

Contextualism and the Problem of the External World

I believe that I have hands. But does my evidence support this belief? Skeptics think not. More generally, they think that our evidence can't support our beliefs about the external world.¹ This skeptical claim can be spelled out in different ways.² But in this paper I shall not examine the differences among different versions of the claim. For I am interested in targeting the very idea that there is any such epistemic gap between my evidence and my beliefs about the external world. I shall argue that, in so far as this gap obtains, it is a gap of our own making: it is by entering into certain contexts of epistemic appraisal that we create the gap between the appraisee's evidence and her beliefs about the external world.

Such "contextualism" in epistemology may by now be all too familiar. But current versions of epistemological contextualism all suffer from a common problem: they all claim that the skeptic *raises the standards for knowledge*.³ I shall argue that the skeptic operates *not* by raising the standards for knowledge, but rather by disqualifying certain mental states from counting as evidence. Thereby the skeptic makes it impossible for us to attain even what, *by ordinary standards*, counts as knowledge of the external world. The skeptic is not making the uninteresting claim that we do not meet unusually stringent standards of knowledge. Rather, she is claiming that we do not meet ordinary

standards for knowledge.⁴ But she can make this claim truthfully only because she restricts what counts as our evidence. Or so I shall argue.

This argument has implications for our understanding of the problem of the external world. When we accept the skeptic's description of the problem of the external world, we do so as part of an assessment of all of what we ordinarily call our "knowledge" of the external world at once.⁵ The position from which we examine all such "knowledge" in the course of skeptical inquiry is, we might say, "external" to all our "knowledge" of the external world in the sense that, from within that position, we are not allowed to treat any such "knowledge" as evidence.⁶ But because she so restricts what counts as evidence, the skeptic does not recognize what she thinks she recognizes. She thinks that she recognizes that our evidence does not support our beliefs about the external world. But there is no such fact to recognize. What our evidence includes is relative to a context of epistemic appraisal: relative to some such contexts, our evidence does not support our beliefs about the external world, but relative to others, it does.⁷

By exploiting a rule of context-shifting that I will articulate below, the skeptic puts herself and her listeners into a context of attribution in which they can truthfully attribute to us only such evidence as cannot support our beliefs about the external world. But when the skeptic is not around to exploit this rule, then our evidence can truthfully be said to include such states as my *seeing that* I have hands, my *remembering that* I had eggs for breakfast this morning, and so on. And there is no epistemic gap between *those*

evidentiary states and my beliefs about the external world: if I see that I have hands, then I know (or at least am in a position to know) that I have hands.⁸ Relative to some contexts of epistemic appraisal then, my evidence reaches all the way out to the external world.

Let's begin by sharpening our formulation of the problem of the external world, and then reviewing proposed solutions to it. As we review such proposed solutions, we'll be able to see more clearly what it is that we want from a solution to that problem.

I. The Skeptical Puzzle

Many epistemologists have discussed some version of the following hypothesis: I am a disembodied brain floating in a vat of nutrient fluid and being electrochemically stimulated to have the very experiences that I am having.⁹ Let's say, for short, that I am a "BIV" if and only if this hypothesis is true. Now consider the following triad:

- (1) I know that I have hands.
- (2) If I know that p, and I know that p entails q, then I know that q.¹⁰
- (3) I do not know that I am not a BIV.

Since I know that (by hypothesis) BIVs don't have hands, I know that "I have hands" entails "I am not a BIV". It follows that (1), (2), and (3) are jointly inconsistent, and so we should not accept all of them at the same time. But which should we give up? This question is what I will call "the skeptical puzzle".¹¹ There are three obvious ways in

which to solve this puzzle. We may deny (1), deny (2), or deny (3).¹² One problem with each of these responses to the skeptical puzzle is that it denies something plausible, for each of (1), (2), and (3) is plausible: that's what makes this a puzzle. Several philosophers have developed contextualist views that attempt to solve the skeptical puzzle without committing themselves to the claim that any of (1), (2), or (3) is false.¹³ In this paper, I shall follow their lead. I haven't the space here to address the objections that have been raised against the whole contextualist approach to solving the skeptical puzzle.¹⁴ For the purposes of this paper, I will simply assume that contextualism is on the right track, and that we should not flatly deny any of (1), (2), or (3): to the extent that the solution I develop here avoids the problems that beset other versions of contextualism, it will bear out this assumption. Although the contextualist views that have been developed so far do not provide an adequate solution to the skeptical puzzle (or so I will argue), we can develop an adequate solution to the puzzle by building on the useful ideas present in those views.

