SCEPTICISM AND CONTEXTUALISM
THREE OBJECTIONS AND THREE REPLIES

«Do you doubt ... that we ought to know the truth?»
(AUGUSTINE, Contra Academicos, 1.2.5)

1. Introduction

Scepticism is typically understood as the thesis that we know nothing or next to nothing about the world around us. So conceived, it is a doctrine about our human condition that regrettably clashes with the classical tenet according to which we naturally aim at knowledge. The consequence of this clash are, potentially, devastating for us. Indeed, as Trygetius – on behalf of Augustine – notices in the first book of the Contra Academicos, if we fervently desire knowledge and nevertheless we are not in the condition of attaining it, then it seems that we are sentenced to a life of frustration and of vain efforts. So, following Augustine we might say that our happiness – or perhaps just our epistemic tranquillity, – demands an argument able to vindicate the possibility of knowledge about the external world. One might think, though, that such an argument is not needed. Perhaps, indeed, as our common-sense seems to suggest, we do possess an indefinitely broad amount of knowledge about the world around us. We know, for instance, that the Quirinal is the highest of the seven hills of Rome, that Tom and Louis spent the month of July in Corse, that Henry Green’s novel Party Going was first published in 1939, that there is a common dandelion before us, and we know, also, that doubting about our knowledge about all those things would be absurd – or that it feels so, at least. Yet, if on the one hand our intuitions convey us the ‘moorean’ idea that we, in effect, possess all sort of knowledge about the world around us, on the other, those very intuitions seem to

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1 AUGUSTINE, CA, 1.2.5; translated by J. O’Meara, Against the Academics, Newman Press, New York (NY) 1951.

2 Notice that Augustine conceives wisdom as a type of knowledge and considers the possession of this knowledge to be necessary to happiness. On this point see B.D. BUTTON, Augustine and Academic Skepticism, Cornell University Press, Ithaca (NY) 2016, pp. 53-55, and AUGUSTINE, CA, 1.3.9.

3 Notice that Augustine deals with a broader kind of scepticism than that concerning the external world. See BUTTON, Augustine and Academic Skepticism, pp. 14-29.
be befriended by other that credit those sceptical arguments – sometimes extravagant, but almost always rather compelling - according to which nobody would know nothing or next to nothing about the external world. The sceptic, we would say, cannot be dismissed too easily, a proper answer is due to his argument.

In what follows, after a brief illustration of a sceptical argument, we will introduce and try to defend the contextualist anti-sceptical doctrine. In §§ 3 and 4 we will analyse two alternative anti-sceptical views: the refusal of the closure principle and George Edward Moore’s common-sensical defence of our knowledge. We will allege that they are both ineffective, but that their analysis is helpful to identify the desirable characteristics of a proper reply to the sceptic. In § 5 we will maintain that the contextualist anti-sceptical argument possesses those characteristics, and in § 7 we will try to defend it from three objections moved by the neo-mooreanist (the advocate of another alternative anti-sceptical view): the first, according to which contextualism would be a revisionist thesis; the second, that maintains that the contextualist argument ‘concessive’ nature would, in the end, favour a sceptical conclusion; the third, according to which the core contextualist thesis that ‘know(s)’ is a context-sensitive term would be unnecessary since what the contextualist takes as a change in the truth-conditions of knowledge ascriptions could be better explained as a change in the assertability-conditions of those sentences.

2. Scepticism

Sceptical arguments proceed by means of sceptical hypotheses that are charged with the task of dismantle our confidence in those propositions that we would ordinarily claim to know. Hence, a sceptic might claim, for instance, that if we cannot rule out the possibility that a mad neurophysiologist had transplanted our brains in a vat connected with a machine that perfectly fakes our everyday experiences, – so that our beliefs are identical to those we would have in a normal situation, – then we cannot attribute to ourselves knowledge about many things that we would generally claim to know; and because we cannot rule out the odd possibility mentioned above – might continue the sceptic, – then we are forced to conclude that we know nothing or very little about the external world. More generally, considered a whichever sceptical hypothesis \( h \) (as «We are brains in a vat») and a generic ordinary proposition \( p \) (as «We have hands»), a sceptical argument of the above-mentioned sort (generally known as the «argument from ignorance») takes this form:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{AI} & \quad (1). \quad \text{If we do not know that } \neg h, \text{ then we do not know that } p. \\
(2). \quad \text{We do not know that } \neg h. \\
(3). \quad \text{We do not know that } p.
\end{align*}
\]

Even though AI’s conclusion appears to be – at least from a certain point of view – absurd and astonishing, it clearly follows from the premises of the argument. Furthermore, (1) and (2) seem to be both rather plausible. Consider (2): if we take seri-

ously a sceptical hypothesis as the one according to which we are nothing more than brains in a vat it looks that there is no way such that we can properly rule out it. Ex hypothesis, indeed, our experiences about the external world are the same both in the normal and in the sceptical situation and we would believe that we have hands even if we were handless brains in a vat. Coming to the sceptical argument’s former premise, it seems to be even more compelling than (2). In the epistemological literature it is in fact generally assumed that knowledge is closed under known logical implication; thus, accordingly, if we know both that \( p \) (e.g. «It is raining in Boston») and that \( p \) implies \( q \) (e.g. «It is raining in Massachusetts»), then we know that \( q \). So, to conclude, since we would not say that those subjects who would believe a certain proposition \( p \) even if \( p \) was not the case are in the position to count as knowing that \( p \), then (3) seems to be grounded on really solid bases: we do not know that \( p \).

3. The unbearable refusal of the closure principle

Prima facie, in order to forestall the sceptical conclusion we have no other options than contesting one of the two premises of AI. According to the anti-sceptical strategy proposed by Fred Dretske and Robert Nozick we should refuse (1)\(^7\). Indeed, the denial of the closure principle – of which (1) is clearly an instantiation, – entails that we can have knowledge of an everyday proposition like \( p \) («We have hands») even if we lack knowledge of one of its implications – the proposition not-\( h \) («We are not handless brains in a vat»). Giving up closure, however, is certainly a theoretically expensive move since, as Keith DeRose rightly points out, it commits us to endorse «abominable conjunctions»\(^8\) as

\[
\begin{align*}
(4). \quad & \text{We know that we have hands, but we do not know that we are not handless brains in a vat} \\
(5). \quad & \text{We know that the animal in the pen is a zebra, but we do not know that it is not a cleverly disguised mule}
\end{align*}
\]

which sound highly counterintuitive. Even if (4) and (5) sound odd or conversationally inappropriate, though, this does not necessarily mean that these propositions are not true. In order to illustrate this point, Dretske highlights\(^9\) that the sentence

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\(^6\) We would probably not say, for example, that Louis knows who Marian is if we would know that he cannot tell apart Marian from her monozygotic twin Vivian, even if he would say – precisely pointing at Marian, – «I know that she is Marian». In order to know a proposition \( p \), indeed, we should be able to discriminate the truth of \( p \) from a given set of relevant alternatives. On this point see A. Goldman, *Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge*, «The Journal of Philosophy», 73 (1976), 20, pp. 771-791.


