

A Sceptical Rejoinder to Sensitivity-Contextualism

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[“scepticism,” and not “skepticism,” in this J.]

ABSTRACT: This article offers a novel sceptical argument that the sensitivity-contextualist must say is sound; moreover, she must say that the conclusion of this argument is true at ordinary standards. The view under scrutiny has it that in different contexts knowledge-attributing sentences express different propositions, propositions which differ in the stretch of worlds across which the subject is required to track the truth. I identify the underlying reason for the sceptical result and argue that it makes sensitivity-contextualism irremediably flawed. Contextualists, I conclude, should abandon sensitivity for some other piece of epistemic machinery.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article présente un nouvel argument en faveur du scepticisme que les tenants du contextualisme sensoriel doivent reconnaître comme valide; qui plus est, ils doivent admettre que les conclusions de cet argument sont vraies selon des critères standards. J'examine la position selon laquelle, dans différents contextes, les formules visant à désigner un contenu de connaissance expriment différentes propositions, propositions qui diffèrent les unes des autres dans la série des mondes au sein desquels le sujet est à la recherche de la vérité. J'identifie la raison sur laquelle se fonde le constat sceptique et soutient qu'il fait du contextualisme sensoriel une position irrémédiablement défailante. Je conclus en proposant que les tenants de cette position devraient abandonner la sensation à la faveur d'autres composantes des rouages épistémiques.

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A sceptic confronts us and utters the following sentences:

- (1) “George does not know that he is not a brain-in-a-vat (BIV).”
- (2) “If George does not know that he is not a BIV, then George does not know that he has hands.”
- (3) “So, George does not know that he has hands.”

Since the sceptic’s argument is valid, it seems that the available responses are limited to these: either reject what the sceptic says at (1) or (2), or capitulate and agree with (3).

Epistemological contextualists disagree. They provide another option. Employing the semantic claim that sentences attributing (as well as sentences denying) knowledge can express different propositions depending on the contexts in which they are uttered, contextualists identify two contexts. *Sceptical contexts* are contexts in which sentences like (1) and (2) are uttered, while *ordinary contexts* are contexts in which sentences like (1) and (2) are not uttered. Contextualists then claim that tokenings of “George does not know that he has hands” express different propositions in these two kinds of contexts: a token utterance made in a sceptical context expresses a true proposition, while a token utterance made in an ordinary context expresses a false proposition.

This makes for a novel evaluation of the sceptical argument. It differs from other ways of rejecting the argument in holding that what the sceptic expresses when he says (1) and what he expresses when he says (2) are true. And yet on this evaluation we need not capitulate to scepticism. Or, at least, we need not capitulate to any *worrisome* form of scepticism that boldly claims that we grossly overestimate the extent of our knowledge of some subject, like the external world. Put in terms of our ordinary everyday attributions of knowledge of the external world, this form of scepticism has it that the sentences we use to attribute knowledge of the external world to one another (and to ourselves) are false. On the contextualist evaluation, this view is mistaken, since ordinary utterances of a sentence like “George knows that he has hands” express something *true*. This gets us a novel evaluation of the opening argument, one on which everything the sceptic says is, in the context in which the sceptic says it, true; and yet the worrisome form of scepticism is still false.

To this point, opponents have taken aim at either the contextualists’ semantic claim or the thought that semantically assenting to examine sentences is an effective way of evaluating scepticism.¹ Here, I will pursue another way that a specific form of contextualism might go wrong. Fault may be found with the epistemic machinery that a specific form of contextualism recruits. More specifically, fault may be found with the sliding

condition on the truth of knowledge-attributions. This is the condition whose stringency varies in response to the context in which various sentences are used. According to contextualists, this is the condition that is set low enough in ordinary contexts that George meets it, and high enough in sceptical contexts that George fails to meet it.