As we proceed, I should like us to keep this in mind: we are here concerned with skepticism *about the external world*. We shall assume that, even if we don't know that we are not BIVs, we at least know some of the more obvious truths about our own present states of consciousness and about how some of those states of consciousness serve as our reasons for forming certain beliefs. For instance, I know that I am now having a visual experience as of a white expanse before me; I know that I believe that

there is something white before me; I know that it is (at least partly) because I have this visual experience that I have that belief. The BIV hypothesis is not intended to cast doubt on the claim that we know these “internal” things. Nor is it intended to cast doubt on the claim that we know what logical relations obtain among propositions. Rather, it is intended to cast doubt on the idea that any such knowledge of logic or of our own internal world enables us to have knowledge of the external world.

II. Relevant Alternatives

One of the first contextualist views was offered by Gail Stine in her paper "Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives, and Deductive Closure".¹⁵ According to Stine, S knows that p only if S can rule out all the alternatives to p that are relevant in S's context. To illustrate this thesis, Stine borrows an example discussed by Fred Dretske.¹⁶ Suppose that I am at the zoo and am looking at the zebras. Not suspecting anything strange about my situation, I believe these animals to be zebras. Now, although these animals are zebras, unbeknownst to me, the zookeepers in this zoo have been frequently replacing the zebras with cleverly painted mules, and I, for one, wouldn't be able to tell, on the basis of my current evidence, that the animals before me are not cleverly painted mules. In these extraordinary circumstances, knowing that these animals are zebras would require me to be able to rule out the hypothesis that they are cleverly painted mules, and this is not something that I can now do. Stine puts this point by saying that, in these circumstances,

the hypothesis that these are cleverly painted mules is a *relevant alternative* to the hypothesis that they are zebras. That is, it is an alternative that I must be able to rule out in order to know that they are zebras. But it is an alternative that I cannot now rule out. Therefore, in these circumstances, I do not now know that these animals are zebras.

Now, since (2) is true, and since I know that a zebra is not a cleverly painted mule, it follows that when I do not know that they are not cleverly painted mules, then I also do not know that they are zebras. Nonetheless, when I am not in such extraordinary circumstances -- when, say, I am at a zoo whose zookeepers do not engage in such antics -- then I do know that the animals before me are zebras. For when I am not in such extraordinary circumstances, knowing that they are zebras does not require me to be able to rule out the hypothesis that they are cleverly painted mules. In ordinary circumstances, the hypothesis that they are cleverly painted mules is not a relevant alternative to the hypothesis that they are zebras, and so it is not an alternative that I need to be able to rule out in order to know that they are zebras. So, in ordinary circumstances, even though I cannot rule out the hypothesis that they are cleverly painted mules, I still know that they are zebras. And, since (2) is true, and since I know that a zebra is not a cleverly painted mule, it follows that when I know that they are zebras, then I also know that they are not cleverly painted mules.

We can now show how Stine's "relevant alternatives" conception of knowledge generates an apparent solution to the skeptical puzzle. Suppose that I wake up one

morning to find myself in a facility full of BIVs who are all being stimulated to have experiences just like the experiences I'm having now. When I am in these extraordinary circumstances, then I do not know that I am not a BIV. In these circumstances, the hypothesis that I am a BIV is a relevant alternative to the hypothesis that I am not a BIV. But it is – according to Stine -- an alternative that I cannot rule out. Therefore, in these circumstances, I cannot know that I am not a BIV. Now, when I do not know that I am not a BIV, then I also do not know that I have hands. Thus, when I am in these extraordinary circumstances, then (1) is false but (2) and (3) are true. Nonetheless, when I am not in some such extraordinary circumstances, then the hypothesis that I am a BIV is not a relevant alternative to the hypothesis that I have hands, and so it is not an alternative that I need to be able to rule out in order to know that I have hands. So, even though I cannot rule out the hypothesis that I am a BIV, I can still know that I have hands. And when I know that I have hands, then I also know that I'm not a BIV. Thus, when I am in ordinary circumstances, then (1) and (2) are true and (3) is false. So none of (1), (2), or (3) is always false. Rather, (2) is always true, (1) is true when I am in ordinary circumstances, and (3) is true when I am in certain sorts of extraordinary circumstances.¹⁷

Stine's proposal avoids flatly denying any of (1), (2), or (3). But it suffers from at least two problems.¹⁸ I'll discuss the first of these problems now, and the second in section V.

