

M: I saw some there.

L: So, you knew that they were zebras?

M: Yes.

L: Could you rule out the possibility that they were only cleverly painted mules?

M: No, I suppose not.

L: So, did you really know that they were zebras?

M: Is there any reason to think that they were painted mules, of all things?

L: Just answer the question!

Well, how should I answer the question? If there is no special reason to think they were painted mules then I certainly wouldn't want to admit that I didn't know they were zebras, but maybe I'm just being stubborn. Suppose I do admit it:

M: I guess I didn't know that they were zebras.

L: Aha! The witness has contradicted his earlier claim. First he says that he knew; now he says he didn't. Now which is it, Mr. DeRose?

Surely something is amiss in this dialogue; my lawyer should object. I haven't contradicted my earlier claim, as much as it looks as if I have. It would be as if the following had occurred. While standing in a bright yellow room, I said, "This room is yellow." The lawyer

then dragged me by the ear into a room in which all was grey and got me to say, "This room is grey," and now he is jumping all over me: "First he says, 'This room is yellow,' then he says, 'This room is grey.' Which is it?" The contextualist maintains that something very much like this has happened in my original dialogue with the lawyer. Of course, there is room for the invariantist to deny this contextualist claim. But it is far from clear that in cases like the one Yourgrau brings to our attention, we should admit that our earlier claim was false or that our later claim contradicts it.

So, the objection that whether we know something or not does not depend on contextual factors of the type we have been considering is based on a mistake. But Unger does not make this mistake when he raises an objection similar to the one we have been considering.¹⁹ He

¹⁹Unger may make this mistake at one point, not about knowledge but about flatness. Throughout his sceptical writings, Unger compares knowledge claims with claims about the flatness of objects. In *Philosophical Relativity*, Unger describes an invariantist semantics for "flat" according to which an object must be as flat as possible in order for a sentence like "that is flat" to be true of it, and a contextualist semantics for "flat" according to which how flat something must be in order for a sentence like "that is flat" to be true of it varies with context, and he claims that there is no determinate fact as to which semantics is correct. In attacking the contextualist semantics for "flat", Unger writes: "How can the matter of whether a given surface

writes of "our belief that the semantics of these expressions ["know" is one of the expressions being considered] is appropriately independent, that the conditions do not depend on the contextual interests of those happening to use the terms on a particular occasion" (p. 37). Insofar as we do have this belief, that the conditions for truly saying that someone knows do not depend on the sorts of contextual factors we have been discussing, then contextualism goes against at least one of our beliefs. But it seems that much of the appeal of this belief derives from the plausibility of the thesis (with which the contextualist can agree) that whether we know something or not does not depend on such

is flat, in contradistinction to, say, whether it is suitable for our croquet game, depend upon the interests in that surface taken by those who happen to converse about it? This appears to go against our better judgement" (*Philosophical Relativity*, p. 39). But the contextualist need not and should not claim that "the matter of whether or not a given surface is flat" depends "upon the interests in that surface taken by those who happen to converse about it", although the contextualist will say that the truth conditions for the sentence "that is flat" do depend upon such contextual interests. I believe that the above passage is just a slip on Unger's part; he is usually more careful in making his attack on contextualism. But it is revealing that Unger makes this slip: It shows how easy it is to confuse the claim (a) that whether or not something is flat or is known does not depend on contextual interests with the claim (b) that the truth conditions for a sentence about knowledge or flatness do not depend on contextual interests, which does not follow from (a).

factors. The answer to the question, "Does she know?", in whatever context it is asked, including a philosophy paper, is determined by facts independent of contextual factors, i.e., what I have been calling attributor factors. These contextual factors affect the meaning of the question, but once the question is asked with a specific meaning, its answer, we may say, is objectively determined. Going back to our opening examples, the contextualist can affirm (3) in any context in which it is uttered: If I know in Case A, then I know in Case B. Of course, the contextualist must deny (4), and (4) sounds very plausible, but much of the appeal of (4) comes from the plausibility of (3). And since we must give up either (1), (2), or (4), those who, like me, find (1) and (2) very plausible will be well-motivated to give up (4), especially since (3) can still be affirmed.

In general, then, when it looks as if the contextualist has to say something strongly counter-intuitive, what he must say turns out to be, on the contrary, something fairly theoretical concerning the truth conditions of certain sentences. Do we really have strong intuitions about such things? At any rate, the contextualist can go along with the simple facts

that we all recognize: that if I know in Case A, then I know in Case B, and that whether we know something or not does not typically depend on our current interests or on other such contextual factors.

