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PREVIEW

**CONTEXTUALISM AND SKEPTICISM ABOUT THE EXTERNAL WORLD**

by

**Tim Black**

**A DISSERTATION**

**Presented to the Faculty of**

**The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska**

**In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements**

**For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**Major: Philosophy**

**Under the Supervision of Professor Albert Casullo**

**Lincoln, Nebraska**

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PREVIEW

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GRADUATE COLLEGE  
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# CONTEXTUALISM AND SKEPTICISM ABOUT THE EXTERNAL WORLD

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University of Nebraska, 2001

Adviser: Albert Casullo

Contextualist responses to skepticism about the external world are inadequate, and we should prefer an invariantist response to skepticism. There are two kinds of contextualism – anti-theoretical and theoretical. Anti-theoretical contextualists argue that the principles on which skepticism depends are absent from our ordinary epistemic ways of thinking. So anti-theoretical contextualists conclude that the burden of proof is on the skeptic. But some argue that the principles on which skepticism depends are *not* absent from our ordinary ways of thinking. The existence of this unresolved dispute suggests that anti-theoretical contextualists have not shifted the burden of proof to the skeptic. Anti-theoretical contextualists also fail to refute skepticism outright. Their primary argument here is one in which the notion of certainty plays a key role. But their argument is unsound on all significant uses of the word ‘certain.’ Thus, anti-theoretical contextualists have neither refuted skepticism nor shifted the burden of proof to the skeptic.

Theoretical contextualism claims that the solution to skeptical puzzles lies in the fact that the standards for knowledge shift from context to context. Yet if theoretical contextualist solutions are to be adequate, they must explain how those standards shift. Unfortunately, theoretical contextualism fails to provide this explanation. This

explanatory failure, along with the problems that face individual theoretical contextualist accounts, shows that theoretical contextualist responses to skepticism are inadequate.

Even though contextualism fails, a Moorean invariantism – according to which the standards for knowledge are always low – allows us to know across contexts the things we ordinarily take ourselves to know. We should prefer this Moorean invariantism over contextualism. It stands on the same theoretical ground as the dominant contextualisms while still allowing us to explain how we know that certain skeptical hypotheses are false. Also, contextualism raises questions – for example, questions concerning how the standards for knowledge shift – that receive only inadequate answers. The Moorean invariantist account does not raise such questions. All of this suggests that the Moorean invariantist response to skepticism is better than any of its contextualist counterparts.

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

## INTRODUCTION

Skeptical arguments of a Cartesian sort continue to plague epistemology. These arguments often take a very simple form:

1. I don't know that not-H (where H is a radical skeptical hypothesis, for example, the hypothesis that I am a brain-in-a-vat, or the hypothesis that I am now dreaming).
2. If I don't know that not-H, then I don't know that P (where P is a proposition that I ordinarily take myself to know about the external world).
3. So, I don't know that P.

Skeptical arguments of this sort present a puzzle, for the arguments two plausible premises yield a conclusion whose *negation* is plausible. The desire to respond to this skeptical puzzle is perhaps the primary motivation for contextualism. There are two main kinds of contextualism – anti-theoretical contextualism and theoretical contextualism. Taking skeptical arguments at face value, theoretical contextualism attempts to solve the puzzles they present. Theoretical contextualists argue that skeptical arguments seem compelling because they are in fact sound in some contexts. However, theoretical contextualists also suggest that skeptical arguments are very often not compelling because they are very often unsound. Rather than confronting skeptical puzzles head on, anti-theoretical contextualism questions the theoretical underpinnings of such puzzles. Anti-theoretical contextualists argue that we need not take skeptical puzzles seriously

because they are founded only on contentious theoretical ideas. In this dissertation, I argue that neither theoretical nor anti-theoretical contextualism provides an adequate response to skepticism. However, I also argue that we *can* solve the puzzles generated by skeptical arguments like the one above.