The first problem, pointed out by Stewart Cohen¹⁹ is this. Stine would explain the plausibility of both (1) and (3) by saying that I know that I'm not a BIV when I'm in some circumstances but not when I'm in others. Specifically, I know that I'm not a BIV when and only when I'm in circumstances in which the BIV hypothesis is not a relevant alternative. But if I could rule out the BIV hypothesis, then this explanation of the plausibility of both (1) and (3) would fail. For even when the BIV hypothesis is a relevant alternative, I can still know it not to obtain if I can rule it out. So, if Stine's proposed solution to the skeptical puzzle is going to work, she must claim that I cannot rule out the BIV hypothesis. But if I had sufficient evidence to know that I'm not a BIV²⁰, then I could rule out the BIV hypothesis. Therefore, Stine must claim that I do not have sufficient evidence to know that I'm not a BIV. Thus, although Stine plausibly accepts (2), she is committed to denying at least one of the following two claims.

(4) If I have sufficient evidence to know that p, and I know that p entails not-q, then I have sufficient evidence to know that not-q.

(5) My knowledge that I have hands requires that my belief that I have hands be based on some sufficient evidence for the proposition that I have hands.²¹

If (4) and (5) are both true, then, since I know that "I have hands" entails "I am not a BIV", it follows that I have sufficient evidence to know that I am not a BIV. But if I have sufficient evidence to know that I am not a BIV, then I can rule out the BIV hypothesis, and that is exactly what Stine is committed to denying. (In fact, Stine would

deny that I have *any* evidence that I am not a BIV.) So Stine cannot accept both (4) and (5). Can she plausibly reject one of them?

No. As Cohen claims, (4) is just as plausible as (2).²² One thing to be said in defense of (4) -- though Cohen doesn't say it -- is that Gettier's plausible challenge to the "justified true belief" account of knowledge²³ depends upon the truth of (4). For suppose that (4) is not true. Let p be some false proposition that is such that S believes it and has evidence that would be sufficient, as far as evidence goes, to know it (e.g., that Jones owns a Ford). And let q be some true proposition that is such that S understands it but has no evidence for it (e.g., that Brown is in Barcelona). S , being logically competent, knows that p entails $p \vee q$, and deduces the disjunction from p , thereby arriving at the true belief that $p \vee q$. Now, if (4) is false, it doesn't follow that S has evidence that would be sufficient, as far as evidence goes, for S to know that $p \vee q$. And so such a case doesn't show that knowledge, which S lacks in regard to $p \vee q$, is not the same as a true belief for which one has sufficient evidence. But if that doesn't follow, then Gettier can't conclude from the fact that S doesn't know that $p \vee q$ that knowledge isn't the same as true belief for which one has sufficient evidence. But that *is* something that Gettier can conclude from his examples.²⁴ Thus, (4) is true.^{25 26}

(5) is also plausible. Some philosophers would deny (5) on the grounds that, under normal circumstances, even though I know that I have hands, nothing serves as my evidence that I have hands.²⁷ This challenge may be fleshed out in various ways. For

instance, it may be pointed out that my belief that I have hands is not reached inferentially.²⁸ Again, it may be said that I am as certain that I have hands as I am of anything else²⁹, or that if I were to doubt that I have hands then I would have reason to doubt my understanding of the content of my own thoughts.³⁰ Finally, it may be said that it is typically inappropriate to describe me as having evidence that I have hands³¹, or to ask what justifies my belief that I have hands.³² But none of these points shows that I typically do not have evidence that I have hands. In section VII, I will offer a diagnosis of what motivates philosophers to think that, under normal circumstances, nothing serves as my evidence that I have hands. In the meantime, though, I propose that we try to solve the skeptical puzzle in a way that doesn't require us to reject (4) or (5).

III. The Context of Attribution

Cohen's view enables us to solve the skeptical puzzle in such a way. Cohen, like Stine, takes attributions of knowledge to be true or false only relative to a set of relevant alternatives. But Cohen regards relevance as a function not just of features of the *attributee's* context, but also of the *attributor's* context – what I call the “context of epistemic appraisal”.³³ Specifically, Cohen puts forward the following two-part account of relevance. If S has reason r for believing that q, then: "(i) an alternative (to q) h is relevant, if the probability of h conditional on reason r and certain features of the circumstances [i.e. S's circumstances] is sufficiently high (where the level of probability