Though contextualists have endorsed a number of sliding conditions, many have gravitated toward a condition that resembles Robert Nozick's tracking condition. Roughly, this condition requires subjects of knowledge-attributions to track the truth across stretches of possible worlds. It operates as a sliding condition in the following way: a more stringent demand is imposed on the subject of a knowledge-attribution by expanding the stretch of worlds that she must track the truth across, while a less stringent, more relaxed standard is imposed by contracting the set of worlds across which she has to track the truth. This, in sketch form, is what I will call sensitivity-contextualism.²

In what follows, I argue that the epistemic machinery at the heart of sensitivity-contextualism cannot support the rejection of scepticism. I begin by laying out the view in more detail. Then I offer a sceptical argument that closely resembles the argument with which we began. On a contextualist evaluation, every sentence that figures into the argument expresses a true proposition. Moreover, the conclusion of this argument, which is as radical a claim as the claim that George does not know he has hands, comes out *true, at ordinary standards*, and all of this *by the lights of sensitivity-contextualism*. This creates an oddity: while we are told that the conclusion of the opening sceptical argument comes out false in ordinary contexts, the conclusion of a very similar sceptical argument comes out true *even in ordinary contexts*. After identifying the source of this oddity, I argue that it makes this form of contextualism irremediably flawed. If I am right, we should reject contextualist evaluations of sceptical arguments that employ this machinery. If contextualists are going to refute the sceptical argument, they will need to find some alternative machinery that makes use of some other sliding condition.

1. The Machinery of Sensitivity-Contextualism

Let us look in more detail at the machinery. Recall the sentences the sceptic utters:

- (1) "George does not know that he is not a BIV."
- (2) "If George does not know that he is not a BIV, then George does not know that he has hands."
- (3) "So, George does not know that he has hands."

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And recall the contextualists' two-part diagnosis: everything that the sceptic says is true, yet scepticism, in its worrisome form, is false. Let us take a closer look at each part of the diagnosis.

What (1) says is true, we are told, because George's belief that he is not a BIV is a belief that George would hold even if he were a BIV.³ Since we are ultimately evaluating sentence tokenings, the condition that George fails to meet needs to be put in terms of the truth of knowledge-attributing sentences. It says,

(TS) "S knows that p" is true only if S's belief that p tracks the truth out to the nearest possible world where p is false.

The notion of tracking the truth of a proposition is then spelled out this way:

(TB) S's belief that p tracks the truth out to world w if and only if, for all the worlds out to and including w : (i) in those worlds where p is true, S believes p; and (ii) in those worlds where p is false, S does not believe p.⁴

Since George would believe that he is not a BIV even if he were a BIV, it follows by (TB) that George's belief that he is not a BIV fails to track the truth out to the nearest world where he is a BIV. It then follows, by TS, that the sentence "George does not know that he is not a BIV" expresses a truth.⁵

Contextualists hold that (2) is true because it is an instance of the closure principle.⁶ This principle says knowledge is closed under known entailment. In its rough form, it says: if S knows that p and S knows that *if p then q*, then S knows that q .⁷ Contextualists need a meta-linguistic principle that captures this idea:

(Closure) For a single context c , if "S knows that p" is true in c and "S knows that p entails q" is true in c , then "S knows that q" is also true in c .

Now, in the conversation under consideration (and perhaps in all conversations), it is correct to attribute knowledge of the relevant conditional to George: it is correct to say "George knows that if he has hands then he is not a handless BIV." It follows, then, that if "George knows that he is not a BIV" is *false* in the context in which the sceptic speaks then "George knows that he has hands" is also false in that context.

The sceptic's utterance of (2), in addition to expressing something true, functions to take the same epistemic standard that is imposed on George's belief that he is not a BIV and carry it over and impose it on George's

belief that he has hands. As a result, George's belief that he has hands must track the truth out to the nearest world where George is a BIV. So across this last stretch of worlds, in the worlds where George has hands, he must believe that he has hands, and in those worlds where he does not have hands, he must not believe that he has hands. But he fails at the second of these, for, among the worlds where he does not have hands is the world where he is a BIV, and in that world he believes that he has hands.