(6). The refrigerator is empty, but has lots of things in it

可以被正当地包括在可憎的连结词集合中，并且无论如何它可能是真的。德特斯基指出，电冰箱可能为空，因为没有食物在内（也就是说‘空’从一个特定的、普通感官的角度来看），并且无论如何它可能为满由于它含有气体分子（然后‘满’从另一个，显微镜的，所以来说，点的角度来看）。因此，(6)的奇异性会依赖于‘一个违背正常期望的违反’10，一个转移，我们可以说，在理解‘满’和‘空’的概念上。同样，(4)和(5)陈述会听起来很奇怪，德特斯基认为，因为‘第二个连结词引入通常假设是无关紧要的可能性’11。然而，如果如此，人们可能会想知道，拒绝封闭原则是否还必要的要解决怀疑论的难题。实际上，为什么不能说——如语境论者可能会建议的——根据一个标准我们知道在围栏中的动物是一匹斑马，而另一匹巧妙伪装的驴子我们不知道它是一匹斑马？正如我们已经看到的，德特斯基更喜欢否认封闭原则，但刚刚提到的语境论者方法似乎在理论上更不情愿和更直观的，而不是对不愉快的连结词的采纳。

也许，然而，不愉快的连结词的不一致性，这拒绝封闭原则可能不意味着一个完全具有说服力的论点反对这个反怀疑论的策略。然而，值得注意的是，拒绝封闭原则意味着比仅对不愉快的连结词的承诺更多的成本。为了简明起见，我们将考虑仅其中一个限制，即由约翰·霍桑13指出的拒绝封闭原则和对等原则之间的不可兼容性12。为了方便起见，我们将只考虑这些局限性中的一个，即等价原则和分配原则之间的不可兼容性。

等价原则

如果一人知道a priori（确定性）的是p是等同于q的，且知p，且能推导q从p（保留知识p），则知q。

分配原则

如果一人知p和q的结合，那么只要能推导p，一人就处于能推导p的状态，且只要能推导q，一人就处于能推导q的状态。

现在，等价原则和分配原则是高度可信的原理，以至于没有一个人会根本上想要放弃。然而，正如霍桑巧妙指出的，拒绝封闭的人不能同时接受等价原则和分配原则。如果考虑等式(5)的首项，如果考虑等式(5)的首项，
– according to which we know the proposition that the animal in the pen is a zebra –
we can note that this proposition is \textit{a priori} equivalent to the following:

(7). The animal in the pen is a zebra \& The animal in the pen is not a
cleverly disguised mule.

Now, by means of \textit{EP} we can deduce and come to know that (7) from the first con-
junct of (5). Furthermore, since we know both that (7) and the first conjunct of (5), by
means of \textit{DP} we can also deduce and come to know the second conjunct of (7). The
proposition (7), though, is exactly that sort of proposition that the one who refuses
closure is committed to deny. So, the refusal closure forces to refuse also \textit{EP} or \textit{DP}.
Refusing the closure principle, therefore, seems to be a too dangerous path for the one
who aims to vindicate the possibility of knowledge about the external world. Indeed,
it might be that with this move he can safeguard our everyday knowledge, yet he will
also commit himself to costs that appear to be unbearable.

4. \textit{The faults of the moorean response to the sceptic}

Perhaps, in order to block the sceptical conclusion (3) we should focus our attention
on (2) instead of considering (1). All things considered, in fact, as we have already
said, if on the one hand the sceptical argument appears to be plausible, on the other,
doubting of our knowledge of those ordinary propositions that we generally claim to
know seems to be highly unreasonable – if not absurd. Grounding on this intuition, the
common-sensical line of reasoning typically ascribed to Moore maintains that it is not
true that we do not know that we are not handless brains in a vat for we can deduce that
we are not such things from our knowledge of a simple ordinary proposition as «We
have hands» – and by means of the closure principle\textsuperscript{14}. Moore’s anti-sceptical
argument rests on the dogmatic assumption – «I can know things, which I cannot prove»
he says in his \textit{Proof of an External World}\textsuperscript{15} – that we know many ordinary propositions
(like, for instance, \textit{p}: «We have hands») that, by virtue of their incompatibility with a
given sceptical hypothesis \textit{h} («We are brains in a vat»), are able to rule out it. Moore’s
argument proceeds as following:

\begin{align*}
  \textit{MA} & \quad (8). \quad \text{If we know that } p, \text{then we know that not-}h. \\
  (9). & \quad \text{We know that } p. \\
  (10). & \quad \text{We know that not-}h. 
\end{align*}

Despite it is grounded on our solid intuition that we do know many things, since it
is clearly the converse of the argument proposed by the sceptic \textit{MA} does not seem
to be very promising as an anti-sceptical strategy. Indeed, Moore’s strategy merely
consists in a denial of the sceptical conclusion (3) and in an argument based on the

\textsuperscript{14} For Moore’s anti-sceptical argument G.E. Moore, \textit{Proof of an External World}, in T. BALDWIN (ed.),
\textit{G.E. Moore: Selected Writings}, Routledge, Abingdon 2013, pp. 147-170, and \textit{Id.}, \textit{Certainty}, in BALDWIN,
\textit{G.E. Moore: Selected Writings}, pp. 171-96. For an analysis of Moore’s anti-sceptical strategy see N. LEMOS,
\textit{Moore and Skepticism}, in J. GRECO (ed.), \textit{The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism}, Oxford University Press,

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Moore, Proof of an External World}, p. 170.
plain assumption of this denial; this answer to the sceptical argument, though, lacks of explanatory force. Why we should prefer this argument to the one proposed by the sceptic? Perhaps because our ordinary knowledge is sure? But what can grant this point to us? The moorean strategy, therefore, leaves too many questions unanswered.

Duncan Pritchard summarises its limits in six faults\textsuperscript{16}. First, MA seems to be dialectically inappropriate since the argument’s main premise is a mere denial of the sceptic’s conclusion. Second, being both grounded on plausible premises, the two arguments seem to be on a par; so, it might be said that the moorean philosopher does not earn a true victory over the sceptic, at least only a not so satisfying draw. Third, the sentences involved in MA would be conversationally inappropriate, for we very rarely use the phrase «I know that p» to convey the fact that we have knowledge that p \([\ldots]\) this phrase thus plays a very special role in our practice of knowledge self-ascription, but \([\ldots]\) not one that seems applicable to the kind of anti-sceptical assertion that the moorean makes\textsuperscript{17}.