In Chapters 1 through 3, I evaluate Michael Williams' contextualist account. Williams advocates *anti-theoretical contextualism*, which is the idea that independently of contextual factors there is no fact of the matter as to what kind of justification a belief about the external world must have in order to count as knowledge. Williams suggests that if anti-theoretical contextualism is true, we cannot provide a general account of our knowledge of the external world and thus cannot theorize about such knowledge. He also argues that skepticism depends essentially on what he calls epistemological realism, which is the idea that even independently of contextual factors there *is* a fact of the matter as to what kind of justification beliefs require. Specifically, epistemological realism says that beliefs about the external world *must be justified by sensory experience* if they are to count as knowledge. Williams argues that epistemological realism runs counter to our ordinary ways of epistemic thinking, and he concludes that the skeptic must shoulder the burden of proof (or what he often calls the burden of theory). The skeptic must show us that epistemological realism is true if we are to be convinced by her skeptical arguments.

Yet Williams fails to show that we should redistribute the burden of theory to the skeptic. There is an unresolved dispute over the nature of our ordinary epistemic practices. One party to the dispute – Williams – claims that epistemological realism is *not* present in those practices, while the other party suggests that it *is* present in those practices. The existence of this unresolved dispute prevents Williams from redistributing

the burden of theory to the skeptic, for the existence of this dispute suggests that skepticism might *not* run counter to our ordinary ways of epistemic thinking, in which case the skeptic need not shoulder the burden of theory.

To bolster his argument for the redistribution of the burden of theory, Williams might argue that anti-theoretical contextualism is true, that is, that epistemological realism is false. But since skepticism depends essentially on epistemological realism, arguing that epistemological realism is false is tantamount to arguing that skepticism is false. So Williams' arguments for the truth of anti-theoretical contextualism commit him to a dilemma – either he can show that epistemological realism is false, in which case he will have refuted skepticism outright, or he cannot show that it is false, in which case his arguments for the redistribution of the burden of theory to the skeptic fail. Williams must at this point abandon his attempt to shift the burden of theory. He now has recourse only to a refutation of skepticism.

To refute skepticism, Williams relies on an argument inspired by Wittgenstein, an argument in which the notion of certainty plays a key role. I distinguish two versions of this argument in Chapter 3. The notion of certainty involved in the first version of the argument is a dyadic notion, according to which certainty comes in degrees and thus according to which my belief that *p* can be more certain than my belief that *q*. Here's the first version of the argument:

- P1     My seeing that I have two hands is not more certain than my belief that I have two hands.
- P2     A justifies B only if A is more certain than B.
- C1     My seeing that I have two hands does not justify my belief that I have two



hands.

There are two things that ‘certain’ might mean in this version of the argument, psychological certainty (or, roughly, confidence) or justification. I argue that the argument is unsound both when it is formulated in terms of psychological certainty and when it is formulated in terms of justification. The first version of Williams’ argument is therefore unsuccessful.

The notion of certainty involved in the second version of the argument is a monadic notion, according to which certainty does not come in degrees. Here’s the second version of the argument:

- P3 Both my belief that I have hands and my seeing that I have hands are certain.
- P4 B justifies A only if A is not certain.
- C1 My seeing that I have two hands does not justify my belief that I have two hands.

I distinguish three ways in which Williams might use the word ‘certain’ in this second version of the argument – a truth-evaluating use, a warrant-evaluating use, and a testability-evaluating use. Truth-evaluating uses of ‘certain’ associate certainty with truth; warrant-evaluating uses of ‘certain’ associate certainty with justification; and testability-evaluating uses of ‘certain’ associate certainty with refutability. I argue, however, that the second version of Williams’ argument is sound on none of these uses of ‘certain,’ and I conclude that skepticism survives Williams’ attacks. Williams fails to show that we should redistribute the burden of theory to the skeptic. Furthermore, he also fails to refute skepticism outright since he fails to establish the truth of anti-theoretical contextualism.

Since we have at this point quieted Williams' anti-theoretical contextualism, and since many epistemologists believe that a principle similar to epistemological realism is true – or at any rate that knowledge of the external world is somehow theoretically unified – let us suppose that knowledge of the external world is unified in a way that makes it something about which we can theorize. Still, even though we have quieted Williams' anti-theoretical contextualism, other contextualisms demand to be heard. Those who advocate these other contextualisms allow – or at least they *can* allow – that knowledge is something about which we can theorize. I call contextualisms of this sort theoretical contextualism, or simply *contextualism*. In general, contextualism claims that the truth-conditions of sentences that either ascribe or deny knowledge (sentences of the form 'S knows that p' and 'S doesn't know that p') vary in certain ways according to the contexts in which those sentences are uttered. For the sake of brevity, we can say that contextualism holds that the standards for knowledge vary from context to context.