This marks an important amendment to TS. While a subject's belief that *p* must track the truth of *p* out to the nearest world where *p* is false, some contexts require *more* if someone is to correctly say that the subject knows *p*. So it is with the sceptic's utterance of "George knows that he has hands." If this utterance is to express a truth, it is not enough that George's belief tracks out to the nearest world where he is handless. In this context, it is required that George's belief, in addition, track beyond the nearest world where he is handless; this context requires that his belief track the truth to the nearest world where he is a BIV. It follows, then, that TS is just a minimal necessary condition on the truth of knowledge attributions.

Because TS is just a minimal necessary condition on the truth of knowledge attributions, contextualists are able to endorse this condition as well as a closure-style principle. Nozick, of course, famously rejected closure-style principles on the grounds that one can track the truth of one proposition out to the nearest possible world where it is false, validly deduce a second proposition from this first one, and yet fail to track the truth of the second proposition out to the nearest world where it is false. So Nozick allows that despite all this good work one would fail to know the second proposition.⁸ Contextualists, however, can retain their favoured closure-style principle on the grounds that even if the subject of a knowledge-attributing sentence tracks the truth of a proposition to the nearest world where it is false, this may not be enough to make that knowledge-attributing sentence true. As we have just seen, in some contexts she may have to track the truth across an even wider stretch of worlds.

But none of this changes the fact that an *ordinary* utterance of "George knows that he has hands" is *not* false. In an ordinary conversation, one in which sceptical possibilities have not been raised, the standard that must be met *does not* involve a wider stretch of worlds. The possible worlds that differ from the actual world even more than does the world where George is handless—for example, worlds where George is a BIV—are simply not germane to ordinary utterances of "George knows that he has hands." For utterances made in more ordinary contexts to be true, it is enough that George's belief tracks the truth out to (and including) the nearest world where he does not have hands. Since George's belief succeeds in doing this, the sceptic has failed to impugn what is said in an ordinary conversation by uttering "George knows that he has hands."

2. A Parallel Argument

Now for the argument that parallels (1)-(3). Call anything that weighs at least two pounds an “object.” Then take the belief that at least three such objects exist and consider a conversation where someone utters the following sentences:

- (4) “George does not know that he is not a BIV.”
- (5) “If George does not know that he is not a BIV, then George does not know that there are at least three objects.”
- (6) “So, George does not know that there are at least three objects.”

First, I am going to show that on sensitivity-contextualism, (4) and (5) come out true. Then I will argue that by the same lights (6) comes out true *even at ordinary standards*.

The utterance of (4) expresses the same proposition (1) expressed—we have seen why contextualists judge that proposition true. The truth of (5), then, will be the focus in what follows. My approach to (5) begins with reconsideration of (2) and the thought that the closure principle is what supports (2). After arguing that this is not so, and arguing that there is a more attractive principle that does just as good a job of supporting (2), I will bring these lessons to bear on (5).

To see what the alternative principle is, consider the sceptical hypothesis employed in the antecedent of (2)—the BIV hypothesis. This hypothesis is well-suited, it seems, to discredit the belief mentioned in (2)’s consequent, namely George’s belief that he has hands. But, precisely what is it about this sceptical hypothesis that makes it well-suited to do this? The BIV hypothesis, after all, is *not* well-suited to discredit some of George’s other beliefs: for example, his belief that he exists or his belief that he is presently thinking.

In general, what does it take for a sceptical hypothesis to be well-suited to discredit some target belief? Two answers suggest themselves. According to one, a well-suited sceptical hypothesis is one on which the target belief is false. I will call this *the falsity account of well-suited sceptical hypotheses*. According to the second, a well-suited sceptical hypothesis is one on which the target belief fails to amount to knowledge. I will call this *the ignorance account of well-suited sceptical hypotheses*.