that is sufficient is determined by context [of attribution]), (ii) an alternative (to q) h is relevant, if S lacks sufficient evidence (reason) to deny h, i.e. to believe not-h [where, again, the standard of sufficiency is determined by context of attribution].”³⁴ On this account, which alternatives count as relevant is relative to a context of epistemic appraisal. Since S knows that q only if S can rule out all relevant alternatives to q, it follows that whether or not S knows that q is relative to a context of epistemic appraisal. Thus, it can happen that one person truthfully attributes to me knowledge that the animals before me are zebras, while another truthfully denies that I have such knowledge. Independently of any context of attribution, there is no fact about whether the epistemic reasons that I have at a given moment are sufficient for me to know that they are zebras. Whether the epistemic reasons that I have are sufficient or not is relative to a standard of sufficiency, and different attributors may employ different standards of sufficiency. But, according to Cohen, no matter which particular standard of sufficiency we employ, the following generalization of (4) is true: If, relative to a particular standard of sufficiency, I have sufficient epistemic reason to know that p, and I know that p entails not-q, then, relative to that same standard of sufficiency, I have sufficient epistemic reason to know that not-q.

Cohen wants to offer a similar solution to the skeptical puzzle: relative to some contexts of appraisal, (1) is true and (3) is false, but relative to others, (3) is true and (1) is false. Relative to all contexts though, (2), (4) and (5) are true. For this solution to work,

then, there must be contexts in which (3) is false, i.e., in which I know that I'm not a BIV. But if (5) is true, then shouldn't my knowledge that I'm not a BIV require me to have some sufficient evidence that I'm not a BIV? Is there some difference between "I have hands" and "I'm not a BIV" such that my knowledge of the first requires me to have evidence for it but my knowledge of the second doesn't? It seems not. And yet it may seem – and it does seem to Cohen, as to Stine – that nothing can serve for me as evidence that I'm not a BIV. So no matter how low one sets one's standards of sufficiency, one cannot, according to Cohen, truthfully claim that I have some sufficient evidence to know that I'm not a BIV. Acknowledging this issue, Cohen writes:

Where does this leave us? The skeptic would seem to be correct in claiming that we do lack evidence against radical skeptical hypotheses. However, it does not follow that it is not reasonable or rational to deny such hypotheses. I am not, here, referring to non-epistemic senses of rationality (e.g., prudential rationality). Rather I am referring to a way in which it can be rational (or reasonable) to believe a proposition without possessing evidence for the belief. We can call beliefs of this sort intrinsically rational.³⁵

What does Cohen mean when he speaks of a belief being "intrinsically rational"? He doesn't tell us. Now, we might think that our beliefs concerning *a priori* truths are, in some sense, intrinsically rational. We might also think that our beliefs concerning our own states of consciousness or our own existence are, in some sense, intrinsically

rational. But in what sense can my belief that I am not a BIV be intrinsically (epistemically) rational?³⁶ Why isn't my belief that I have hands also intrinsically rational? There is an unresolved mystery at the heart of Cohen's proposed solution. We should try to do better. Let's say, then, that our solution to the skeptical puzzle should satisfy the following conditions of adequacy: It should not appeal to any mysterious sources of justification for my belief that I am not a BIV (e.g. the unexplicated "intrinsic rationality" of that belief).

IV. Justification and the Rule of Attention

Maybe the only way for us to improve upon Cohen's proposed solution to the skeptical puzzle is to give up the idea that my knowledge that I'm not a BIV needs to rest on any kind of justification at all – evidentiary or otherwise. This is what David Lewis does. In "Elusive Knowledge", he offers an account of knowledge that would furnish a contextualist solution to the skeptical puzzle, while severing knowledge from justification. Lewis's argument that knowledge doesn't require justification is confined to the following passage:

What (non-circular) argument supports our reliance on perception, on memory, and on testimony? And yet we do gain knowledge by these means. And sometimes, far from having supporting arguments, we don't even know how we know. We once had evidence, drew conclusions, and thereby gained knowledge;

now we have forgotten our reasons, yet still we retain our knowledge. Or we know the name that goes with the face, or the sex of the chicken, by relying on subtle visual cues, without knowing what those cues may be.³⁷

What do these considerations show? It's true that we have no non-circular argument to support our reliance on perception, memory, or testimony in forming our beliefs. But it's also true that we have no non-circular argument to support our reliance on *reasons* in forming our beliefs. It doesn't follow that our beliefs aren't justified by the reasons that we have for them.³⁸ Again, it's true that we sometimes don't know how we know. But it doesn't follow that, in these cases, we have unjustified beliefs that count as knowledge. It could equally well be that we have justification for these beliefs, but we don't know what justification it is that we have, and don't even know that we have justification.³⁹ It seems, then, that Lewis has not gone any distance towards showing that knowledge doesn't require justification.

