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Sceptical Doubts – Raising the Standards or Changing the Angle?

Abstract

The goal of this paper is to explore two different accounts of the mechanisms by which epistemic standards change, as a basis for the explanation of how arguments for radical scepticism get their appearance of legitimacy and persuasive power. The discussion begins with a presentation of arguments for the view that our epistemic practice contains a mechanism that raises the epistemic standards, to illustrate how sceptical hypotheses pose challenges to the truth value of our ordinary knowledge claims. Then, the discussion moves to a critique aimed to show that raising the standards approach is not well-suited to the job because it does not truly account for the radical form of philosophical scepticism. We take that these arguments pose serious problems with raising the standards approach and have to be dealt with. We examine an alternative account of changing epistemic standards, changing the angle of scrutiny, in line with which epistemic standards are interpreted as conditioned by disciplinary fields within which we conduct our research. After that, we compare the two highlighted approaches based on their success in providing an adequate description of actual epistemic practice. We conclude by arguing in favour of a latter approach as a superior conception and also as a promissory framework for an explanation of the phenomenology of our involvement with philosophical scepticism. Finally, we will close with some questions for both accounts.

Keywords

epistemic standards, level of scrutiny, knowledge claims, angle of scrutiny

Introductory Remarks

The epistemological viewpoint which attempts to reconstruct the problem of philosophical scepticism in light of the thesis that our epistemic practice contains a mechanism that *raises and lowers* the standards relative to which we evaluate our knowledge claims has received a great deal of discussion. Conversational contextualists offer the most elaborate version of this thesis (see: Lewis 1996; Cohen 1988; DeRose 1995; etc.). One of the central ideas of philosophers working within this camp is that such a hierarchical variation of standards enfolds against the background of a widening and narrowing range of error possibilities in play, which directly depends on conversational factors, such as speaker aims and intentions, listener anticipations, the purposes of conversation participants etc. Conversational contextualists consider this thesis a viable framework for an account of why we even consider sceptic objections when evaluating knowledge claims. However, this kind of explanation has been subject to a variety of objections, three of which are the most prevalent: (a) that the *conversational mechanism* is not sufficient to bring about shifting from an everyday context to a sceptical one (Williams 2001; Engel 2004; Davis 2004; Barke 2004; etc.); (b) that it is unclear in which way the conversational mechanism allows the lowering epistemic standards to everyday levels, after being raised to the maximum by the sceptic (Davis

2004: 267; Davis 2007: 420; Stanley 2005: 65; Barke 2004: 356); (c) that shifting from an everyday to a sceptical context is not driven by a mechanism of increasing and decreasing of epistemic standards (Barke 2004; Williams 2004a; Williams 2004b; etc.). In this article, we are primarily interested in assessing the third objection. In order to do so, in §1, we set out the core characteristics of an attempt to tie the problem of scepticism with the imposition of austere standards for knowledge. Subsequently, we consider several objections to this explanation, and in §1.2 we show that it faces serious difficulties explaining how the argument for the radical sceptical conclusion works. In §2, we introduce an alternative approach – *changing the angle of scrutiny* – and offer a comparative evaluation of the two approaches. We argue in favour of the thesis that *changing the angle of scrutiny* view enjoys a certain advantage over *raising the standards* view.

1. Raising the epistemic standards

We begin our discussion with an example of how, according to conversational contextualists, conversational mechanisms are employed in order to raise the standards relative to which we evaluate our knowledge claims.

“Hana is in Maribor with a group of friends. They are about to go rafting in Soča valley, and some of them, who’ve never been to Ljubljana, insist on visiting the city beforehand. After a long and exhausting deliberation they agree to take the bus to Ljubljana later that evening. Trying to check the timetables, they realise that they have no internet access, at which point Hana says, ‘Guys, don’t worry, I know that a bus leaves to Ljubljana five minutes before midnight because I checked the timetable last night. I’m going to my room now and see you later.’ Since nothing really important is at stake one of the others says, ‘OK, Hana knows the bus leaves five minutes before midnight, let’s make use of the day and leave for Ljubljana at that time’. But then, one of the group points out that she has promised to meet a business partner in Ljubljana early in the morning; the meeting is important and she cannot afford to risk it. She says, ‘Maybe the schedule that Hana saw was the local bus to *Ljubljanska Street* and not the bus to Ljubljana.’” (Pavličić 2018: 37)

Given that confusing the bus to *Ljubljana* and to *Ljubljanska Street* had previously happened to Hana’s friend, and given the importance of attending the meeting in the morning, the rest of the group start to reflect on their previous knowledge ascription and declare that Hana does not know that the bus leaves at that time.

As this example shows, there are some conversational parameters: needs and intentions of Hana’s friend, which activate the mechanism that lifts standards for knowledge ascriptions to the point at which additional evidence is needed to assess knowledge attribution to be considered as true.¹ Conversational contextualists hold that the level of epistemic standards depends on the span of error possibilities which are assessed as relevant in a given conversational context: the more remote the error possibilities that enter the set considered in a conversation, the more demanding the standards for attributing knowledge tend to become. Because of the possibility of increasingly remote scenarios entering into consideration, it is maintained that we may arrive at a context of non-ordinary epistemic practices, such as the sceptical context.