I hope that I have clarified and defended contextualism at least to such a point that it looks worthy of further investigation. More complete reasons for accepting contextualism will be given in Chapter 2. But it is now time for us to explore the connection between contextualism and scepticism.

D. Contextualism, Scepticism, and "Changing the Subject". Scepticism, of course, comes in a variety of interesting forms. Theses to the effect that a surprisingly wide range of our beliefs are not justified, or are not certain, or are not true, or may not be true, can all properly be called forms of scepticism. But one of the most common varieties of scepticism is a wide-ranging denial of knowledge. I will be focussing on this form of scepticism in this dissertation, although I will also say things relevant to a treatment of the sceptical theses that our most or all of our beliefs may not be false and that they are not certain. It is not hard to see that one's approach

to the problem of philosophical scepticism will be greatly affected by the acceptance or rejection of contextualism.

In the opening of her discussion of the issues of certainty and scepticism in Ockham and other medievals, Marilyn McCord Adams characterizes sceptics as maintaining

that a belief that p is true counts as knowledge of p, only if (i) p is true and (ii) the believer has some infallible sign by means of which he can distinguish, among instances of belief that p is true, genuine from merely apparent cases of true belief,

and as holding that condition (ii) cannot be fulfilled for any of our beliefs. These sceptics, therefore, hold that "certain and infallible knowledge is impossible for human beings" (p. 551). Adams continues:

Historically, the sceptics' contentions have been met with a threefold response: (1) The most ambitious of their opponents accept the sceptics' standards for certain and infallible knowledge and argue that these standards are sometimes met. (2) Others report that no rational person should accept the sceptics' demand for an infallible sign by means of which to distinguish genuine from merely apparent instances of true belief. And they substitute "lower" alternative standards for certain knowledge. These philosophers reply, in effect, by changing the subject. For the sceptics have not denied that it is possible for us to have certain knowledge as measured by these "lower" standards, and often have allowed that--for all we know--we do have it. (3) Still other philosophers, of stronger constitution, have

²⁰M.M. Adams, William Ockham, p. 551.

accepted the sceptics' standards and granted their conclusions. (p. 551)

I think it is fairly common among philosophers to think that, while we often use quite low standards in ascribing knowledge to people in ordinary, non-philosophical contexts, there is a very high way or sense of knowing according to which the sceptic is right: We know nothing or very little.

Now, if the sceptics' two conditions are indeed put forward as conditions for when a belief "counts as knowledge", the sceptics may be the ones guilty of "changing the subject". A sceptic, I take it, doesn't want to be like the man in Barry Stroud's example who startles us with the interesting-if-true announcement that there are no physicians in New York City only to disappoint when he explains that what he means by 'physician' is "a person who has a medical degree and can cure any conceivable illness in less than two minutes."²¹ If we object to this man's standards for when someone counts as a physician, he cannot correctly respond by accusing us of "changing the subject", for he is the one guilty of that sin if the subject was the presence or absence of physicians in New York City. And

²¹The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism, p. 40.

if he meant to be discussing a different subject (the presence or absence of people who have medical degrees and can cure any conceivable illness in less than two minutes), then he should not have used the word 'physician'. This man's standards for being a physician are not "higher than usual; they are obviously wrong. And the fact that English speakers constantly describe people as knowing this and that who don't live up to the sceptics' standards may be thought to make for a presumption that the sceptics' standards are wrong, if she supposes them to be the standards for knowing, or even the standards for knowing for certain, since we also quite commonly describe people as knowing various things for certain although they don't live up to the sceptics' standards.

However, we all feel that there's some crucial difference between the sceptics' claims that we don't know and the claim of the strange man in Stroud's example: there must be, I think we should all agree, a tighter connection between the sceptics' use and the more ordinary use of 'know' than there is between the ordinary use and the strange man's use of 'physician'. Even if the sceptic is "changing the subject", she is not doing so nearly as grossly and obviously as is the

man who claims that there are no physicians in New York City.