Fourth, the argument lacks of explanatory force: it does not offer any reason to back its epistemological claims. Fifth, it lacks also of an explanation of the reason why we found so plausible and compelling – at least at first glance and under certain circumstances, – the sceptical conclusion. Finally, Pritchard alleges that MA is also completely ineffective against a form of scepticism that undermines our evidential bases for knowledge. The argument for this kind of scepticism (labelled by Pritchard «evidential scepticism») runs as follow\textsuperscript{18}:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ES} \ (11). & \quad \text{If we know the ordinary proposition } p, \text{ then our evidence for } p \text{ favours } p \text{ over the known to be incompatible sceptical hypothesis } h. \\
\ (12). & \quad \text{Our evidence for } p \text{ does not favours } p \text{ over the known to be incompatible sceptical hypothesis } h. \\
\ (13). & \quad \text{We do not know that } p.
\end{align*}
\]

As AI rests for its conclusion on the closure principle, ES relies on a likewise plausible principle, namely the underdetermination principle\textsuperscript{19}:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{UP} \quad \text{If one knows both that } p \text{ and that } p \text{ entails } q, \text{ then one’s evidence for believing } p \text{ favours } p \text{ over not-}q.
\end{align*}
\]

UP seems incredibly intuitive. Consider this example: if we know that we are reading Agatha Christie’s novel The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, and we know that if we are reading this novel we are not reading Niccolò Machiavelli’s treatise The Prince, then the evidence which supports our belief that we are reading Christie’s novel must


\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid}, p. 72.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid}, p. 73.

favour this belief over the known to be incompatible belief that we are reading Machia-
velli’s treatise. In other words, any evidence $e$ for a belief $p$ that truly deserves the
title of ‘evidence’ should favour $p$ over the known to be incompatible beliefs $q_1, q_2,$
$q_3...q_n$; all things considered, in fact, if $e$ would be unable to yield such an effect, it
could be barely considered an evidence for $p$.

Pritchard maintains that Moore’s strategy «doesn’t really engage at all» with this
form of scepticism. We would rather say that those limits that undercut the moorean
argument against AI are also responsible for the ineffectiveness of the moorean reply
to ES. As Pritchard points out, the moorean philosopher might answer to ES maintain-
ing that he knows the ordinary proposition $p$ thanks to the evidence $e$ and that since
he knows that $p$ thanks to $e$, then $e$ favours $p$ over a certain set of known to be incom-
patible propositions that includes $h$ («I’m a brain in a vat»). Clearly, for the moorean
philosopher does not provide any adequate theoretical framework able vindicate the
common-sensical assumption of his argument, his response to the sceptical argument
sounds highly controversial. However, this seems to be the same main reason that
undermines also the moorean response to AI. In both cases the moorean philosopher
might perhaps simply say that we are unquestionably more certain of the truth of $p$
(and of the fact that our evidence $e$ favours $p$) than that of $h$, but due to the missing
philosophical support, this claim will result, both in the former and in the latter case,
 extremely suspect and dogmatic.

5. A sceptical problem, a contextualist solution

Even though Moore’s response to the sceptic turns out to be unsatisfying, its com-
mon-sensical starting point – the idea that we do know many of those things that we
ordinarily claim to know – is extremely sound and intuitive. However, as we have
seen in the previous paragraph, this intuition must be reconciled with the observation
that under certain circumstances we reckon as plausible the sceptical hypotheses, and
supported by a compelling theory about how it is that we might have knowledge about
the world around us. An anti-sceptical argument that seems to satisfy the above-men-
tioned conditions is proposed by those philosophers as Gail Stine, David Lewis,
Stewart Cohen or DeRose who are generally known as ‘epistemological contextu-
alists’. Interestingly, instead of simply assessing that

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20 Pritchard, How to be a Neo-Moorean, p. 40.
21 Ibi, p. 73.
22 Ibi, p. 75.
23 In his essay Four Forms of Scepticism, Moore employs an anti-sceptical strategy that positis that
none of the assumptions of the sceptical argument are as certain as our knowledge of ordinary proposi-
24 G. Stine, Scepticism, Relevant Alternatives, and Deductive Closure, «Philosophical Studies», 29
(1976), 4, pp. 249-261.
26 S. Cohen, Knowledge, Context, and Social Standards, «Synthese», 73 (1987), 1, pp. 3-26; Id.,
Contextualist Solutions to Epistemological Problems: Scepticism, Gettier, and the Lottery, «Australasian
Reasons, «Philosophical Perspectives», 13 (1999), 13, pp. 57-89; Id., Contextualism and Skepticism,
27 DeRose, Solving the Skeptical Problem.
We know that we have hands

or simply denying that

We do not know that are not handless brains in a vat

the contextualists explain away the apparent inconsistency of our intuitions concerning (14) and (2) alleging that when we discuss sceptical arguments we do not understand the word ‘know(s)’ as we understand it in the circumstance of an ordinary conversation. Indeed, according to the contextualists the expressions containing the word ‘know(s)’ and its cognates are context-sensitive, i.e. their truth-conditions vary depending upon certain features of their context of utterance. In particular, the contextualists claim that things as the purposes, the intentions, the expectations or the practical interests of the knowledge ascriber are responsible for the arrangement of that set of conditions (the «epistemic standard») that defines how strong a subject’s epistemic position with regard to a certain proposition \( p \) must be in order for a sentence as «\( S \) (the subject) knows that \( p \)» to be true in context of the ascriber\(^{28}\). Now, since contextualism posits that in different contexts of ascription there can be in place different epistemic standards, it follows that the same knowledge-ascribing sentence can have different truth-values in different contexts. For a better understanding, consider the sentence

\[ \text{(15). } \text{Tom knows that he is looking at a yellow baboon} \]

and suppose that Tom is in an ordinary epistemic position with regard to the proposition in question \( p \) («I’m looking at a yellow baboon»). It might be the case that the standard in place in the context \( C_i \) – say, the context of a restful visit at the zoo, – is sufficiently permissive to make Tom’s ordinary epistemic position with regard to \( p \) strong enough to make the sentence (15) true in this context. However, at the same time in the context \( C_j \) – the context of an ethological symposium, – it might be in place a much more demanding standard that Tom’s ordinary epistemic position cannot satisfy. In this context, therefore, (15) is false. Is it worth stressing here that the two occurrences of (15) are not contradictory, since they express two different propositions. Given the quotidian and the scientific standards in place in \( C_i \) and in \( C_j \), indeed, the proposition expressed by (15) in the former context will be something as «Tom knows that \( p \) according to the epistemic standard of an ordinary conversation» while the proposition expressed by the same sentence in the latter context will amount to something as «Tom knows that \( p \) according to the epistemic standard of a scientific ethological society».

It should be clear, at this point, how the thesis concerning the context-sensitivity of the word ‘know(s)’ can provide the basis for a compelling answer to the sceptical argument. On the one hand, the contextualist will account for the plausibility of (2) maintaining that, when the sceptic mentions a sceptical hypothesis and manages to raise the epistemic standard in place in the context, the standard increases so much that our epistemic positions systematically fail to meet it. On the other, the contex-

tualist will vindicate our common-sensical intuition that we know, say, that we have hands, claiming that if it is true that we do not know this proposition according to the sceptical standard, it is also true that from this fact does not follow that we do not know that very proposition according to the quotidian standards in place in ordinary contexts. So, accordingly, the contextualist alleges that in the sceptical context the sentence (2) is true and therefore the sentence (14) is false, while in ordinary contexts the sentence (14) is true and therefore (2) false.