But contextualism faces an immediate threat. Knowledge of the external world might be theoretically unified in such a way that there is *only one* standard for knowledge. And if it turns out that there is only one standard for knowledge, then no theory that says that the standards for knowledge vary – and *a fortiori* no theory that says that the standards vary from context to context – can get off the ground.

Barry Stroud argues against varying standards for knowledge. He argues that our ordinary standard for knowledge is identical to a high, Cartesian standard for knowledge. If his arguments are successful, then the standard for knowledge is always quite high, even when we seem in everyday situations to be employing other, lower standards. Furthermore, if Stroud's arguments are successful, it seems that no theory can get off the

ground if it envisages varying standards for knowledge. However, I argue in Chapter 4 that Stroud's arguments do not succeed, for they are based on a bad analogy. Thus, his arguments do not prevent contextualism from getting off the ground.

After opening the door for contextualism, I evaluate representatives of all extant contextualist accounts. One of the two most prominent contextualisms is based on the relevant alternatives theory of knowledge. These relevant alternatives contextualisms can either accept or deny the epistemic closure principle, according to which S doesn't know that P if she doesn't know that H. The other of the two most prominent contextualisms is based on the subjunctive conditionals account of knowledge. However, I begin in Chapter 5 with a consideration of Steven Rieber's explanatory contextualism, which is a less prominent form of contextualism. Rieber's contextualist account is based on an explanatory theory of knowledge, according to which S knows that p if and only if the fact that p explains why S believes that p. I argue that this explanatory theory of knowledge is weaker than other theories that are used to support contextualist accounts, and thus that we should reject Rieber's explanatory contextualism in favor of other forms of contextualism.

I next consider Mark Heller's contextualist account, which is a relevant alternatives contextualism that denies closure. Heller claims that I can know in ordinary contexts that I have hands even though I don't know that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat. This is because certain skeptical alternatives – for example, the alternative that I am a brain-in-a-vat – are not relevant to whether or not I know that I have hands. However, there are contexts in which skeptical alternatives *are* relevant. In those contexts, I know neither that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat nor that I have hands. In Chapter 6, I argue that the

contextualist elements of Heller's account are motivated by an unexplained and seemingly *ad hoc* incongruity. Heller's contextualism must be better supported if we are to have any reason to take it seriously.

Next, I turn to Stewart Cohen's contextualist account, which is a relevant alternatives account that accepts closure. Cohen claims that in ordinary contexts skeptical alternatives are not relevant at all. This means that I can know in those contexts *both* that I have hands *and* that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat. But, in other contexts, those skeptical alternatives *are* relevant and I cannot rule them out. In such contexts, I know neither that I have hands nor that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat. But, as I argue in Chapter 7, Cohen's account suffers from two serious problems. First, essential to Cohen's contextualism is the claim that some intrinsically rational beliefs – beliefs that are epistemically rational for me to hold even though I possess no evidence for them – amount to knowledge. In fact, he suggests that intrinsic rationality is sufficient for knowledge. The problem, however, is that intrinsic rationality does not seem to be related to knowledge in this way. Second, Cohen's relevant alternatives contextualism is not a satisfactory response to radical skeptical paradoxes. Those paradoxes remain potent and credible even after Cohen has presented his solution to them. In light of these problems, we should hesitate to adopt Cohen's contextualist account.

Aside from the problems that are peculiar to each of these contextualist accounts, there are problems that are common to all extant contextualisms. Keith DeRose's contextualism, which is based on the subjunctive conditionals account of knowledge, provides the basis for my discussion of the problems faced by contextualism in general. At the heart of contextualism is the idea that the standards for knowledge shift from

context to context. So if their accounts are to be at all plausible, contextualists must explain how such shifts are effected. They claim that the standards shift when contexts (conversations) contain certain features. In particular, contextualists claim that the standards for knowledge rise when the skeptic asserts that I don't know that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat, or when the skeptic makes her assertion and her conversational partners cooperate with her, allowing her to raise the standards for knowledge. So the relevant question is this: How is it that these contextual or conversational features suffice to raise the standards for knowledge to a level such that I count as knowing neither that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat nor that I have hands? I argue in Chapter 8 that no contextualist provides an adequate answer to this question. The arguments of that chapter show that contextualism in general fails to explain how the skeptic raises the standards for knowledge.