Stroud's book, The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism, is largely an attempt to understand the philosophical sceptic's use of 'know' and how it relates to our ordinary use of that term. Stroud tries to distinguish between what he calls the sceptic's "external" and our everyday "internal" questions about and assertions and denials of knowledge.²² Stroud gives no indication of thinking that his distinction is a matter of degree, that 'know' can be used in a more or less internal or external way. For all he writes, he can be seen as making a simple, two-place division of knowledge claims into the "external" and the "internal". This would put Stroud's analysis of the difference between philosophical and ordinary talk about knowledge into the same broad category as Norman Malcolm's in "Knowledge and Belief." In that article, Malcolm distinguishes between what he calls "two senses of 'know': a "strong" sense and a "weak" sense. The main difference between these senses is that it is only in the strong sense, the sense used by philosophers in

²²See Chapter 4, Part I, where I discuss Stroud's distinction between "internal" and "external" knowledge.

discussions of philosophical scepticism, that "It could have turned out that I was mistaken' implies 'I did not know'" (p. 61).

Such analyses have the weakness of making the connection between the philosophical sceptic's and our ordinary talk of knowledge too loose. Such two-place divisions have the result that there are two, perhaps related, senses of 'know', a common and an uncommon one, and the sceptic is simply using 'know' in the uncommon sense. The relation between the two senses may be fairly substantial. Stroud would certainly want to say that both internal and external uses of 'know' require true belief plus something more for someone to count as 'knowing' something. And even though the two uses diverge on satisfies the "something more" requirement, they may well require only two different degrees of more-or-less the same type of condition (justification, warrant?). Basically, there are two sets of standards for knowledge, a high set and a low set, and living up to the high standards can be seen as having more of the same type of thing that it takes to live up to the low standards. But the strange man in Stroud's example can be viewed as, in the same way, having much higher standards for what it takes to be a physician: by his

standards, what it takes is a higher degree of physician-making properties than are required by the lower ordinary standards.

But we are now in a position to make the relation between the philosophical sceptic's talk about knowledge and ordinary uses of 'know' much tighter. For, as we have seen (recall the two Bank Cases), even in non-philosophical settings the standards we use in ascribing knowledge vary. And the sceptic, one might think, is simply using very high standards. As Stine writes:

The skeptic has an entering wedge, and rightly so. It is an essential characteristic of our concept of knowledge that tighter criteria are appropriate in different contexts. It is one thing in a street encounter, another in a law court -- and who is to say it cannot be another in a philosophical discussion.

Thus, one might think, 'know' is importantly different from 'physician', and the sceptics' claims, one might think, are importantly better off than are the man's in Stroud's example. It is not as if there had always been a single set of standards and the sceptic is now introducing a new and different set. Rather, the standards have always, even in non-philosophical talk, adjusted to context, moving up and down, and now, in

²³"Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives, and Deductive Closure," p. 254.

philosophical discussion, they are simply being raised higher than usual by methods of standard-raising that we can all recognize from our experience of their use in non-philosophical settings. If analyses of the type that Malcolm and perhaps Stroud put forward were correct, the reaction of people introduced to philosophical scepticism for the first time would probably be similar to the strong negative reaction against "changing the subject" that we have to the strange man in Stroud's example. If one set of standards had always been in place for ordinary knowledge claims, the philosophical sceptic would be viewed as doing something completely new and illegitimately misleading by continuing to use the word 'know' but suddenly introducing higher standards for its application. We might be inclined to request the sceptic to come up with a new word by which to express her conclusion that, as she now puts it, "we don't know very much," and we would think it was up to the sceptic to show that her conclusion that we don't 'know' in this new, stipulated sense has any interest. But if it has always been the case that the standards move up and down with context, the sceptic isn't doing anything radically new by raising the standards; she is, in Stine's words,

playing upon an "essential characteristic of our concept of knowledge, that tighter criteria are appropriate in different contexts", a characteristic which manifests itself constantly in non-philosophical uses of the term 'know'.

On a contextualist analysis of knowledge attributions, as we have seen, one can raise the strength and change the content of a knowledge attribution. But one is not thereby using 'know' in a different sense, unless we are willing to say that 'know' has indefinitely many "senses". It seems more natural to say that, on such an account, 'know' is being used in the same sense through all these changes of strength, but that this single sense accommodates indefinitely many strengths. The sceptic's denials of knowledge, then, need not be viewed as cases of grossly "changing the subject" as is the case of Stroud's strange man. On a Malcolm- (or perhaps Stroud-) type analysis, if we take the subject to be ordinary (weak, internal) knowing, the sceptic can be charged with "changing the subject". But on a contextualist analysis, she cannot be charged with "changing the subject", because on such an analysis, if (as the charge would require) a change in strength is taken to amount

to a change in subject, then there never has been a single subject which is identified by the ordinary use of 'know' and which is now being changed: the standards always have been varying. Thus, contextualism may tend, in some degree, to legitimate the denials of knowledge made by philosophical sceptics.