If the contextualist anti-sceptical argument can both account for our (everyday) knowledge and for the plausibility of a sceptical argument like AI it is by no means certain that it can also provide a likewise compelling solution to the conundrum posed by the evidential sceptic. Fortunately, however, Ram Neta’s own reading of contextualism can dispel our doubts, since his version of the theory is developed precisely to deal with ES. Neta’s contextualism alleges that the sceptic, rather than employing unusually stringent standards for knowledge, employs unusually restrictive standards for evidence. Thus, when the sceptic manages to install his demanding standard in the context he operates a restriction over our evidential bases for knowledge. In particular, the sceptical standards have the effect of excluding factive evidence, that is the evidence which entails what it is evidence for. Since factive evidence is available in ordinary contexts, though, and for this sort of evidence can favour a given proposition over its known to be incompatible alternative, in quotidian contexts we have that our evidence favour ordinary propositions over sceptical hypotheses.

6. Three neo-moorean objections

Contextualism seems to nicely overcome all those issues that limit the moorean response to the sceptic. Contextualism vindicates our intuition that when we claim to know we (typically) speak truly and at the same time explains why we found sceptical hypotheses so plausible. Furthermore, since it provides an articulate philosophical theory about how it is that we can come to know all those things that we ordinarily claim to know, contextualism appears to be also immune to objections concerning its dialectical adequacy – we would not say that the contextualist anti-sceptical argument is question-begging. Clearly, however, the theory does not lack of questionable aspects, and many objections have been moved against it. In particular, it has been wondered whether contextualism is really the best strategy to vindicate the moorean intuition that we know many things about the external world. Perhaps, indeed, one could support the moorean claim without committing himself to an unorthodox and revisionist theory about the semantics of knowledge ascriptions. Perhaps, one might follow a different path to explain why we find sceptical hypotheses so plausible and why we reckon as inappropriate our knowledge claims when sceptical hypotheses have been stated. The above-mentioned remarks has been raised by those philosophers who doubt of the efficacy of the contextualist anti-sceptical argument and who allege that the moorean intuition should be supported differently. Those philosophers are generally known as ‘neo-moorean’. In the following paragraphs we will analyse and answer

to the two above-mentioned objections as have been advanced by Pritchard, and we will reply to a third objections – also moved by Pritchard, – according to which contextualism would raise the intuition that, in the end, the right standards for knowledge (or for evidence) are those employed by the sceptic.

7. Three contextualist answers

7.1. Contextualism and the epistemological orthodoxy about the semantic of ‘know(s)’

Likewise its moorean precursor, also the neo-moorean philosopher is committed to the «revisionistic claim» – as Pritchard calls it\(^{30}\) – that we can know the denials of sceptical hypotheses. Contextualism, under this respect, is not different from its rival view\(^{31}\). However, contrary to neo-mooreanism, contextualism is committed also to a second revisionist claim, namely the semantic thesis that knowledge ascriptions are context-sensitive expressions. Pritchard maintains that this thesis would be a cumbersome burden for the contextualist since it would go against our «natural non-contextualist [...] understanding of “know”»\(^{32}\) and it wouldn’t be necessary to solve the sceptical problem. In this paragraph we will concentrate our attention on the first claim made by Pritchard, setting aside his second claim for § 7.3.

Contextualism, we have seen, would be a ‘revisionist’ theory for our natural understanding of the semantics of knowledge ascriptions would be an invariantist (\textit{i.e.} non-contextualist) one. Under a certain perspective, this claim seems to be unquestionably true. It is indubitable, indeed, that the invariantist intuition that there is just one right standard for ‘know(s)’ is deeply-rooted in our minds. For if that were not the case it would be impossible to explain the wide amount of invariantist objections that have been moved against the contextualist position. Yet, it is by no means certain that the invariantist intuition is the only one that we entertain about the semantics of knowledge ascriptions. Contextualism, we will maintain, is much more intuitive and less ‘revisionist’ than one might think: indeed, the contextualist thesis concerning knowledge ascriptions is as natural as the invariantist one.

A first interesting clue of this point can be traced in the fact that the core contextualist thesis that the word ‘know(s)’ can be employed to label different epistemic positions with respect to a same proposition \(p\) is not so pristine as it could appear at first glance. As Claudia Bianchi and Nicla Vassallo rightly point out\(^{33}\), René Descartes, John Locke, and David Hume, for example, maintained that there are two sense of ‘know(s)’: one ordinary and colloquial, the other stricter and philosophically more


\(^{31}\) It should be noticed that the contextualist can know the denial of the sceptical hypotheses only in not sceptical contexts.

\(^{32}\) \textit{Ibidem}.

scepticism and contextualism

34 R. DESCARTES, Discours de la méthode, Part IV; J. LOCKE, An Essay concerning Human Understanding, Book IV, Ch. XI, par. 3; D. HUME, A Treatise of Human Nature, Book I, Ch. IV, Sect. VII.


37 These cases are a variation of DeRose’s Old Bank Cases. For the original formulation of the example see DeRose, Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions, p. 913. For a similar case see COHEN, Contextualism and Skepticism. For the defence and a proper illustration of this strategy to argue for contextualism see DeRose, The Case for Contextualism, pp. 47-79.
temic intuitions of the protagonists. We would say, in fact, that in the former case it is true that Tom knows that the pastry shop will be open on Sunday morning and that it is false that he knows this very proposition in the latter. Apparently, our intuitions concerning cases like A and B motivate and are perfectly explained by the contextualist doctrine. What about our «natural non-contextualist understanding of “know(s)”»? Invariantism seems to face serious issues when is confronted with $PC$. Indeed, since the invariantist is committed to maintain that there is only one right standard for ‘know(s)’, he should claim or that the following knowledge ascription

(16). Tom knows that the pastry shop will be open on Sunday morning

is true or that it is false. Yet, none of the two claims seem to be a good answer to the puzzle. Suppose that the invariantist judges (16) true simpliciter: this answer clearly conforms to our intuitions concerning case A, but our intuitions also strongly suggest that in case B (16) is false. If (16) would be true simpliciter, moreover, it would be hard to make sense of Tom’s behaviour and assertions in case B. From his own perspective, indeed, it is perfectly reasonable (in case B) to deny to him knowledge about the schedule of the pastry shop. Furthermore, it is also difficult to envisage what he could ever say, in case B, instead of claiming that he does not know that the pastry-shop will be open on Sunday morning. Perhaps something as: «I know that the pastry shop will be open on Sunday morning, but I need to be more certain about this fact»? But this assertion sounds extremely odd and counterintuitive. So, deeming (16) true simpliciter seems to be an unhappy choice for the invariantist.