The problem of philosophical scepticism is traced back to Descartes’ famous hypothesis that an evil demon is systematically deceiving us, which has its modern counterpart in the hypothesis that we are a brain in vat (BIV) which is stimulated into having experiential evidence that is entirely indistinguishable from that which we possess in this very moment. There are two key fea-

tures of possibilities of this kind: their incompatibility with all our knowledge claims which, in quotidian circumstances, we hold to be true; and compatibility with every part of our actual and potential experience. If we take p to be an ‘ordinary’ proposition, such as “I have hands”, and take q to be an appropriate sceptical hypothesis, such as BIV, the sceptical argument can be developed in the following way:

1. I don’t know that not q .
2. If I don’t know that not q , then I don’t know that p .
3. I don’t know that p .

According to conversational contextualist DeRose (1995: 1), who named this version of the sceptical argument “The Argument from Ignorance“ (AI), one of the reasons why this argument seems so compelling is that it appears not to differ in form from how we dispute knowledge claims in ordinary epistemic practice. Does Hana know when the bus leaves to Ljubljana? Yes, because she checked the timetable the night before. But, given Hana’s friend’s needs and the costs of being wrong, stricter criteria to merit a knowledge attribution enter into force, in light of which Hana’s friends are willing to deny that she knows the bus will leave before midnight. In a similar vein, following their theoretical needs and goals, the philosophical sceptic lifts epistemic standards to the maximum by bringing up some extremely remote possibilities which are overlooked – and perhaps reasonably ignored – in our everyday practical context, but which in the absence of pragmatic constraints must be ruled out in order for anything we believe count as knowledge. Precisely, when the sceptic asserts the (1) premise of AI, they vastly expand the range of error possibilities such that q becomes a relevant possibility, which introduces the obligation to rule it out. Although adherents to conversational contextualists differ in terms of the kind of conversational rules that determine the change in epistemic standards, they agree that such a change is driven by ordinary conversational mechanisms for contextual shifts. In other words, whether it is claimed that sceptical hypotheses become epistemically relevant by making them *explicit* (DeRose 1995),² by bringing our attention to them (Lewis 1996

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Conversational contextualism has been rebutted by those who hold that alterations in the aforementioned conversational parameters do not affect the semantic dimension of the concept of knowledge but solely the conditions under which it is appropriate conversationally to assert the aforementioned sentences (see: Brown 2006; Bach 2005; Davis 2004; Davis 2007; etc.). If we turn to the example illustrated above this thesis is defended by pointing out one of the following two options. (1) That the initial knowledge ascription is false, but appears to be true due to its being in line with low standards for appropriate laying claim to knowledge. Unger (1971) famously defended this strategy. See also: Stroud 1984: § 2. (2) That ex post denial of knowledge is false, but appears to be true due to its being in line with low standards for appropriate laying claim to doubt (Rysiew 2001: 492, 499). As the aforementioned example is subject to opposing interpretations (Davis 2004; Davis

2007; Stanley 2005; etc.), it is claimed that the key argument in favour of contextualism is inconclusive. For an exemplary contextualist attempt to overcome challenges of this kind see (DeRose 1999: § 8–10; DeRose 2002: § 1.2–5; DeRose 2009: 88). The participants in this discussion have done much work in philosophy of language and semantics on the context dependence of knowledge attributions and, in turn, the debate became highly susceptible to a whole range of problems and disputes. However, it should be noted that excellent work aimed to show that ordinary knowledge ascriptions fail to display any sensitivity to factors relevant from the conversational contextualist angle (precisely, stakes) has been done in the field of experimental philosophy in: “Nothing at Stake in Knowledge” (Rose *et al.* 2019).

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More precisely, DeRose is of the opinion that the raising of epistemic standards does not

or by making them *salient* (Cohen 1988), it is maintained that they become so by conversational means.

Although put forward to motivate scepticism, not conversational contextualism; an account of *raising the standards* is also advanced by Fogelin (1999; 2003).³ Fogelin's general claim is that once we are presented with the sceptical scenarios, we have a strong inclination to dwell on them, which in return invokes raising the "level of scrutiny" so high that all sorts of psychological or pragmatic constraints are set aside (Fogelin 1999: 159; Fogelin 2003: 108–109). But, whereas Fogelin claims that ordinary knowledge turns out not to be knowledge *simpliciter*, but only *knowledge for all practical goals*, conversational contextualists deny that knowledge *simpliciter* – in traditional terms of knowledge evaluated according to some invariant standard – exists, and hold that the sceptical conclusion can be successfully avoided by being cognizant of ever-varying conditions for applying of the word 'know' (see: DeRose 2009: 214).⁴

Although appealing at face value, the idea of mechanisms for the gradual changing of epistemic standards generates two claims which, as we will see, turn out to be highly problematic: (i) that how we evaluate sceptical error possibilities is determined by their place on an abstract scale of remoteness; (ii) that the way in which the sceptic assesses knowledge claims does not lie in a deeper discontinuity with other epistemic assessments. We will take each of these claims in turn, although they are interrelated aspects of this epistemological viewpoint. First, we consider one objection that is raised against the plausibility of the thesis (i).