E. The Plan: Dividing and Conquering the Sceptics. But contextualism -- like two-place division theories -- also seems to safeguard the truth of ordinary claims to know. One might suspect that if contextualism were accepted, we would be led to the following result: We often are saying something true in ordinary conversation when we claim to know this or that, but the sceptic is also saying something true when she claims (in a philosophical context) that we don't know those very same things. This, as we will see, is the result that Stine and Lewis think we are led to.²⁴ Very bold sceptics -- those who want to claim or show that we are saying something literally false when, in ordinary conversation, we claim to know this or that -- would not be happy with this result. These bold sceptics are going to want to forge an even tighter connection

²⁴See Chapter 4, Part A.

between their very high standards and the meanings of ordinary knowledge attributions. They will want to claim that all knowledge attributions -- whether "philosophical" or ordinary -- mean that the putative knower lives up to the sceptic's high standards. A bold sceptic should admit that the standards one has to live up to before we typically ascribe knowledge to him do vary, but she will claim that most of our knowledge attributions are false because the truth conditions of knowledge attributions do not vary, and are extremely strong: In order for a knowledge attribution to be true, the putative knower must live up to very high standards. In short, this bold sceptic will probably require a sceptical invariantist account of knowledge attributions.

On the other hand, a not-so-bold sceptic might accept contextualism and admit that most of our ordinary knowledge attributions are true -- or at least admit that she cannot show that they aren't -- but insist that she is using "know" in a very strong but perfectly legitimate way, and that in this strong use of the word, one can truly say that we don't know many of the things we truly claim to know in non-philosophical conversation. (This seems to be Adams's conception of

the sceptic's stance.)

In addition to dividing sceptics according to the status they deny to most or all or many of our beliefs (justification, knowledge, truth, absolute certainty, etc.), we may also divide them according to the range of beliefs to which they deny that status. Thus, a universal sceptic will claim that all of our beliefs lack a certain status, while more limited forms of scepticism will only deny that status to some of our beliefs. The type of limited sceptic with which I will mostly be dealing is, as I noted in the Introduction, the external world sceptic. And since the status I will be focussing on is that of knowledge, I will be mostly interested in the sceptical thesis that we don't know anything about the external world, where this thesis can be understood in either of the two ways (the bold way and the not-so-bold way) discussed in the above two paragraphs.

In Chapter 3, then, I will attack this sceptical thesis in the version of it according to which we say something false whenever we claim to know something about the external world. I would be very surprised to find out that this bold thesis is true; but there are, undeniably, sceptical arguments which threaten to

establish just this conclusion. I therefore find this type of scepticism very interesting. As I've pointed out, it seems to require a sceptical invariantist account of knowledge attributions. An important part of my case against it in Chapter 3, then, will be an argument that contextualism is superior to sceptical invariantism.

The not-so-bold sceptic who claims that we know nothing about the external world but does not intend to imply that we say something false whenever we claim to know something about the external world, while not nearly so interesting, seems to be on firmer ground. Here we run into the seeming truism that there is a very high way or sense of knowing (requiring something like an infallible sign of truth) according to which the external world sceptic is right: If we let the criteria for knowledge get tight enough, then the external world sceptic is saying something true when she denies that we know anything about the external world, and this denial is more-or-less like ordinary denials of knowledge except that she is using tighter criteria than are ordinarily used; as Stine writes, the sceptic is playing on "an essential characteristic of our concept of knowledge," namely, "that tighter criteria are

appropriate in different contexts" and the sceptic's criteria seem to be at one end of a continuum: "street encounter" -- "classroom" -- "law court" -- "philosophical discussion." In Chapter 4, I question this seeming truism. I will investigate the Wittgensteinian idea (which I think is expressed in On Certainty) that we don't understand the sceptic's standards as we understand what standards are in place in ordinary settings, and that therefore the meaning of the sceptic's thesis is problematic in a way that the meanings of ordinary denials and disclaimers of knowledge are not. While I am tempted by this Wittgensteinian idea, I will not be able to endorse it. But my investigation of it will, I hope, lead us to see that a related charge can be brought against the not-so-bold external world sceptic: namely, that her thesis does not have any of the interest we initially might have thought it must have.

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