Judging (16) false simpliciter, however, appears to be a likewise problematic manner to solve the puzzle. Such an answer, indeed, clearly goes against our epistemic intuition according to which (16) is true in case A. And again, if (16) would be false simpliciter the invariantist should explain Tom’s behaviour and assertions in case A, but Tom’s behaviour and his assertions appear to be perfectly reasonable in this scenario. Furthermore, as Cohen rightly points out, claiming that (16) is false simpliciter contrasts with our ordinary epistemic custom. In ordinary contexts, indeed, we generally ascribe knowledge on, for example, the basis of other people’s testimony when we have no reasons to doubt of the reliability of the witnesses in question. Using Cohen’s words, if we deny that (16) is true in case A then we have to deny that we know in many of the everyday cases in which we claim to know things. We would have to say that a considerable amount of the time, we speak falsely in our everyday lives when we claim to know things.

So, at least some of our epistemic intuitions concerning the semantics of knowledge ascriptions appear to conform to the assumptions of the contextualist theory, that therefore seems to be more intuitive and less revisionist than expected.

It might be clearly observed, though, that there are other cases that provide intuitions that discredit the contextualist doctrine. In many cases, indeed, we seem to be ‘blind’ to the context-sensitivity of ‘know(s)’. As an example, consider the objection

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38 Cohen, Contextualism and Skepticism, p. 96.
39 Ibidem.
40 Ibidem.
advanced by Hawthorne involving knowledge reports\textsuperscript{41}. Suppose that Jackie is in New York, and that she had just uttered the sentence «It’s raining here» during a phone call with Tom, who is in Sacramento. As Hawthorne rightly points out, if Tom wants to report Jackie’s statement to someone in Sacramento, he will probably say something as «Jackie, who’s in New York, said that it was raining there». So, while reporting Jackie’s assertion Tom will be aware of the context-sensitivity of the indexical term ‘here’. Suppose now that Jackie had also said «I know that my flight to Sacramento was cancelled» and that she was in a context ruled by a quite permissive epistemic standard. Tom, who finds himself in an epistemically more demanding context, won’t presumably report her statement saying «Jackie knows that her flight to Sacramento was cancelled accordingly to the permissive epistemic standard in place in her context»; rather, he will treat her self-knowledge ascribing sentence as a not context-sensitive expression. Now, contextualists justify cases as the one that we have just seen resorting to the notion of «semantic blindness» – i.e. we are blind to the context-sensitivity of ‘know(s)’. Is it worth noticing that such an account is not \textit{ad hoc}, since we experience the semantic blindness also when other clearly context-sensitive terms as, for instance, ‘tall’ are considered\textsuperscript{42}; yet, it is clear that the intuitions regarding the context-sensitivity of ‘know(s)’ are, at least, variable. However, since contextualists are generally able to propose plausible replies to the linguistic objections moved against their thesis\textsuperscript{43}, \textit{PC} seems to assume a crucial role in the debate between contextualists and invariantists. Contextualists, in fact, are able to account for our intuitions concerning \textit{PC} while invariantists are not. Contextualism, therefore, takes the lead. Notices, however, that to the invariantist is still open a path to explain \textit{PC} and thus getting a draw. We will scrutinize the plausibility of this strategy in § 7.3.

7.2. Sceptical and ordinary standards

Perhaps the contextualist is right: his semantic thesis is more intuitive and less revisionist than one might think, and it proves to be helpful, if not necessary, to explain our epistemic intuitions concerning puzzles as \textit{PC}. Nonetheless, one might still wonder whether resorting to the thesis of the context-sensitivity of the word ‘know(s)’ does really provide a compelling solution to the sceptical problem. Perhaps, one could suppose, this strategy yields more handicaps than advantages. Pritchard seems to be of this opinion for he claims that the contextualist strategy entails a serious issue for the contextualist anti-sceptical argument, an issue that according to him would follow from the intimate «concessive» nature of the strategy itself\textsuperscript{44}. Contextualism would be a «concessive» view since it does not \textit{properly} refute the sceptical argument, but rather it only weaken it

\textsuperscript{41} J. \textsc{Hawthorne}, \textit{Knowledge and Lotteries}, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004.

\textsuperscript{42} DeRose rightly points out that also a clearer context-sensitive expression as ‘tall’ is reported by ordinary speakers without any reference to the context-sensitivity of the expression. If Jackie says «Louis is tall», Tom will presumably report her utterance saying «Jackie said that Louis is tall» even if in Jackie’s context the standard for tallness would be significantly different from that in place in Tom’s context. On this point see DeRose, \textit{The Case for Contextualism}, pp. 166-170.

\textsuperscript{43} See for example Id., \textit{The Case for Contextualism}, and P. \textsc{Ludlow}, \textit{Contextualism and the new linguistic turn in epistemology}, in G. \textsc{Preyer} - G. \textsc{Peter} (eds.), \textit{Contextualism in Philosophy: Knowledge, Meaning, and Truth}, Oxford University Press, New York (NY) 2005, pp. 11-49.

\textsuperscript{44} \textsc{Pritchard}, \textit{Neo-Mooreanism Versus Contextualism}, p. 25.
confining its efficacy to those contexts where the sceptic manages to install his extremely demanding standards. And in those contexts, acknowledges the contextualist, it is true that we do not know all those things that we ordinarily claim to know. Now, according to Pritchard this concession raises the worries that i) although we can say that we know many things in ordinary contexts in the end it is the sceptic the one who is employing the right standard for knowledge and that ii) the standards used in ordinary contexts merely reflect «an epistemic looseness on our part». He writes:

The contextualist line prompts the thought that perhaps, strictly speaking, the sceptic is right after all, it is just that relatively to comparatively undemanding standards in play in everyday conversational contexts where we don’t concern ourselves with austere epistemic requirements made by the sceptic we have a practice – useful, if not strictly correct – of treating ourselves as knowers45.

Pritchard’s objection unquestionably raises a severe issue for contextualism and deserves a proper response. Indeed, if it would be true that, strictly speaking, it is the sceptic the one who is employing the right standard, then the efficacy of the contextualist anti-sceptical argument would be significantly reduced – if not erased at all. So, how could reply a contextualist to Pritchard’s objection? Perhaps, the contextualist might simply highlight that Pritchard is missing a crucial point of the contextualist theory. From the contextualist point of view, in fact, no standard is better than the other. In this theoretical framework, expressions as «the exacting epistemic standard» do not make any sense. None standard is simply ‘correct’ or ‘exact’, no one is ‘the right one’, since every standard is the legitimate outcome of an ascriber’s interests, purposes, expectations, practical interests, and so on. Pritchard’s objection, thus, lies on a misinterpretation of the contextualist doctrine. A proper answer to his objection, though, should also explain why one might think that from the contextualist anti-sceptical argument it would follow that, strictly speaking, it is the sceptic the one who is employing the ‘right standard’.