1.1. Critical Comment on Remoteness (i)

According to the upholders of the *raising the standards* account, the more we detach from our practical purposes, the more we cast the net of error possibilities. And if we entirely cut ourselves away from practical affairs, we raise epistemic standards to the highest possible level. However, Williams (2004a) notices that, if this account is correct, then we would expect that a possibility that is seen as realistic – i.e. less remote – is one that we would take more seriously into account. However, as he notes, such a prediction is not borne out by the facts. To appreciate this, consider:

1. *Pressing*: The schedule that Hana saw was the local bus to *Ljubljanska street* and not the bus to *Ljubljana*.
2. *Remote*: Radical anti-globalists hacker group aiming to disrupt the train system and cause massive strikes throughout the country has intentionally tampered with the online timetable.
3. *Very Remote*: Between now and the time of our departure, reptilians will infiltrate the nuclear plant in Krško and cause a Chernobyl-style accident, leading to all trains in Slovenia to stop.
4. *Hyper-remote*: There is no timetable, no trains and no Hana: I am a brain in a vat.

What is striking about this picture, according to Williams, is that the stories like the forthcoming Chernobyl-style catastrophe caused by reptilians (see Williams' original example: 2004a: 470) seem very silly, while sceptical possibilities, presented in an appropriate context, do not. In his words:

“In the right frame of mind, sceptical scenarios seem interesting, important and distinctly disturbing.” (Williams 2004a: 470)

What exactly does Williams have in mind when he speaks about the *importance* of sceptical hypotheses? Let us look closer at how Williams describes the effect that sceptical hypotheses have on us. He writes:

“Certainly, lots of epistemologists take them very seriously indeed, at least in the sense of seeing them as having great theoretical interest. Yet none of us believe that any sceptical hypothesis is true, or even remotely likely to be true.” (Williams 2004b: 320)

What Williams stressed in this passage is in close alignment with his central thesis that one does not need to be ready to accept the sceptical conclusion in order to be interested in the sceptic’s arguments (cf. Williams 1999: §1). In his view, understanding of the sceptical problem can be shown to be significant for the adequate drawing of relevant demarcation lines, as well as for questions about the value we place on knowledge: for instance, by asking whether knowledge is desirable in an intrinsic or an instrumental sense; whether it is the sole aim of our research projects or there exist other aims of equal or greater importance, etc.

One point concerning William’s previous remarks is worthy of emphasis. Note that Williams clarifies that, despite their significance in terms of theoretical aspirations, sceptical possibilities are certainly not, even remotely, believed to be true. Having that in mind, we might ask ourselves on what basis exactly sceptical possibilities differ from the Chernobyl-style-reptilian possibility? Is it not true that, while none of the participants in the “Maribor case” would consider such a hypothesis even remotely likely to be true, we can comfortably imagine that one of the participants is a science fiction aficionado and therefore interested in that scenario?⁵ Moreover, we can imagine that they would even find it interesting from an epistemological aspect: they may ask what procedures and techniques should be applied in a situation like that, how strong our epistemic position should be, what we should do to determine the truth of our beliefs, and so on. When this is appreciated, we might become suspicious whether Williams’ attempt to problematise the idea that we evaluate sceptical possibilities by their place on an abstract scale of remoteness along this line is satisfactory. To his credit, Williams acknowledges that this argument entirely rests on appeals to intuitions.

depend exclusively on pointing to an error possibility, but that the same effect is accomplished by explicitly claiming that we have excluded certain error possibilities. Thus, for example, the context in which we claim we are not a brain in a vat has a tendency to turn into a context in which the sceptic’s standards are at work.

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For a neat explanation of how the conversational contextualist’s and Fogelin’s positions differ, see: Neta 2003: 402–403.

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By adhering to the thesis that the term *know* and its cognates are *context-relative*, they hold that sceptical worries could be resolved

by understanding that what the sceptic has in mind when they talk about knowledge is perfectly compatible to our ordinary knowledge claims (Cohen 1999: 77). Formulated like this, conversational contextualism is in a position to hold that the impossibility of legitimate knowledge ascription in the context of epistemology does not imply the impossibility of legitimate knowledge ascription in non-epistemological contexts.

5

Since the possibilities against which Williams considers sceptical hypothesis are closer to a “conspiracy theory case”, in order for our argument to apply to his example it is sufficient to replace the imagined science fiction fan with a conspiracy theorist.

However, Williams develops another line of argument that is more grounded on the theoretical than on the intuitive level, which shows why philosophical scepticism is deeply disturbing and misgiving when its consequences are fully understood. In the following section, we will lay out several focal points of this line of reasoning, which will justify us in claiming that, in interpreting sceptical hypotheses as “remote”, the conversational contextualist inadequately addresses philosophical problems scepticism. Now we consider how the notion of *remoteness*, employed in terms of sceptical hypotheses, should be understood.

1.2. Critical Comments on Remoteness (ii)

As mentioned above, conversational contextualists consider AI as problematic, seeing how the utterance of its (1) premise i.e. explicit appeal to sceptical hypotheses leads us to the sceptical problem. Critics do not look kindly on this explanation. Their general remark is that, if the sceptical conclusion only tells us that we cannot fulfil extremely stringent standards for knowledge, nothing is intriguing about scepticism. Feldman (1999: 107; 2001: 78), Rysiew (2001: 483), Conee (2005b: 66) and MacFarlane (2014: 181) pointed out that the sceptical conclusion poses a challenge because the sceptic is put in the position as if to doubt that we are capable of satisfying exactly the same standards for knowledge which we have always been inclined to think are fulfilled. The same remark has been developed by Klein (2000: 110) and Davis (2004: 261).