The following tells against the falsity account. It begins with the observation that the BIV hypothesis is well-suited to target more than just George’s belief that he has hands. It is also well-suited to target George’s belief that there is a chair in the room. Or, if George believes that there is *not* a chair in the room, the BIV hypothesis is just as well-suited to target this belief also. Notice, though, that the BIV hypothesis itself says nothing

about whether there is, or is not, a chair in the room. It is simply silent on this. It follows then that the reason the BIV hypothesis is suited to target George's belief cannot lie in the fact that George's belief is false on the BIV hypothesis, for, however the BIV hypothesis is construed, one of the two beliefs about whether there is a chair in the room is *not* false on it. Nonetheless, the BIV hypothesis is well-suited to target that belief. This means that the well-suitedness of the BIV hypothesis must be due to something other than the target belief's being false on the BIV hypothesis.

Someone might reply that the BIV hypothesis is best thought of as a hypothesis on which all of one's external world beliefs are false. Although the BIV hypothesis is usually described as one on which one's perceptual states are caused by electrochemical stimulations programmed by a computer, perhaps this is just convenient shorthand. When fully spelled out, perhaps the BIV hypothesis also includes additional facts about the external world, facts that make all of one's external world beliefs false.

This suggestion faces a problem. Consider the dynamic nature of perceptual experience. The BIV is made to undergo changing experiences. One moment she is in a perceptual state that suggests there is someone else in the room with her. Later she is in a perceptual state that suggests she is in the room alone. Should the BIV hypothesis be construed as a hypothesis on which there is no one else in the room at the earlier time, and as one on which at the later time someone quickly gets in the room to insure that the later belief is false? There is simply no need to think of the BIV hypothesis this way. If it happens, for example, that a janitor is emptying the trash in the psychology lab housing the BIV at the earlier time, this seems to do nothing at all to blunt the effectiveness of the BIV hypothesis in targeting the subject's belief that there is someone else in the room.

Consider then the alternative account of effective sceptical hypotheses, i.e., the ignorance account. On this account, the BIV hypothesis is well-suited to target a belief because, on that hypothesis, the target belief fails to amount to knowledge. The ignorance account subsumes the falsity account, since one way that a sceptical hypothesis can be well-suited is by being an hypothesis on which the target belief is false. However, the ignorance account allows other ways for sceptical hypotheses to be well-suited. It allows hypotheses on which the target-beliefs fall short of knowledge for some other reason, or example, by being true in a purely fortuitous way.⁹

If we adopt the ignorance account, we need to reevaluate the role of closure in sceptical arguments. For closure, as I will now argue, is closely tied to the falsity account. To see this, consider the equivalent of closure that is employed by the sceptic:

(Closure) For a single context *c*, if "S does not know that *q*" is true in *c* and "S knows that *p* entails *q*" is true in *c*, then "S does not know that *p*" is true in *c*.

The sceptic fills the q-slot with claims to the effect that S is not in a sceptical scenario; she fills the p-slot with believed claims about the external world, claims such as “S has hands” and “there is a chair in this room.” What is important for present purposes is that the sceptic must ensure that *p* entails *q*, for, if *p* fails to entail *q*, “S knows *p* entails *q*” will obviously be false. This will render the antecedent’s second conjunct false, and the sceptic will be unable to draw the conclusion that S does not know that *p*. So *p* needs to entail *q*—that is, *p* needs to entail that S is not in the specified sceptical scenario. Or, put another way, in the sceptical scenario S’s belief that *p* must come out false. This is exactly what the falsity account of sceptical scenarios requires.

But we have seen that the falsity account is inadequate, and that it needs to be replaced with the ignorance account. But if the falsity account forms a package deal with closure, then when we move to the ignorance account, we must replace closure. I call the principle that works in tandem with the ignorance account the sceptical linking principle:

(SLP) For a single context *c*, if “S does not know that not-*h*” is true in *c* and *h* is a sceptical hypothesis such that “on *h*, S would not know that *p*” is true in *c*, then “S does not know that *p*” is true in *c*.