It seems, then, that there is no adequate contextualist solution to the skeptical puzzle. This means that we must provide an invariantist solution, a solution according to which the standards for knowledge do *not* vary from context to context. I provide such a solution in Chapter 9. The invariantist solution I provide is a Moorean one – it is one according to which the standards for knowledge are always low. The standards for knowledge are so low as to allow me to know across contexts that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat. This claim might strike some as implausible, yet my solution suitably explains why this is so. Furthermore, I argue that we should prefer my Moorean invariantist solution over contextualist solutions. The invariantist solution and the most prominent contextualist solutions all stand on the same theoretical ground. Yet the invariantist solution provides the explanations it must provide, while contextualist solutions fail to

provide the explanations they must provide. Also, contextualist solutions raise questions – for example, questions concerning how the skeptic raises the standards for knowledge – that are answered only in ways that seem either *ad hoc* or inadequate. But the invariantist solution does not raise such questions. Thus, my Moorean invariantist solution to the skeptical puzzle is better than its contextualist counterparts. Showing that this is so is among the primary aims of this dissertation.

PREVIEW

## CHAPTER 1

WILLIAMS' ANTI-THEORETICAL CONTEXTUALISM AND OUR ORDINARY  
WAYS OF THINKING*1. Introductory remarks*

In his recent work, Michael Williams argues thoroughly and vehemently for a view he calls *contextualism*. This is the view that “independently of all [situational, disciplinary and other contextually variable factors], a proposition has no epistemic status whatsoever. There is *no fact of the matter* as to what kind of justification it either admits of or requires.”<sup>1</sup> His arguments for contextualism also count as arguments against a view he calls *epistemological realism*, which is the view that even independently of contextual factors, there *is* a fact of the matter as to what kind of justification a belief requires.<sup>2</sup> In particular, epistemological realism maintains the truth of the doctrine of epistemic priority (or DEP). According to DEP, our beliefs about the external world must be justified by sensory experience if they are to amount to knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Williams first argues that epistemological realism in general and DEP in particular are “contentious and possibly dispensable theoretical ideas about knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 119. Throughout Chapters 1 through 3, I will cite this work in the text by page number only.

<sup>2</sup> See Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*, 108-9, 116.

<sup>3</sup> See Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*, 116; and Michael Williams, *Groundless Belief: An Essay on the Possibility of Epistemology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 25.

and justification.”<sup>4</sup> His arguments against epistemological realism and DEP belong to what he calls a theoretical diagnosis of skepticism. Such a diagnosis is supposed to reveal that skepticism depends essentially on theoretical ideas – namely, epistemological realism and DEP – that are not forced on us by our ordinary ways of epistemic thinking. That is, a theoretical diagnosis of skepticism is supposed to reveal that skepticism is *unnatural*. Williams maintains that since skepticism is unnatural, the burden of proof – or what he often calls the burden of *theory* – belongs to the skeptic.<sup>5</sup>

But we should wonder whether Williams’ considerations allow him to redistribute the burden of theory to the skeptic. I argue that they do not. Williams suggests that his redistribution is warranted by the unnaturalness of skepticism, which he takes to be revealed through an examination of “our most ordinary ideas about knowledge and justification” (xvii). However, some people claim that rather than revealing that skepticism is *unnatural*, an examination of our ordinary epistemic ideas reveals that skepticism is *natural*. So there is an unresolved dispute about exactly what such an examination reveals. This means that Williams may not yet redistribute the burden of theory to the skeptic. For, when all is said and done, an examination of our ordinary epistemic ideas might reveal that skepticism is natural, in which case the skeptic need not shoulder the burden of theory.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Williams, “Fogelin’s Neo-Pyrrhonism,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 7 (1999): 141-158, p. 144.

<sup>5</sup> I take it that the burden of theory is a special brand of the burden of proof. To have the burden of theory is to have the burden of proving that one’s theory is correct. Or perhaps to have the burden of theory is to have the burden of proving that we can theorize in a certain way or about certain things.