DeRose stresses that previous remarks represent a mischaracterisation of the contextualist anti-sceptical strategy; he writes:

“The contextualist strategy is important because AI initially seems to threaten the truth of our ordinary claims – it threatens to boldly show that we’ve been wrong all along in thinking and saying that we know this and that. (...) In fact, one is initially tempted to say that there’s no good sense in which I know that I’m not a BIV or in which I can know I have hands if I don’t know that I’m not a BIV. How (and whether) to avoid the bold sceptical result is puzzle enough.” (DeRose 2017: 4)

In light of the passage cited above, we may ask: are conversational contextualists in a position to explain the bold sceptical conclusion (as DeRose uses the term, see also: 2017: 40, 100–107) away as ostensible i.e. as an *illusion of invariant epistemic standards* which is the result of the careless imposing of unusually heightened standards inherent in doing epistemology? After all, it is crucial to explain how the sceptical puzzle arises to answer the following question: if the sceptical argument does not threaten the truth of our ordinary knowledge claims, why did we initially think otherwise?

The recent appeal of conversational contextualists to an *error theory* has exactly that purpose. According to the *error theory* competent speakers are in a systematic confusion about the semantic nature of the word *know* and that without philosophical interventions they are not capable of the insight that the standards for application of this term are context-sensitive (DeRose 1995: § 2; DeRose 2009: 159; Cohen 1999: 77). Thus, the basic claim is that the sceptical argument is puzzling because we cannot independently become cognizant that the sceptic is merely changing the standards for knowledge.

Williams notes that appealing to an error theory is unconvincing, for the application of such a diagnosis of the sceptical puzzle leaves both the sceptic and the anti-sceptic confused.⁶ This insight is related to Conee’s (2005a: 55)

critique who pointed out that even after revealing the error theory, a great number of philosophers continue to reject it firmly. With this in mind, it appears that there is some truth in the remark that if, even after applying the diagnosis, the sceptical conclusion remains to appear to relate to our everyday epistemic practice, then the paradox is not fully resolved (see: Williams 2004b: 458, 468–469). Moreover, we could add that, in the absence of convincing arguments based on the *illusion of invariant epistemic standards*, the anti-sceptic response by conversational contextualists begs the question: it illegitimately appeals to everyday epistemic standards in order to preserve the truth of ordinary knowledge claims, even though the sceptic expressed doubt regarding our ability to fulfil those same standards. For this reason, it seems that we should accept Williams' suggestion and view error theory as merely a symptom of a deeper problem. What is then the problem in question?

In answering this question, we need to determine what conversational contextualists have in mind interpreting sceptical hypotheses as *remote*. By taking the theory of subjunctive conditionals as a basis for his contextualist account, DeRose (1995: §11–12) claims that the sceptical world, in everyday circumstances, does not belong to “the sphere of epistemically relevant worlds”, for it is extremely *remote* from the actual world. This essentially means that worlds which include a systematic deception are irrelevant for everyday knowledge ascription, for they are too far apart from the actual world. A similar explanation is found among those conversational contextualists who are working within the relevant alternatives framework: in everyday contexts sceptical possibilities (“alternatives”) are too remote to count as relevant (see: Cohen, 1988: 96–97). Describing sceptic hypotheses as extremely remote conversational contextualists hold that they are irrelevant for our everyday attributions of knowledge as they are too unrealistic: the likelihood they are realised in ordinary circumstances converges to zero.⁷ Indeed, it is entirely irrelevant whether the probability of his hypothesis being actualised is high or low from the sceptic's viewpoint. Even if we were not deceived in one of the ways the sceptic points to, we are unable to know so. On the other hand, it is entirely insignificant from conversational contextualists' perspective that such possibilities – distant in a modal sense – exist. In an everyday context, there is no reason why such possibilities should be taken into consideration. Therefore, they are unable to defeat the truth of ordinary knowledge claims (see, for example, Stine 1976: 252–253).

Williams cautions that we should be careful in using the term “remote”. He claims that the reasoning of conversational contextualists is unsatisfactory, as they lose from sight the fact that the sceptic lays out their argument to show

6

Appeal of conversational contextualists to *an error theory* has generated a literature of its own that is full of subtleties and argumentative moves that we do not have space to discuss here. For more detail, see: Rysiew (2001).

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The format does not allow for a more thorough account on how exactly DeRose's notion of remoteness departs from that which advocates of “relevant alternatives contextualism” have

in mind. For a convincing argument of how DeRose's attempts to construct spheres of epistemically relevant worlds based on their similarities with the actual world fails see (Blome-Tillmann 2009). However, DeRose offers some pointers of directions in which his account could be improved and updated in (DeRose 2017: 154), admitting the lack of precision in his use of term *the closeness of possible worlds to the actual world*, that his “account of knowledge is a picture, at most, rather than a theory” (DeRose 2017: 207).

why we are not in a position to exclude their scenario, which is based on different usage of the term. The sceptic sets out an argument that they considers to reveal a problematic feature of our epistemic position: our perceptual evidence is the all we can rely on when it comes to our knowledge of physical objects in the external world. As our epistemic position in an actual world is identical to what it would be in the world of systematic deception, the sceptic points to the fact that this presupposed world is, from the perspective of our epistemic position (the evidence at our disposal), alarmingly *close* to our actual world. For that reason, Williams insists that, in considering the sceptical problem, two notions of “remoteness” must be clearly distinguished: the first, which he attributes to the conversational contextualist in which we take into consideration the idea of *factual remoteness*; and the second ascribed to the sceptic, by which possibilities can be remote in terms of the evidence available to us – *epistemic remoteness*. While the conversational contextualists hold that the sceptical world – in which our belief in an ordinary proposition *p* is false – is factually remote; concerning the dimension which the sceptic considers crucial for determining whether our belief in ordinary claims of type *p* is true – the evidence at our disposal – it is not at all remote (Williams 2004a: 471).