Can SLP be used to support (5) in the parallel argument? The answer turns on whether the BIV hypothesis is well-suited to show that George does not know there are at least three objects. On the ignorance account, it is well-suited to do this if the BIV hypothesis is a hypothesis on which George fails to know there are at least three objects. This is so. For on the hypothesis that George is a BIV, his belief that there are at least three objects, though true (since his brain, the vat, and the computer each weigh over two pounds), would be based on non-veridical perceptual experiences, experiences that cannot turn the relevant perceptual belief into knowledge.¹⁰ It follows, then, that if George were a BIV, this would explain how he would fail to know that there are at least three objects. So the BIV hypothesis is well-suited for targeting George’s belief that there are at least three objects.¹¹ Therefore, the utterance at (5) is true.¹² Since the utterance of (4) also expressed a true proposition, and the reasoning is valid, the utterance of (6) expresses a true proposition.

To this point, the evaluation of the parallel argument is just the same as the evaluation of the first argument: each utterance (whether of a premise or a conclusion) in each argument expresses a proposition that is true. So only one issue remains: is the utterance of (6) only true in sceptical contexts? To answer, let us review the utterances of (4)-(6), paying special attention to the contextualists’ sliding condition.

Recall that with the earlier argument, contextualists claimed that uttering (1) initiates a non-ordinary, high-standards context since it makes the

epistemic evaluation of another important claim in that argument—namely, (3) “George does not know that he has hands”—subject to a standard that is more demanding than the standard that it would have been subjected to had (1) not been uttered. (4), however, does not do this: it does not introduce a standard that is more demanding than the standard that would have, in the absence of (4), been imposed on the other key utterance in the second argument—namely, (6) “George does not know that there are at least three objects.” This is because the stretch of worlds made salient by the introduction of the BIV hypothesis is *not* wider than the stretch of worlds that would be made salient if (6) were uttered in a conversation in which no one mentions sceptical hypotheses, for the nearest world where George is a BIV resembles the actual world *more closely* than the nearest world where there are less than three objects. After all, the nearest world where George is a BIV is just like the actual world except that it is a bit more technologically advanced and George has been subjected to this technology. However, a world where there are less than three objects is radically different from the actual world; for instance, it fails to include nearly everything that exists in the actual world.¹³ For this reason, the standard put into play by the introduction of the BIV scenario is less demanding than the standard that an ordinary utterance of “George knows that there are at least three objects” would put into play.

How does the utterance of (5)—namely, the utterance of “If George does not know that he is not a BIV, then George does not know that there are at least three objects”—affect the operative epistemic standards? Only two answers are available: either it fails to affect the standard and the standard generated by (4) stays in place, or the standard changes. In either case, the final result is the same: the standard that (6) ends up meeting is no more stringent than an ordinary standard. Recall that (6) is the utterance “George does not know that there are at least three objects.” Consider each possibility. On the first possibility, the standard that (6) meets is the one generated by (4). That standard, as we saw, is *less demanding* than the standard that would be generated by an ordinary utterance of (6). On the other possibility, the one on which the utterance of (5) changes the standard initiated by (4), the only possible standard to which it could change is the one that would have been generated by uttering “George does not know that there are at least three objects” in a conversation free of the likes of (4). That is, the standard changes to the standard generated by an *ordinary* utterance of (6). It follows, then, that the utterance of (6), the sceptical conclusion “George does not know that there are at least three objects,” expresses, *even in a perfectly ordinary context*, a true proposition.