But putting aside this problem, let's consider whether Lewis's proposed solution to the skeptical puzzle is successful. According to Lewis, S knows that p iff p holds in every possibility uneliminated by S's evidence (except for those possibilities we -the attributors -- are properly ignoring).⁴⁰ Thus, Lewis, like Cohen, regards attributions of knowledge as true or false only relative to a context of attribution. Lewis has a rich and inventive story to tell about which features of the context of attribution operate in determining the truth-values of knowledge attributions. I will consider only that feature

of his story that is relevant to his proposed solution to the skeptical puzzle. This is his Rule of Attention, according to which "a possibility not ignored at all is ipso facto not properly ignored".⁴¹ Thus, when we attend to the possibility that I am a BIV, we put ourselves in a context of attribution relative to which the possibility that I am a BIV is not properly ignored. Since that possibility is not eliminated by my evidence, we -- who are attending to the BIV possibility -- cannot truthfully say that I know that I'm not a BIV. Of course, the possibility that I'm a BIV is a possibility according to which I don't have hands. Since it is a possibility that we cannot now properly ignore, and since my evidence doesn't eliminate it, it follows that we cannot truthfully say, and can truthfully deny, that I know that I have hands. Thus, when we attend to the possibility that I'm a BIV, then we can truthfully assent to (2) and (3), and truthfully deny (1). But, in at least some contexts in which we do not attend to the possibility that I'm a BIV, we can truthfully assent to (1) and (2) and truthfully deny (3).⁴²

Does this solve the skeptical puzzle? The problem with this proposal is similar to a problem that Keith DeRose spotted in an earlier proposal of Lewis's.⁴³ The problem is this: If Lewis is right to claim that the truth-values of our attributions of knowledge are governed by the Rule of Attention, then, in order to generate a skeptical puzzle, we don't need to attend to any *specific* hypothesis on which we falsely believe that we have hands. We could generate a skeptical puzzle simply by attending to the mere possibility that I don't have hands. On Lewis's Rule of Attention, by attending to that possibility, we

make it a possibility that we cannot properly ignore. But, my evidence cannot eliminate the possibility that I don't have hands, since it cannot eliminate the possibility that I'm a (handless) BIV! Thus, Lewis's account has the following consequence: relative to a context of attribution in which we are attending to the mere possibility that I don't have hands (without attending to any more specific possibility, such as the possibility that I'm a BIV), we can truthfully say that I don't know that I have hands. But if this is correct, then the following inconsistent pair should induce a conflict of intuitions just as (1) – (3) does:

(1) I know that I have hands.

(6) I don't know that I have hands.

Does this pair induce a conflict of intuitions? Unless we are thinking about some specific way in which we might have been misled about our having hands, all the intuitive force is behind (1) rather than (6). But Lewis's proposed solution leaves this fact mysterious. If Lewis's account is correct then shouldn't there be as much intuitive force to (6) as to (3)?

One thing we want from a solution to the skeptical puzzle is that it be able to explain why it is that the BIV hypothesis can be used to generate the skeptical puzzle whereas the mere hypothesis that I don't have hands cannot be so used. We can now add a condition of adequacy on a solution to the skeptical puzzle: It should explain why (3) is more plausible than (6), and thereby explain why the BIV hypothesis can be used to generate the skeptical puzzle but the mere "I don't have hands" hypothesis can't be.

V. Strength and Sensitivity

DeRose proposes a solution to the skeptical puzzle that is designed to satisfy this condition of adequacy. But there is another motivation for DeRose's proposed solution, and this brings us to the second of the two problems in Stine's proposed solution. In "Solving the Skeptical Problem", DeRose points out that a "relevant alternatives" solution like Stine's fails to explain what it is about (3) that makes it plausible. Stine might say that (3) is plausible because I cannot rule out the hypothesis that I am a BIV. But how does my inability to rule out the BIV hypothesis *explain* the plausibility of (3)? Couldn't we just as well say that the direction of explanation runs the other way: I cannot rule out the hypothesis that I am a BIV because I don't know that I'm not one?⁴⁴ It seems that Stine does not explain makes (3) plausible. Can we solve the skeptical puzzle in a way that helps us to understand what it is about skeptical hypotheses that makes it plausible to say that we don't know that they don't obtain?