With this in mind, Williams concludes that explanations based on the idea of “factual remoteness” do not hit the crux of the sceptical problem, so that conversational contextualists fail to provide an adequate diagnosis of the sceptical problem. This insight leads Williams to a diagnosis of Cartesian scepticism based on the so-called “Underdetermination problem” (Brueckner 1994). Since the sceptic conceives worlds in which our perceptual evidence is identical to evidence favouring our ordinary propositions, that evidence will not be sufficient for beliefs in those propositions to be counted as true. This problem arises because beliefs about the external world are grounded on the evidence of the senses, which means that beliefs concerning immediate experience are *epistemologically prior* relative to beliefs regarding physical objects in the external world. Williams notes that this assumption represents an instance of the doctrine he calls “epistemological realism”, according to which our knowledge of the world represents one epistemological kind set in certain objective relations to other types of knowledge (among which the most relevant is the relation of epistemological priority). Williams links the classification of beliefs into epistemological kinds to an attempt to provide evidential justification for all our empirical knowledge (so-called *The Prior Grounding Requirement*, cf. Williams 2001: 24). To critically examine “The Prior Grounding Requirement”, Williams proposed his “theoretical diagnosis” of traditional epistemological inquiry, aiming to identify its hidden theoretical presuppositions and provide a systematic critical review regarding their reasonableness.

Acknowledging that he has not previously addressed scepticism about justification (DeRose 2017: 113), in his recent work DeRose has framed the questions of “epistemic priority”, or as he says, “the tricky matter of determining when one belief is for us based on another, in such a way that the latter is serving as our evidence for the former” (2017: 244; cf. DeRose 2017: 247) in order to spell out on what grounds we might have come to know sceptical hypotheses are false. DeRose connects the sceptical objection that one – even in a context of relatively low epistemic standards – does not know $\sim q$ – with the idea that knowledge-yielding justification for believing in the falsehood

of radical sceptical hypotheses must be gained through experience. However, that idea, as DeRose observes, appeals to “the old ‘No a priori knowledge of deeply contingent truths’ mantra” (DeRose 2017: 250) which is, as he is inclined to think, false and should be abandoned.

Holding that justification for $\sim q$ is not derived from perceptual experience but rather “immediate, not based on other beliefs at all” (DeRose 2017: 243) DeRose commits to the development of an account of the a priori nature of knowledge of the falsehood of radical sceptical hypotheses in spite of “the deep contingency of the non-obtaining of those hypotheses” (DeRose 2017: 235). To evaluate DeRose’s contextualist version of a prioritism, readers should take a careful look at (DeRose 2017: §7) themselves. However, it is important to notice that in the end, not merely by making explicit some ideas that the traditional epistemologist takes for granted does DeRose invite “theoretical diagnosis” of scepticism; he also acknowledges that the key to coming to terms with bold sceptical conclusions (i.e. “that there’s no good sense in which I know that I’m not a BIV or in which I can know I have hands if I don’t know that I’m not a BIV” – 2017: 215) is for one to account for the doctrine of *epistemological priority*: that knowledge of the empirical truth needs to be derivable from epistemologically prior experiential data.⁸ That, in turn, leads us to assess Williams’ diagnosis as an approach that digs a little deeper and points out one important direction in which the sceptical problem could be understood.

Given the assumption of epistemological realism, Williams notices that the sceptic inflicts a *totality condition* for a proper assessment of the knowledge of the world, by which he demands from us “not only to assess all our knowledge, or all knowledge in some broad category, but all at once” (Williams 1991: 23). But, imposing this condition, Williams stresses, does not mean *raising the standards for knowledge*, but entirely rests on conducting a different type of investigation motivated by the traditional epistemological question of a special subject-matter: the possibility of knowledge *as such* (Williams 2004a: 462). The transformation from an everyday to a sceptical context cannot, Williams believes, simply be tantamount to lifting the lev-

8

But it is a question of its own whether conversational contextualism can account for the complete answer to the problem of traditional scepticism or not. To address the prevailing critics that contextualist theory is flawed because it is committed to (i) the highly controversial claim such as “Now you know it now you don’t.” (see: Yourgrau 1983: 183; Stanley 2005: 52); (ii) the view that epistemologists are best described as the most ignorant persons in the world (Engel 2004: 210; Feldman 2001: 62; etc.); and (iii) the view that knowledge that radical sceptical hypotheses are false cannot be truthfully stated or that it is unspeakable (Davis 2004: 260; Schiffer 1996: 321), DeRose and Cohen have claimed that the aforementioned objections are the result of a mischaracterisation of their position, which is correctly understood as a meta-linguistic or semantic theory of knowledge attributions. And this is exactly the point where criticism

that conversational contextualism cannot account for the complete answer to the problem of traditional scepticism has been applied. According to critics, the problem of scepticism is not merely a problem of adequate application of epistemic predicates (see: Bruckener 1992; Sosa 2000; etc.). They believe that the sceptic challenges our intuition that we do have *knowledge* – an intuition that we express in object language; they note that the answer to it must be at the same level. But, as some authors have observed, if such an answer is given from conversational contextualists, it would be subjected to “the fallacy of semantic descent” (see: Čuljak and Sekulić 2013: 389). Whether or not DeRose is making this fallacy is a topic for another paper, but it is important to stress that Williams has not formulated his contextualism as purely semantic theory, so he doesn’t face this difficulty.

el of scrutiny for that to occur requires a change in research angle. In the following section, we will set out Williams's account for shifting epistemic standards.