Let me highlight an essential part of the contextualist evaluation of the (1)-(3) argument. This is the reliance on the fact that the nearest world where George is a BIV is *less similar* to the actual world than the nearest world where he fails to have hands. This fact was used to support the key

claim that a non-ordinary high-standard _____ is imposed on the truth of the sentence “George knows that he has hands,” a standard that is non-ordinary because it requires George to track the truth *beyond* the nearest world where he does not have hands. Now, contrast this with the argument at (4)-(6). The nearest world where George is a BIV is *more similar* to the actual world than the nearest world where there are fewer than three objects. For this reason, the introduction of the nearest world where George is a BIV did not induce a non-ordinary standard.

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3. The Dialectic

Consider the dialectic so far. We started with the sceptical argument at (1)-(3). Contextualists (and others) insist that one of the premises of that argument, (2), is supported by closure. But, as I have argued, the most powerful sceptical argument along the lines of (1)-(3) recruits another principle, SLP, to support (2); I then used SLP to support a key claim in the (4)-(6) argument that made trouble for sensitivity-contextualism.

In light of all this, one might think my argument misses the mark. If the sensitivity-contextualists address an argument that calls on closure, but I raise an argument that instead calls on SLP, one might charge that I have failed to address the sensitivity-contextualists’ response to the sceptical argument they are interested in. Is not the aim of sensitivity-contextualism to disarm the sceptical argument that calls on closure?

I offer two points in response. First, it is important to notice that sensitivity-contextualism is logically independent of the components of the two competing packages. Recall, one package bundles together the closure principle and the falsity account of sceptical scenarios, while the other bundles together SLP and the ignorance account. Sensitivity-contextualism, in asserting the thesis of contextualism, says that the truth-conditions for tokens of “S knows that p” are determined, in part, by features of the utterer’s context. Then it adds the sensitivity thesis that identifies the contextually determined condition as one that concerns the stretch of worlds across which S must track the truth. The features of the utterer’s context that determine this stretch are not widely agreed upon, but it is often claimed that raising a sceptical scenario can help expand the stretch of worlds that the subject must track across. Still the tenets of sensitivity-contextualism do not yet imply anything about the truth or falsity of the closure principle, SLP, the falsity account, or the ignorance account, for the tenets of sensitivity-contextualism still leave open the question of whether mentioning a sceptical scenario raises the standards in virtue of the target belief being false in that scenario, or in virtue of its falling short of the knowledge mark. Similarly, it leaves open whether the sceptic must call on the closure principle or SLP.

So how are we to choose between the two packages? This gets us to the second point. The choice, quite clearly, is one for the sceptic to make.

After all, we are discussing the sceptic's argument. If anti-sceptics are going to address this argument, they need to address the most powerful version of it. Sensitivity-contextualists and others who have identified closure and the falsity account as what underlies the sceptic's (2) have failed at this. By making the correction and moving to the view that SLP and the ignorance account provide better support for (2), we put ourselves in a position to determine whether sensitivity-contextualism can handle a more powerful sceptical argument.¹⁴ I have argued that it cannot.

4. Diagnosis: Misplaced Emphasis on Modal Distance

As the argument at (4)-(6) illustrates, sensitivity-contextualism turns out to be friendlier to scepticism than its proponents realize. What is the underlying reason for this? I argue that it is the epistemic significance that the position assigns to a proposition's *modal distance*. I then argue that this emphasis is misplaced.

Let a (true) proposition's modal distance be determined by the stretch of possible worlds that extend to the nearest world where it is false. On the view under consideration, a person's belief must enjoy epistemic success across this stretch of worlds if an ordinary attribution of knowledge of that proposition is to be true. Being successful requires two things: in worlds where the proposition is true, one must believe it; and in worlds where it is false, one must not believe it. In this way, modal distance is supposed to provide a measure of the ease or difficulty of knowing a proposition.

But is it? *There are at least three objects* is something that we think of as being fairly easy to know. However, the nearest world where it is false radically differs from the actual world. That world is so "distant" that, as we have seen, the BIV hypothesis can be used to show that one fails to know this proposition. Moreover, this can be done without inducing a non-ordinary context.