DeRose attempts to do just this. DeRose, like Cohen and Lewis, regards attributions of knowledge as true or false only relative to a context of attribution. But these philosophers differ in their accounts of what varies across different contexts of attribution. To explain DeRose's account, some definitions are necessary. S's belief that p is "sensitive" just in case S wouldn't believe that p if p were false.⁴⁵ S's epistemic position with respect to p is "at least as strong as" S's epistemic position with respect to q

just in case the following is true relative to any context of attribution: if, relative to that context, S knows that q, then, relative to that same context, S knows that p.⁴⁶ Now, although DeRose doesn't offer necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of "S knows that p", he takes it to be a necessary condition of S's knowing that p that S's belief concerning the truth or falsity of p be true through some bandwidth of possible worlds centered around the actual world.⁴⁷ We'll say that S's belief concerning p "tracks the truth" through that bandwidth of worlds.

For DeRose, contexts of attribution vary in the bandwidth of possible worlds (centered around the actual world) through which the attributee's belief concerning p must track the truth for the attributee to count as knowing that p. Let's call the worlds in this bandwidth the "epistemically relevant worlds". So, relative to ordinary contexts of attribution, my belief concerning p must track the truth in this world and in nearby possible worlds for me to count as knowing that p: the bandwidth of epistemically relevant worlds is small. But relative to more stringent contexts of attribution, my belief concerning p must track the truth throughout a much larger bandwidth of possible worlds for me to count as knowing that p: the bandwidth of epistemically relevant worlds is large.

How can this view be applied to solve the skeptical puzzle? To explain DeRose's proposed solution, let's introduce his "Rule of Sensitivity". His first (incomplete) formulation of it is as follows: "when it's asserted that S knows (or doesn't know) that P,

then, if necessary, enlarge the sphere of epistemically relevant worlds so that it at least includes the closest worlds in which P is false".⁴⁸ DeRose later extends this rule so that the sphere of epistemically relevant worlds can be enlarged not only by asserting that S knows (or doesn't know) that P, but also by asserting something that *implies* that S knows (or doesn't know) that P.⁴⁹

This rule provides the following solution to the skeptical puzzle: when the skeptic asserts that I don't know that I'm not a BIV, the bandwidth of epistemically relevant worlds enlarges so that it at least includes the closest worlds in which I am a BIV. But my belief that I'm not a BIV is insensitive: in the closest worlds in which I am a BIV, I still believe that I'm not. Thus, when the skeptic asserts that I don't know that I'm not a BIV, she puts us in a context of attribution relative to which her assertion is true. (Thus the plausibility of (3).) And yet my epistemic position with respect to the proposition that I'm not a BIV is at least as strong as my epistemic position with respect to the proposition that I have hands. Therefore, relative to a context in which I cannot be truthfully said to know that I'm not a BIV, I also cannot be truthfully said to know that I have hands. And so, by asserting that I don't know that I'm not a BIV, the skeptic puts us in a context of attribution relative to which I cannot be truthfully said to know that I have hands. In that context of attribution, (1) is false and (2) and (3) are true.

Nonetheless, when we're not considering whether or not I know that I'm a BIV, then I can be truthfully said to know that I have hands, since my belief as to whether or not I

have hands is true in all nearby worlds. Thus, in ordinary contexts of attribution, (1) and (2) are true and (3) is false.^{50 51}

Notice how this proposed solution to the skeptical puzzle helps to explain why certain hypotheses other than the BIV hypothesis do not generate the skeptical puzzle. Suppose that, instead of considering the BIV hypothesis, we considered the hypothesis

(H1) I don't have hands.

Considering (H1) doesn't enlarge the bandwidth of epistemically relevant worlds at all. For when we considered (1), we were already in a context in which the epistemically relevant worlds included a world in which I don't have hands. Thus, (H1) cannot be used in place of the BIV hypothesis to generate the skeptical puzzle.⁵²

But what about the hypothesis

(H2) I falsely believe that I have hands.

By considering (H2) we may, in accordance with the Rule of Sensitivity, enlarge the bandwidth of epistemically relevant worlds to include the nearest worlds in which I falsely believe that I have hands. Obviously, my belief that I have hands doesn't track the truth through that bandwidth. It seems then that the Rule of Sensitivity would predict that, relative to the context of attribution created by considering (H2), I don't know that I have hands.⁵³ But we cannot generate a skeptical puzzle by considering (H2) by itself. Why not? Because, DeRose claims, another necessary feature of effective skeptical hypotheses is that they *explain* how I have come falsely to believe that I have hands.⁵⁴

And while the BIV hypothesis explains how I have come falsely to believe that I have hands, (H2) does not explain how I have come to have this false belief.