2. Raising the Standards or Changing the Subject?

The subject of the debate between these two camps is not whether a mechanism which triggers the raising and lowering of epistemic standards exists (it is undisputed that it does), but whether on the back of such a mechanism can account for the dynamics of *epistemic* context changes and, accordingly, an adequate diagnosis of the origins of the sceptical problem can be offered. For example, consider the field of forensic archaeology. The practitioner who points in the direction of certain bony remains and utters "Here is one hand." has to satisfy an entire set of conditions for their claim to be considered true. In doing so, they can *raise* the level of scrutiny: they can be extremely strict in applying archaeological identification methods (such as an osteological examination) or more meticulous in classifying data obtained by macroscopic and microscopic analysis of the bony material etc. But if they begin to wonder if some fossil remains are the product of deception by a neuroscientist, the proper question to ask is: what happens with the epistemic standards after such moments? Are they raising the *level* of scrutiny or changing the *angle* of scrutiny?

In §1, we saw that in maintaining the *raising the standards* thesis, conversational contextualists commit themselves to the notion that the pattern by which the sceptic formulates their arguments does not depart from that by which we bring knowledge claims into question in everyday practice. Fogelin (1999:160) adopts a parallel attitude toward sceptical arguments. He believes that entertaining sceptical scenarios is only a question of imagination: if we exclude certain practical constraints, we notice that the upper boundary for raising investigation standards does not exist. On the contrary, Williams holds that it is not possible to speak of any claims' epistemic status in the absence of such constraints. For instance, within forensic archaeology, there are some constraints on theoretical inquiry that determine which utterances will be exempted from doubt for us to think archaeologically at all. One such proposition which is not brought into question in the aforementioned context is the negation of the Russellian Hypothesis – that the world came into existence a few minutes ago – as well as the hypothesis that all archaeological remains are skilful forgeries. Williams calls propositions whose truth must be assumed in order for us to even engage in the type of research "methodological necessities".⁹ Understood this way, what explains how sceptical alternatives seem irrelevant in particular contexts is not that they have not been introduced into a conversation (conversational contextualists) or for practical reasons (Fogelin), but a fundamental fact about the *logic of inquiry*. For one argument in support of this claim, Williams provides the observation that methodological necessities – although they allow an inexhaustible increase in the level of scrutiny within their native context – by determining the reasonableness of any challenge to our knowledge claims they preclude the possibility of considering sceptical hypotheses as epistemically relevant. The main idea is thus to claim that certain disciplinary constraints enforce at all levels of scrutiny. Is Williams right?

We believe that Williams account is plausible and that through an example of an everyday situation we can show how “the angle of inquiry” may keep us distant from considering sceptical possibilities as epistemically relevant (i.e., as defeaters) to our knowledge claim, even in a context in which we are very close to considering them. Imagine Hana researching the “History of the philosophical idea of scepticism”. Imagine that despite Hana’s keen effort, the professor denies her the highest mark, claiming that Hana’s evidence is insufficient to support her conclusion since she has failed to consider arguments in Michael de Montaigne’s writings, Francisco Sánchez, etc. It becomes clear how it is possible to raise the “level of scrutiny” very high, without even coming close to considering sceptical hypotheses as “defeaters” to a given knowledge claims. We can also imagine that the professor commends Hana for providing evidence on the first modern versions of the Evil Deceiver hypothesis. It becomes clear that sceptical possibilities can be brought to attention without our tendency to intensively reflect on them and feel obliged to consider them as epistemically relevant challenges to our ordinary knowledge claims. Viewed in this light, it seems obvious that as long as Hana is dealing with scepticism from one angle of scrutiny – *the angle of historical research* – it will be obvious that, say, scepticism had a profound influence on the development of intellectual thought in the 16th century, or that the earth existed 5 minutes ago. These insights suggest that the “angle of scrutiny” exclude certain alternatives no matter how high the bar for scrutiny is placed. We can also approach the problem of deciding between “raising the standards” and “changing the angle” by focusing on a particular question: under which circumstances would the sceptic’s reference to the sceptical hypotheses make them relevant in a given conversation?

As mentioned in the introduction, that conversational mechanisms cannot be the moving force behind context transformations that is epistemic in nature, is argued by many critics. They consider that bringing up the BIV hypothesis would at best cause the bewilderment, wonderment or sneer of participants in a conversation, but would not alter the usual standards for knowledge (Feldman 1999; Engel 2004; Davis 2004; etc.). That this is a fair point is demonstrated by the example of how, even to a philosophy student dealing with the concept of scepticism, so long as it is from a historical angle, the request to consider sceptical hypotheses as ‘defeaters’ to their knowledge would seem entirely inappropriate, or something that they are not committed to consider as the topic of their research. But we can easily imagine that sceptical hypothesis would be considered as an appropriate challenge if Hana would enter a discussion with her professor on another course he is teaching, or if she had attended an epistemology seminar.