Further support comes from pairs of propositions that differ significantly in modal distance, but are similarly difficult (or easy) to know. For instance, given the common conception of things, the nearest world where George is vividly dreaming is much closer to the actual world than the nearest world where he is a BIV. However, it is quite plausible that George is in the same position (whether good or bad) to know that he is not vividly dreaming as he is to know that he is not a BIV.

There are also pairs of propositions whose modal distance is the same, but one is more difficult to know than the other. For example, consider two propositions that are, as a subtle matter, logically equivalent. Suppose the first is easy to know. And suppose the second is hard to know except by deduction from the first. Since these propositions are logically equivalent, the modal distance to their negations is the same; yet the first is much easier to know than the second. For example, it is easier to know

that there are at least three objects than it is to know that there are at least n objects, where $n=513/171$.¹⁵

Oh! V. good mind-bnder.

These considerations cast doubt on the underlying thought that a proposition's modal distance reflects how easy, or difficult, it is to know. The correct account of knowledge will come with a better measure of the difficulty of knowing. Until we have such a view, though, scepticism has not been refuted.¹⁶

Notes

- 1 For objections along these lines, see Richard Feldman, "Skeptical Problems, Contextualist Solutions," *Philosophical Studies*, 103 (2001): 61-85; John Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2004); and Jason Stanley, "On the Linguistic Basis for Contextualism," *Philosophical Studies*, 119 (2004): 119-46. For replies, see Stewart Cohen, "Contextualism, Skepticism, and the Structure of Reasons," *Philosophical Perspectives*, 13 (1999): 57-89; Stewart Cohen, "Contextualism Defended: Comments on Richard Feldman's 'Skeptical Problems, Contextualist Solutions,'" *Philosophical Studies*, 103 (2001): 87-98; and Keith DeRose, "The Ordinary Language Basis for Contextualism and the New Invariantism," *Philosophical Quarterly* (forthcoming).
- 2 Views along these lines include views that employ a contextually determined set of relevant alternatives. Proponents include Keith DeRose, David Lewis, and Mark Heller. The primary target in what follows is DeRose.
- 3 See Keith DeRose, "Solving the Skeptical Problem," *Philosophical Review*, 104 (1995): 1-52, at p. 36.
- 4 Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1981), p. ____.
- 5 I assume that the conversants are cooperating and that none of them are protesting the effect that mentioning the BIV hypothesis has on raising the standards.
- 6 According to DeRose, conditionals like (2) are "true regardless of how high or low the standards for knowledge are set" and to deny such a conditional is to embrace an "abominable conjunction." See DeRose, "Solving the Skeptical Problem," pp. 27-29.
- 7 This is a first approximation. Some more clauses must be added to deal with odd cases. A better approximation is: If (i) S knows that p, (ii) S knows that if p then q, (iii) S forms the belief that q on the basis of her beliefs that p and if p then q, and (iv) S is generally competent at *modus ponens* reasoning, then S knows that q.
- 8 We have just such a case. George tracks the truth of the claim that he has hands, since he believes that he has hands in all the nearest possible worlds where he has hands, and he does not believe that he has hands in the nearest possible world where he does not have hands (e.g., a world where he recently had an accident). However, he does not track the fact that he is not a BIV,

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since in the nearest possible world where he is a BIV he believes that he is not a BIV.