But now I'd like to raise an issue that DeRose doesn't address. Consider:

(H3) I falsely believe that I have hands because I've been hit on the head in such a way as to cause me to have that false belief.

This hypothesis explains how I have come to have the false belief that I have hands.

And, by DeRose's lights, it seems that, by considering (H3), we may enlarge the bandwidth of epistemically relevant worlds to include some worlds in which I falsely believe that I have hands. But is (H3) an effective skeptical hypothesis? That depends upon how we interpret it. We might interpret it as

(H3A) I falsely believe that I have hands because I've been hit on the head in such a way as to cause me to have that false belief, along with all the sensory experiences and memories that I have (including those that provide me with reasons for believing that I have hands).

Or we might interpret it as

(H3B) I falsely believe that I have hands because I've been hit on the head in such a way as to cause me to have that false belief, but not to have any of the sensory experiences and memories that would provide me with reasons for believing that I have hands.

Now, since we are assuming (for the purposes of this paper) that we know what states of consciousness we are in and how they are rationally interrelated, we have an easy way to rule out (H3B): namely, I know that my belief that I have hands – whether it is true or false – is rationally based on my sensory experiences and memories as of having hands. I believe that I have hands because I have such experiences. I don't simply *find myself* believing that I have hands, as I might find myself believing that I will win if I buy *this* lottery ticket rather than *that* one.

So, if (H3) is interpreted as (H3B), then it is no more effective as a skeptical hypothesis than is (H2). But (H3A) seems to be just as effective as the BIV hypothesis in generating the skeptical puzzle. What does (H3A) have that (H3B) doesn't have? While both hypotheses explain how I came to have the false belief that I have hands, (H3B) doesn't offer the right *kind* of explanation. It offers a *merely* causal explanation of my belief, explaining it in a way that says nothing about my evidence for that belief. And indeed, the ineffectiveness of (H3B) is shared by any other hypothesis that shares this feature of it. Thus:

(H3') I falsely believe that I have hands because I've taken a drug that causes me to have that false belief (but not to have any sensory experiences or memories that seem to support that false belief).

(H3'') I falsely believe that I have hands because I want to believe it, and my wishes cause me to have that false belief (but not to have any sensory experiences or memories that seem to support that false belief).

And so on. These examples of ineffective skeptical hypotheses suggest that a necessary condition of an effective skeptical hypothesis is not merely that it explain how I have come to believe that I have hands. More, it must explain this by appeal to my evidence for this belief.⁵⁵

It seems then that an effective skeptical hypothesis is one on which my belief that I have hands is based on misleading evidence. Thus, the BIV hypothesis qualifies as an effective skeptical hypothesis, as does the evil genius hypothesis, and (according to those philosophers who take dreams to consist of experiences that could also be enjoyed while awake) the dreaming hypothesis. But (H3B) doesn't qualify, for it neither says nor implies anything about the evidence on the basis of which I form the belief that I have hands. We can now add another condition of adequacy on our solution: It should predict that an effective skeptical hypothesis is one on which my belief that I have hands is based on misleading evidence.

VI. The Evidentiary Puzzle

Effective skeptical hypotheses about the external world involve calling into question the trustworthiness of our evidence. But this raises a question: If the

experiences that I take to serve as my evidence that I have hands are experiences that I could also have had if I didn't have hands, then why should we regard those experiences as evidence that I do have hands? Couldn't those experiences just as well be evidence that I'm a BIV? Or no evidence one way or the other? In asking these questions, I am not supposing that the only way in which evidence can support a belief is by entailing it. Allow that evidence can support a belief in other ways as well. The question still remains: how can my experiences support any of my beliefs about the external world, if I have no access to that world independently of those experiences?⁵⁶

One way to bring out the issue here is to consider the following triad:

(1') I have evidence for the hypothesis that I have hands.

(2') If I have evidence for p, and I know that p entails q, I have evidence for q.

(3') I have no evidence for the hypothesis that I'm not a BIV.⁵⁷

Since I know that my having hands entails my not being a BIV, it follows that (1'), (2') and (3') are jointly inconsistent. So which should we deny?

Since we are accepting (5), we are committed to thinking of (1') as following from (1). But since (1) is plausible, (1') should be as well.⁵⁸ Some philosophers who accept (1) would reject (1') and (5). Since I have already postponed until section VII further consideration of (5), I also postpone until then further consideration of (1'). In the meantime, though, I take it that (1') is plausible.