Viewed from this angle, we think that Williams is right in holding that the sceptical context differs from other contexts not because it is most rigorous, but because it involves a different kind of inquiry. Given the unusual generality of the sceptic’s requirement i.e. the requirement for a global legitimation of our beliefs, it seems that the sceptic is not overworking quotidian mechanisms

for context change but shifts the direction of inquiry: they turn us to searching for the sort of belief upon which our entire knowledge of the world could be founded. Such a request, however, gets its full legitimacy only from the angle of doing traditional epistemology. For, if we accept that there are epistemic kinds and some invariant epistemologically relevant facts in light of which is possible to distinguish justified beliefs from those which are not – such as the general foundedness of beliefs about the external world in experiential evidence – the sceptic’s requirement for an ultimate grounding of all empirical knowledge becomes relevant.

In light of this, we may add that Williams offers a more complete explanation of how the sceptical argument is supposed to work based on an answer to the origin of sceptical intuitions that bring us into the sceptical problem. As we saw in §1, Fogelin claims that once sceptical possibilities are presented, we have a tendency to reflect on them intensely (Williams 2004: 108), but this answer fails to explain why we even take to consider the presuppositions of a philosophical sceptic when evaluating knowledge claims in the first place. Similarly, when it comes to conversational contextualists, we notice that their mechanisms for the shifting of standards are conceived with the intent of explaining how the sceptical argument becomes convincing once it has already been brought into play, but just as Fogelin, it has little to add in terms of answering the question of why it has even been formulated. On the other hand, Williams can address this question by claiming that they are artefacts of a traditionally dominant philosophical idea that he calls “epistemological realism”.

In arguing that Williams’ diagnosis is deeper and more appropriate than the one offered by conversational contextualists, we are left with a lingering question: does it go all the way down? To ask this is to appreciate that, even in associating traditional scepticism with “epistemological realism”, one might be dubious about the line of thought that identifies the latter as a philosophical preconception of sceptical reasoning. Barry Stroud, for instance, maintained that Williams’ diagnosis “does not penetrate very deeply into the sources of scepticism” (Stroud 2000: 7) since “epistemological realism” is not an assumption but a by-product of sceptical reasoning. On Stroud’s account, the doctrine of *epistemological priority* of beliefs concerning immediate experience is supported by the mere common-sense opinion that all our knowledge of physical objects comes through experience. Since we need to say more about sense-perception and its function in our understanding of empirical knowledge, Stroud believed that the sceptic’s questioning does not lie in a deeper discontinuity with our other epistemic assessments, but rather “appeals to something deep in our nature” (Stroud 1984: 39).

“The difficulty comes in philosophy when we try to see exactly how sense-perception works to give us knowledge of the world. We are led to think of seeing, or perceiving generally, in a certain way. What is in question is our knowledge of anything at all about the world, of any of the truths that are about things around us.” (Stroud 1984: 5)

But, what follows the above passage is:

“What we want is an explanation of how we could get any knowledge of things around us on the basis of sense-perception, given certain apparently undeniable facts about sense-perception.” (Stroud 1984: 5)

From Stroud’s perspective on how we do and should think about sense-perception, the explanation of how experience works for our worldly knowledge

is equated with the explanation “of how we could get any knowledge of things around us *on the basis of sense-perception*”. However, we might wonder if in accepting the (natural and highly intuitive) idea that experience plays an important part in our worldly knowledge we have to commit ourselves to the (highly theoretical) idea that it plays a direct justifying role. The latter is exactly what Williams identifies as an assumption of traditional epistemologists upon which sceptical arguments trade. In Williams’ alternative account, sense-perception does not play a foundational, but *causal-explanatory* role in understanding our observational knowledge. Distinguishing the conceptual and the epistemic dependence, Williams has provided specific reasons for the viewpoint according to which, from maintaining that sense-perception does not serve as the foundation for our empirical knowledge, we should not conclude that immediate experience is irrelevant for “knowing what is going on in the world around us” (Williams 2001: §15). Whether those are good reasons for adopting Williams’ alternative account of observational knowledge (see: Williams 2001: §15; Williams 2014) is a question that is beyond the scope of this paper. However, Williams’ proposal is worth examining, since working in the general direction which he points to – i.e. to give up the idea that beliefs about the external world are grounded on the evidence of the senses – enables us to avoid worrying about the “Underdetermination problem”, and provides us with a clear and elegant explanation of why arguments for the sceptical conclusion are formulated in the first place. Put simply, we could explain our disposition to consider the presuppositions of a philosophical sceptic when evaluating knowledge claims as a result of the intuitions of professional philosophers.¹⁰ On the other hand, supposing that Stroud is right – i.e. to let sceptical questioning pass off as merely intuitive and natural – we would be open to criticism (that we have just hinted above) directed at conversational contextualists that mentioning the BIV hypothesis in a conversation would at best cause the bewilderment, wonderment or sneer of participants which is, in the end, in close alignment with the observation (nowadays brought into focus by many epistemologists) that most people simply remain unmoved by sceptical arguments.¹¹

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we have argued in favour of the account of *changing the angle of scrutiny* over the *raising the standards* account, as a superior explanation regarding the origins of intuitions that drive us to the sceptical problem, and that it provides a picture of justification that meshes more smoothly with the obvious features of everyday epistemic practice. Naturally, remarks concerning this debate provide only a starting point for further research, the most important of which concerns the question: by which linguistic means can we justify the claim that epistemic standards are context-sensitive? But, providing an answer to this question is a highly demanding task beyond the scope of this paper.

10

In so doing, we also come through clarifying what Williams means by stating that, in the right frame of mind, one has a peculiar interest in sceptical arguments.