- 9 Notice, though, that a situation in which the target belief falls short of the knowledge mark is not *sufficient* for being an effective sceptical scenario, for a situation that is just baldly described as one in which the subject fails to know is not effective. But this should not lead us back to the falsity account since a situation in which the target belief is false need not be effective either, for, similarly, a situation that is baldly described as one in which the subject's belief is false is not effective either. I develop a complete account in "Effective Sceptical Scenarios" (ms.). For other discussions of the ignorance account, see Stephen Hetherington, "Gettieristic Scepticism," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 74 (1996): 83-97, and Barbara Winters, "Skeptical Counterpossibilities," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 62 (1981): 30-38. DeRose himself is open to the ignorance account, noting that the target belief's being false on a scenario is not necessary (and, he says, only "usually sufficient") for that scenario to be effective ("Solving the Sceptical Problem," p. 18).
- 10 Epistemic internalists might claim that beliefs based on such experiences are justified; but they should still agree that they are not warranted and therefore do not count as knowledge.
- 11 It is at this point that the move from the falsity account and closure to the ignorance account and SLP is important. The falsity account will not do, since it delivers the wrong result that the BIV hypothesis is *not* well-suited to target the three-objects belief. It delivers this result because on the BIV hypothesis, there exists at least George's brain, a vat, and a computer, enough to make the three-objects belief *true*. In addition, this is where the move from closure to SLP is important, since SLP, not closure, gets us from the claim that on the BIV hypothesis George fails to know that he is not a BIV to the claim that George does not know that there are at least three objects.
- 12 In §10 of "Solving the Sceptical Problem," DeRose argues that there is another thing that makes the sceptic's utterance of (2) true. As he puts it, this is the fact that George is in at least as good an epistemic position to know that he is not a BIV as he is to know that he has hands. So too, though, George is in at least as good a position to know that he is not a BIV as he is to know that there are at least three objects. For *reductio*, assume that this is not so. Assume, that is, that George is in a *better* position to know that there are at least three objects than he is to know that he is not a BIV. This claim, along with DeRose's claim that George is in at least as good a position to know that he is not a BIV as he is to know that he has hands, entails that George is in a better position to know that there are at least three objects than he is to know that he has hands. But this last claim is not independently plausible, for, as we have seen, the BIV hypothesis can be as effectively (or ineffectively) used to cast doubt on whether George knows that there are at least three objects as it can to cast doubt on whether George knows that he has hands. In addition, a person who knows that there are at least three objects knows this on the basis

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14 *Dialogue*

of perception. But if perception equips one to know that there are at least three objects, it also equips one to know that one has hands. So, if one has what it takes to perceive, and thereby know that there are three objects, one surely has what it takes to perceive, and thereby know, that one has hands.

- 13 An anonymous referee suggested that George might think differently about the similarity ordering. From George's point of view, a world where he is a BIV *is* radically different from the actual world, even more so than a world where he is not envatted but in which there are less than three objects. This is contrasted with the third-person point of view, from which George's being a BIV is not so radically dissimilar from the actual world. The suggestion has it that "I know that there are at least three objects" is true when uttered by George, but "George knows that there are at least three objects" is false when uttered by someone else. This is not independently plausible since it means that if a contextualist were to assess George's self-ascription (which, of course, is made in George's context) and then make her own assessment, upon hearing George utter "I know that there are at least three objects," she would say something true if she were to say "what George just said is true, but he doesn't know that there are at least three objects." The latter is clearly false.
- 14 One might include among the tenets of sensitivity-contextualism not only the contextualist thesis and the sensitivity thesis, but also a claim about what features of sceptical hypotheses make them well-suited to target beliefs. If all of this is packed into sensitivity-contextualism, then this third tenet, as I have argued, had better endorse the ignorance account. DeRose seems not to have written a claim of this third kind right into sensitivity-contextualism.
- 15 One might protest that this is unfair. Instead, we should think of the view as contending that the difficulty in knowing a proposition is determined by *two* things: the proposition's modal distance and the resources of the relevant epistemic creature. On this view, how difficult it is to know a given proposition is partly determined by the kind of epistemic creature that one is. This is surely plausible, but it is not enough to handle cases of this last kind, for here the two propositions are equally modally distant, yet specifying fixed epistemic resources for the creature—for example, perception and counting—would imply that the two propositions are equally difficult to know using the specified resource. But this is not so.
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