A reason for this misunderstanding might lie on the erroneous assumption that contextualists would be committed to that epistemic rule formulated by Lewis according to which the mere mention of an error possibility (as a sceptical hypothesis) would be sufficient to install a more demanding standard in a context46. This rule – named by Lewis «the rule of attention» – suggests the idea that a more demanding standard is always preferable to a less demanding one. The rule of attention, indeed, seems to concede to the former kind of standard a sort of priority over the latter. It should be noted, however, that many contextualists – perhaps all save Lewis, – refute this rule. Michael Ashfield, for example, writes that the rule of attention describes «a worst-case-scenario for the contextualists»47, while in the DeRose’s paper *Now You Know It, Now You Don’t* it can be read the following passage: «actually I have a lot of sympathy for the thought that the mere mention of the alternative is not sufficient for making it relevant»48. Contextualists generally opt for much less

45 *Ibidem*.
sceptical-friendly views about the mechanisms that rule the change of the standards. Antonia Barke, for example, alleges that *discussing* our epistemic assumptions and *agreeing* on which standard we should employ in a context is «an integral part of our epistemic practices»49, while Cohen goes even further since he proposes to confer to the speakers a «veto power» over the act of raising the standard:

The pressure toward higher standards can sometimes be resisted. One device for doing this is adopting a certain tone of voice. So in response to the sceptic, one might say, «C’mon, you’ve got to be kidding – I know I am not a brain-in-a-vat!». If this is the dominant response among the conversational participants, then everyday standards may remain in effect. In such a case, the speaker unmoved by skeptical doubt is not failing to adjust his ascriptions to contextually determined standards. Rather, such a speaker is managing to keep the standards from rising50.

So, contextualists do not typically endorse sceptical-friendly views about the dynamics of contexts changes.

Another possible reason of the misinterpretation of the contextualist doctrine could consist in the misunderstanding of an analogy often employed by contextualists to clarify their semantic thesis concerning the word ‘know(s)’. This analogy compares the semantic behaviour of the word ‘know(s)’ to the one exhibited by gradable predicates as ‘large’, ‘tall’, or ‘flat’51. Indeed, for knowledge ascriptions seem to vary in degree of strength or goodness, it has been thought that they might semantically behave as gradable predicates52. The underlying idea of this analogy, therefore, is that just as different things can be, for example, ‘high’ to different degree, there are also different degree of knowledge53. It should be easy to see, at this point, that appealing to this analogy one could think that the contextualist is committed to the view that there is one linear hierarchy for epistemic standards. If it would be so, perhaps one might conclude that the standards at the top of the hierarchy – we could imagine: the extremely demanding standards of the sceptic – deserve more epistemological concern than those at the bottom of the hierarchy. It is by no means certain, however, that the contextualist is committed to such a view about the order of the epistemic standards. As Peter Ludlow rightly points out, «it could be […] that epistemic standards do not form a clean linear hierarchy but rather that standards cross-cut each other with

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52 It should be noticed that the analogy between predicates as ‘large’, ‘tall’ or ‘flat’ and the term ‘know(s)’ is not merely grounded on the fact that these predicates are gradable but rather on the observations that: a) the standard for applying these predicates typically depends on the context; and b) this standard is generally a comparison class. As an example, consider Louis, who is tall 1.90 meters: he can be certainly judged tall if he is compared to an average person, but the same cannot be said if the comparison class is the one of the NBA basketball players. Similarly, we might judge Louis as counting to know a certain proposition p according to a certain standard, but not according to another. So, since a comparison standard seems to be present both in cases involving knowledge ascriptions and cases involving tallness ascriptions, it is believed that ‘know(s)’ and gradable predicates have a similar semantic behaviour.
Thanks to an anonymous referee for stressing this point.
53 Ludlow, *Contextualism and the new linguistic turn in epistemology*, p. 11.
respect to degrees or grades of knowledge»54. Ludlow notices that the same point is made by DeRose55. In his paper *Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions*, indeed, DeRose endorses an observation made by Peter Unger who claims that the hierarchy of standards is much more complicated than one might think. DeRose writes:

[Unger introduces] a complication which I have ignored in this paper since it has little effect on the point I’m making here. Unger points out that there many different aspects of knowledge and that in different contexts, we may have different demand regarding various of these aspects. Thus, for example, in one context we may demand a very high degree of confidence on the subject’s part before we will count him as knowing while demanding relatively little in the way of his belief being non-accidentally true. In a different context, on the other hand, we may have very stringent standards for non-accidentally but relatively lax standards for subject confidence. As Unger points out, then, things are not as simple as I make them to be: our standards are not just a matter of how good an epistemic position the subject must be in, but rather of how good in which respects56.

So, the idea that there is one linear hierarchy for epistemic standards appears to be, in the end, rather simplistic. Too simplistic, we would say, to firmly motivate the idea that the sceptic is using ‘the right standard’.

What is more, things concerning standards might be even worse, even more complicated than DeRose and Unger think. Consider the following example: in the context of the courthouse $C_1$ are allowed as a source of evidence only the depositions made by eyewitnesses, for those made by earwitnesses are believed to be unreliable. In the context of the courthouse $C_2$, instead, it is the opposite: here are allowed only the depositions made by earwitnesses since are those made by eyewitnesses that are believed to be unreliable. Now, in this case identifying which one is the more demanding standard between the two does not seems to be an easy job. Apparently, the two standards are incomparable, for one considers a reliable source of evidence what the other reckons as an unreliable source. One might say, therefore, that the two standards are, under a certain point of view, on a par, or, better, that the two standards are simply different, and that no one is more or less demanding than the other. Perhaps, the contextualist might say the same thing about the sceptical and the ordinary standards: they are merely different standards that entail completely different and incompatible assumptions about what can be considered evidence for believing a proposition in a context; due to this incompatibility, rather than due to the alleged more demandingness of the sceptical standard, what can count as ‘knowledge’ in a context cannot be considered as such in the other. It should be noticed that here we are not pushing ourselves to maintain that this one is (or should be) the right interpretation of the contextualist treatment of scepticism. We have seen, indeed, that contextualism proves to be in possess of the necessary resources to answer to Pritchard’s objection. Yet, if one would not be persuaded by those sources, the contextualist could, perhaps, resort to above-mentioned interpretation of his treatment of scepticism, an interpretation that seems to decisively disallow the idea that the sceptic could be the one who is using ‘the right standard’57.

54 *Ibi*, p. 25.
55 *DeRose*, *Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions*.
56 *Ibidem*.
57 One might still say, though, that since the contextualist allows that in the sceptical context the scep-
7.3. What if to vary across contexts would be the assertability-conditions of «S knows that \( p \)» instead of its truth-conditions?

The main merit of contextualism is its ability to vindicate our common-sensical intuition that we do know many things about the world around us and to explain, at the same time, why we find sceptical hypotheses so plausible. This ability, as we have seen, is a dowry of the semantic thesis that knowledge ascriptions are context-sensitive expressions. In § 7.1 we have argued that this linguistic thesis is less revisionist than one might think. What is more, we have also argued that the contextualist thesis is necessary in order to account for our epistemic intuitions about puzzles as the one involving case A and case B. Clearly, if the competitors of contextualism would have a better theory to handle those puzzles they would also have a better theory to explain our opposing intuitions concerning sceptical arguments. If it would be so, the epistemological prominence of the contextualist doctrine would be obviously in danger.