11

Nowadays, there is a striking tendency among philosophers to deny the intuitive persuasiveness of sceptical reasoning. These matters are discussed in detail at (DeRose 2017).

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Jelena Pavličić

Skeptičke sumnje – podizati standard ili mijenjati kut?

Sažetak

Cilj je rada istražiti dva različita razmatranja mehanizama putem kojim se mijenjanju epistemički standardi, kao osnova za objašnjenje toga kako argumenti za radikalni skepticizam stječu svoje naličje legitimnosti i snage uvjerljivosti. Rasprava započinje predstavljanjem argumenata za pogled o tome da naša epistemička praksa sadrži mehanizam koji podiže epistemičke standarde, da bi se predočilo kako skeptičke hipoteze čine izazove istinosnim vrijednostima naših svakidašnjih tvrdnji iz znanja. Zatim se rasprava premješta na kritiku s ciljem pokazivanja da pristup podizanja standarda nije adekvatan jer se ne dotiče doista radikalnog oblika filozofijskog skepticizma. Ispitujemo alternativno razmatranje promjene epistemičkih standarda, mijenjanje kuta proučavanja, u skladu s kojim su epistemički standardi tumačeni kao uvjetovani disciplinarnim poljem unutar kojeg se istraživanje provodi. Nakon toga, uspoređujemo dva istaknuta pristupa na osnovi njihove uspješnosti u osiguravanju odgovarajućeg objašnjenja stvarne epistemičke prakse. Završavamo dokazivanjem u korist potonjeg pristupa, kao superiornije koncepcije te kao obećavajućeg okvira za objašnjenje fenomenologije naše uključenosti u filozofijski skepticizam. Završno, postaviti ćemo neka pitanja vezana uz oba pristupa.

Ključne riječi

epistemički standard, stupanj proučavanja, tvrdnje iz znanja, kut proučavanja

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Skeptische Zweifel – Standard anheben oder Blickwinkel ändern?

Zusammenfassung

Die Intention des Papers ist es, zwei unterschiedliche Erwägungen zu den Mechanismen zu untersuchen, durch die sich epistemische Standards ändern, als Basis für die Erklärung, wie die Argumente für den radikalen Skeptizismus ihre Merkmale der Legitimität und Überzeugungskraft annehmen. Die Erörterung setzt ein mit der Präsentation der Argumente für den Standpunkt, dass unsere epistemische Praxis einen Mechanismus in sich birgt, der den epistemischen Standard anhebt, um darzustellen, wie skeptische Hypothesen die wahren Werte unserer alltäglichen wissensbasierten Behauptungen herausfordern. Anschließend verlegt sich die Diskussion auf die Kritik, mit dem Ziel, zu zeigen, dass der Ansatz der Anhebung von Standards nicht angezeigt ist, weil er keine wahrhaftig radikale Form des philosophischen Skeptizismus berührt. Wir nehmen eine alternative Überlegung zur Änderung epistemischer Standards in Augenschein, nämlich die Änderung des Blickwinkels der Erforschung, wonach epistemische Standards als die durch den Disziplinarbereich bedingte Standards ausgelegt werden, innerhalb dessen die Erforschung durchgeführt wird. Danach vergleichen wir die beiden herausragenden Ansätze auf der Grundlage ihrer Effizienz bei der Bereitstellung einer adäquaten Erklärung der tatsächlichen epistemischen Praxis. Wir schließen ab mit der Beweisführung zugunsten des letzteren Ansatzes als überlegene Konzeption und als vielversprechender Rahmen für die Erklärung der Phänomenologie unserer Beteiligung an dem philosophischen Skeptizismus. Zum Schluss werden wir einige Fragen zu den beiden Herangehensweisen stellen.

Schlüsselwörter

epistemischer Standard, Stufe der Erforschung, wissensbasierte Behauptungen, Blickwinkel der Erforschung

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Doute sceptique – élever le standard ou changer d’angle

Résumé

L’objectif de ce travail est de rechercher deux différentes manières de considérer les mécanismes à travers lesquels les standards épistémiques se modifient en tant que fondements pour expliquer comment les arguments en faveur du scepticisme radical acquièrent un semblant de légitimité et leur pouvoir de persuasion. La discussion prend pour point de départ la présentation d’arguments, permettant d’observer que notre pratique épistémique contient un mécanisme qui élève le standard épistémique, afin d’illustrer la manière dont les hypothèses sceptiques constituent un défi pour les valeurs de vérité de nos affirmations quotidiennes issues des sciences. Ensuite, la discussion prend la forme d’une critique dans le but de montrer que l’approche qui vise à élever le standard n’est pas adéquate puisqu’elle ne touche pas réellement à la forme radicale du scepticisme philosophique. Nous interrogeons les considérations alternatives du changement des standards épistémiques, le changement d’angle d’étude, en accord avec l’interprétation des standards épistémiques en tant que conditionnés par le champ disciplinaire au sein duquel la recherche se déroule. Après cela, nous comparons deux approches importantes sur la base de leur succès dans la garantie d’une explication appropriée de la réelle pratique épistémique. Nous terminons par démontrer les avantages de cette dernière approche, en tant que conception supérieure et cadre prometteur pour expliquer la phénoménologie de notre implication dans le scepticisme philosophique. En conclusion, nous questionnons les deux approches.

Mots-clés

standard épistémique, niveau d’analyse, affirmations issues des sciences, angle d’étude