According to Pritchard, the neo-moorean philosopher can do better than the contextualist precisely under this respect. Indeed, instead of resorting to the theoretically binding thesis that ‘know(s)’ is a context-sensitive term, the neo-moorean would be able to solve both the puzzle and the sceptical problem employing a less revisionist and less theoretically binding view. This view maintains that ‘know(s)’ is an invariant term, and that what changes from context to context are the assertability-conditions of the sentences containing this term and its cognates. So, accordingly, despite their truth, certain occurrences of the sentence «S knows that \( p \)» would be inappropriate in some contexts. In particular, the neo-moorean will argue that our knowledge claims are generally true, but that because of the mention of sceptical hypotheses in some contexts we find inappropriate to say that we know those things that we claim to know in ordinary contexts – although it is true that we know those things. In this way the neo-moorean can explain the plausibility that we credit to sceptical arguments (they would make our knowledge claims conversationally inappropriate, thus they would prevent us to assert that we know this and that proposition) and, at the same time, he can also safeguard the possibility of knowledge.

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tic is speaking truly when he claims that we know nothing or very little about the external world, then contextualism is, under this respect, a genuine «concessive» – or sceptical-friendly, – position. Now, although this conclusion is undoubtedly true (the contextualist, indeed, does not seek to erase scepticism, but rather aims to confine the efficacy of his sceptical arguments to sceptical contexts) it should be noticed that understanding the ‘concessive nature’ of contextualism in this way does not harm the effectiveness of the contextualist anti-sceptical argument. Indeed, even if the contextualist concedes that in a certain context the sceptic is right, this does not mean that, all things considered, it is the sceptic the one who is employing the right standard for ‘knowledge’. Again, the contextualist may simply points out that, from the contextualist point of view, no standard is better than the other and that expressions as «the exacting epistemic standard» do not make any sense; besides, the contextualist might still acknowledge that the sceptical and the ordinary standards are not one more demanding than the other, but, instead, simply different. Thus, contextualism’s concessive nature (even so understood) does not lead to the sceptical conclusion suggested by Pritchard’s objection. Clearly, one might still complain that the contextualist does not earn a true and clear victory over the sceptic. Yet, it should be noticed that the ‘pliability’ of contextualism allows to this theory to offer a proper account for the plausibility of sceptical hypotheses – a goal, this one, that – as we will see in § 7.3. – it is by no means certain that it can be achieved by an alternative anti-sceptical view as neo-mooreanism. Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this objection.
Despite its elegance and its relatively lightweight theoretical implications, it is by no means certain that this strategy is effective. DeRose maintains that, from a general point of view, when one employs this sort of strategy (that he names «warranted assertability manoeuvre», henceforth: WAM) with regard to the assertability-conditions of a certain sentence $s$ one should respect three constraints: $a)$ the strategy must explain both the inappropriateness of asserting $s$ and the appropriateness of asserting the negation of $s$; $b)$ the WAM should explain the conversational inappropriateness of $s$ by means of a generation of a false implicature; $c)$ this false implicature should be explained resorting to a general (and not ad hoc) rule of conversation. In his The Case for Contextualism, DeRose offers an example of an effective WAM that is formulated respecting his own three constraints. His WAM aims to explain away the intuition that when one who knows that $p$ says

$$\text{(17). It is possible that } p$$

he is saying something false. According to DeRose, indeed, (17) is true iff the speaker does not know that $p$ is false and not – as our intuitions suggests, – iff the speaker does not know that $p$ is false and does not know that $p$ is true. In order to defend his thesis, DeRose first highlights that both the expressions «I know that $p$» and «$p$» are stronger that (17) and then observes that, since a general conversational rule posits that when we are in the position to assert one of two things we should assert the stronger of them, then whenever we utter (17) we generate the false implicature that we do not know that $p$. In such a way DeRose plausibly defends his thesis concerning the truth-conditions of (17): his WAM effectively explain away our intuition that not knowing that $p$ is true is a truth-condition of (17) and plausibly supports the idea that this condition is a clause that rules the appropriate assertion of (17). Can the neo-moorean provide a likewise compelling WAM to defend the view that what change from context to context are the assertability-conditions rather than the truth-conditions of «$S$ knows that $p$»?

Prima facie, he can. However, it should be noticed that he accomplishes this aim operating a slight variation of DeRose’s constraints. We have seen that according to DeRose an effective WAM must observe the constrain (a). Thus, accordingly, the neo-moorean must explain both $i)$ the inappropriateness of assessing «$S$ knows that $p$» in the sceptical context and $ii)$ the appropriateness of asserting the negation of the knowledge ascriptions in that context. Both Pritchard and Tim Black, though, claims that the neo-moorean should only explain the constraint (i). According to them, indeed, when one is confronted with a sceptical hypothesis his reaction would not that of reversing the sense of his knowledge claims, but rather that of withdrawing those ascriptions that he was previously willing to assert. Pritchard rightly points out that a contextualist would not be inclined to endorse the point just made. However, Pritchard main-

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59 Ibi, pp. 86-87.
tains that a contextualist should endorse that point since our practice of self-ascribing knowledge clearly supports it:

The problem facing contextualists is that while the issue of whether we withdraw our assertions where an ascription of knowledge is explicitly involved is (by their lights) moot, the issue of whether we withdraw our assertions of simple self-ascription sentences is not moot at all (by anyone’s lights). That is, in response to a mere change in the context a simple self-ascription sentence that was once assertible might well be no longer assertible, but this will not mean that the relevant contrary sentence (i.e., “It is false that P”) will become assertible.

So, the neo-moorean has simply to explain away the inappropriateness of asserting “S knows that P” in a sceptical context. He should do that, we have said, resorting to a general conversational rule. In his 2009 *The Case for Contextualism*, DeRose maintains that invariantists have not proposed accounts based on plausible general conversational rules. In these last years, however, some philosophers have advanced compelling explanations grounded on Paul Grice’s conversational maxims— which are unquestionably very general conversational rules. So, Patrick Rysiew, for instance, proposes two accounts appealing to the gricean maxims of relation and quality, while Black points out that the inappropriateness of knowledge assertions in sceptical contexts can be better explained resorting to the maxims of quantity. Here, as an example of these strategies based on the gricean maxims, we will present Pritchard’s account. According to Pritchard, the «general conversational rule» demanded by DeRose’s third constraint can be identified in the gricean maxim of evidence. This maxim posits that a speaker should make only those assertions that he is able to support with adequate evidence. Now, since according to Pritchard «what count as “adequate” evidence in this regards is a context-sensitive matter, it follows that the evidential constraints at stake in sceptical contexts might be more demanding than those in place in ordinary circumstances. Thus, accordingly, an assertion as

(18). There is a dandelion before us

made in a quotidian context will generate the *true* implicature that our evidence adequately support the above-mentioned proposition; therefore, in the everyday context our assertion will be conversationally appropriate. The assertion of (18) in a sceptical context, instead, although true will generate the *false* implicature that our evidence can favour (18) over the known to be incompatible sceptical hypothesis that we are brains in a vat, and so it will be conversationally inappropriate.

So equipped, the neo-moorean seems to be able to provide a compelling solution both to *PC* and to the sceptical problem. Furthermore, his solution appears to be less

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66 Ibi, p. 198.
67 Pritchard, *Contextualism, Skepticism, and Warranted Assertability Maneuvers*.
theoretically binding than that proposed by the contextualist. Yet, according to Peter Baumann the WAMs based on conversational rules as Grice’s maxims are ineffective since they are unable to explain away our contextualist intuitions about tacit knowledge ascriptions – i.e. knowledge ascriptions made in thought\textsuperscript{70}.

Baumann rightly points out that sincere speakers typically say what they think. If one asserts, for instance: «I know that the Cascadilla gorge is not dry», he will presumably convey the belief expressed by his utterance, namely that he knows that the Cascadilla gorge is not dry. Thus, for the contextualist alleges that his theory holds for asserted knowledge ascriptions he should perhaps also maintains that it holds also for knowledge ascriptions made in thought. To clarify this point, recall case \textit{A} and case \textit{B}: as Baumann notices, if one assumes that Tom’s last line «I know that the pastry-shop will be open on Sunday morning» (true in case \textit{A}, but false in case \textit{B}) instead of being asserted is rather merely thought, the cases do not cease to motivate contextualism. We still have the intuition that Tom’s tacit self-knowledge ascription is true in a context, but false in the other. So, accordingly, Baumann proposes the following reformulation of the contextualist thesis:

\begin{quote}
Contextualism says that the truth conditions of knowledge sentences vary with the speaker’s context, and that the content of knowledge beliefs and thoughts of the same character vary with the believer’s or thinker’s context\textsuperscript{71}.
\end{quote}

If the contextualist doctrine accounts for both asserted and tacit knowledge ascriptions then the neo-moorean invariantist should provide a theory that explains why in sceptical contexts both the asserted and the tacit knowledge ascriptions are inappropriate. However, Baumann rightly points out that the neo-moorean invariantist lacks of an adequate account for this phenomenon\textsuperscript{72}. Indeed, as we have previously seen the neo-moorean explains the inappropriateness of asserted knowledge ascriptions in terms of false implicatures and gricean conversational maxims. Yet, such a strategy cannot succeed when tacit knowledge ascriptions are considered, since if there are implicatures for assertions there are not such things for thought. Perhaps, the invariantist might consider thought as a case of conversation with oneself, but even if it would be so, Baumann rightly notices that it seems that one cannot convey something to himself without explicitly thinking it\textsuperscript{73}.

However, a path open to the neo-moorean could be that of accounting for the inappropriateness of tacit knowledge ascriptions in sceptical contexts resorting to the notion of pragmatic warrant. So, the neo-moorean might claim that although it is true that in sceptical contexts we know, say, that we have hands, in those contexts we have pragmatic warrant for believing (falsely) that we do not know that proposition. Yet, Baumann notices that this view is highly counterintuitive, since it is irrational to

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\textsuperscript{70} P. B\textsc{aumann}, \textsc{WAM: Why Worry?}, «Philosophical Papers», 40 (2011), 2, pp. 155-177.

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\textsuperscript{71} Notice that this complex definition is due to the fact that we cannot merely say that thoughts are context-sensitive as sentences. Indeed, a same sentence \textit{p} can express, in different contexts, different propositions with different contents, but those propositions will express in their turn different thoughts, and not the same thought with different contents. Thoughts, in fact, are identified by means of their content. Baumann overcomes this difficulty resorting to the distinction between character and content. Thus, accordingly, if one thought that «\textit{S} knows that \textit{p}» in different contexts he will entertain different beliefs of the same character. See \textit{ibi}, pp. 161-163.

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\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Ibi}, p. 167.

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\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Ibidem}.
believe something just for pragmatic reasons and against ours epistemic warrant\textsuperscript{74} – that, according to the neo-moorean, is the same in all contexts. So, it seems that, for the neo-moorean can provide a satisfactory account only for the inappropriateness – in sceptical contexts, – of the asserted knowledge ascriptions, but not for their tacit counterparts, the contextualist is equipped with a superior theory.

8. Concluding remarks

We have maintained that the sceptic sets a serious challenge that compels us to provide satisfying arguments to vindicate the possibility of our knowledge. Both the classic anti-sceptical approaches of refusing closure and of plainly assert the common-sensical thesis that we do know many things about the external world seem, however, to be unsatisfying. So, here we have tried to elucidate and to defend that quite recently developed theory – \textit{i.e.} contextualism, – that according to us can provide the best argument to discredit the sceptical thesis that we know nothing or next to nothing about the external world. In particular, we have tried to defend the contextualist theory from three objections moved by the advocates of another anti-sceptical strategy – \textit{i.e.} neo-mooreanism. In doing so, we have first seen that the contextualist thesis that ‘know(s)’ is a context-sensitive term rests on epistemic intuitions that are likewise solid as that which support invariantism. Furthermore, we have seen that contextualism seems to be able to account for cases for which invariantism lacks of a compelling explanation. Even the neo-moorean invariantists WAM based on gricean conversational maxims, indeed, proved to be able to cover only a limited amount of cases – \textit{i.e.} those involving asserted knowledge ascriptions. In § 7.2, then, we have ruled out the hypothesis advanced by the neo-moorean according to which contextualism would entail that, strictly speaking, the scepticism is right when he says that we know nothing about the external world. All this leads to the conclusion that the contextualist anti-sceptical argument is a \textit{genuine} anti-sceptical argument and lies on solid semantic grounds.

Abstract

The contextualist anti-sceptical argument seems to be more compelling than many other anti-sceptical strategies, as the refusal of the closure principle preached by Dretske and Nozick or Moore’s common-sensical approach. Yet, it has been maintained that a better response to the sceptic can be expressed by following a neo-moorean approach. Here we defend the contextualist argument from three objections moved by Pritchard, a leading advocate of neo-mooreanism. The first objection claims that contextualism would be a «revisionist» linguistic thesis; the second that the contextualist argument «concessive» nature would lead to a sceptical conclusion; the third that the contextualist thesis that ‘know(s)’ is a context-sensitive term would be unnecessary since what the contextualist takes as a change in the truth-conditions of knowledge ascriptions might be better explained as a change in the assertability-conditions of those sentences. In the end, we will maintain that the three objections are ineffective.

Keywords: Scepticism, Epistemic contextualism, Neo-mooreanism, Warranted Assertability Maneuvers, Knowledge ascriptions

\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Ibi}, p. 171.