What about (2')? Let's consider the point that DeRose makes against Nozick's attack on (2):

Accepting [Nozick's] treatment involves embracing the abominable conjunction that while you don't know you're not a bodiless (and handless!) BIV, still, you know you have hands.⁵⁹

But if this conjunction is abominable, then so too is the conjunction: you don't have any evidence that you're not a bodiless (and handless) BIV, but you do have evidence that you have hands. If (2) is plausible, then so is (2'), and for the same reason.⁶⁰

Finally, a plausible feature of Stine's view is that she accepts (3'): it seems that I cannot have evidence that I'm not a BIV.

(1'), (2'), and (3') are all plausible. Let's call our triad (1') – (3') "the evidentiary puzzle". Since Stine and Cohen both accept (3')⁶¹ they must either deny (1') or else deny (2'). And so neither Stine nor Cohen can provide a solution to the evidentiary puzzle that avoids flatly denying at least one of these three individually plausible claims. Can Lewis or DeRose provide such a solution? Though Lewis claims that my evidence cannot eliminate the BIV possibility, he says nothing about whether I can have any evidence against the BIV hypothesis. And DeRose also says nothing about this issue. It's not clear on what basis either of them could claim that I have any evidence for the hypothesis that I'm not a BIV.

The apparent similarity between the skeptical puzzle and the evidentiary puzzle is no accident. I propose that we try to achieve a unified solution of the two puzzles, a solution that accounts for their apparent similarity.

VII. What Counts as Evidence?

To sum up. I propose to solve the skeptical puzzle in a way that meets the following conditions:

- (A) It does not flatly deny any of (1) - (5).
- (B) It does not appeal to any mysterious sources of justification for my belief that I am not a BIV (e.g. the unexplicated “intrinsic rationality” of that belief).
- (C) It explains why (3) is more plausible than (6), and thereby explains why the BIV hypothesis can be used to generate the skeptical puzzle but the mere “I don’t have hands” hypothesis can’t be.
- (D) It predicts that an effective skeptical hypothesis is one on which my belief that I have hands is based on misleading evidence.
- (E) It solves the skeptical puzzle and the evidentiary puzzle both, and in a way that shows them to result from a common source.
- (F) It explains why some epistemologists are tempted to deny (5) or (1’).

Now, to formulate a solution that meets these conditions, let’s recall the point of bringing up the BIV hypothesis: we bring up that hypothesis in the course of asking: to what

extent, if any, can our beliefs about the external world be supported by our evidence?

The answer to that question depends upon what our evidence includes. If my evidence includes my knowledge that I have hands, then my belief that I am not a BIV can be adequately supported, since I can reason as follows: “I have hands. But, by hypothesis, a BIV doesn’t have hands. So I’m not a BIV”. If the premises of this reasoning include nothing beyond my evidence, then (1’) is true and (3’) is false. If, however, my evidence does not include any of my (ordinarily so-called) knowledge of the external world, then, it is at least plausible to think, (1’) is false and (3’) is true. The problem is that both (1’) and (3’) are plausible. Must we simply choose one of them to deny?

I think not. We can defend a negative answer to this question if we accept the following three plausible claims about evidence:

First, for S to have evidence for p is for S to have evidence that favors p over some alternative(s) that are relevant in the context of epistemic appraisal. To illustrate: Richard is drinking Coke. You and I both ask “Does he have evidence that what he’s drinking is Coke?” I’m asking this because I suspect that Richard’s oft-stated preference for Coke over Pepsi is groundless, for he can’t taste the difference. You, however, are asking because you suspect that Richard has had so little experience with carbonated beverages that he might not be able to taste the difference between Coke and Sprite. In that case, it might be that the answer to my question is “no” while the answer to your

question is “yes”: Richard can have evidence that what he’s drinking is Coke rather than Sprite, even if he doesn’t have evidence that what he’s drinking is Coke rather than Pepsi.

Second, S can have evidence that favors p over some relevant alternative q only if there is some difference between the way that things would be for S if p were true and the way that things would be for S if q were true. The notion of “how things would be for a subject” requires sharpening and will receive it below. But for now, notice that there is some plausibility to this crudely stated idea. For instance, if the way that things would be for Richard if he were drinking Coke is the same as the way that things would be for him if he were drinking Pepsi (if, say, his sense of taste was dulled by a cold), then he cannot have evidence that he is drinking Coke rather than Pepsi.

Third, S can have evidence for p without knowing that p, without believing that p, and without knowing that she has evidence for p. For instance, Richard can have evidence that he is drinking Coke rather than Pepsi even if he doesn’t attend to this evidence, and so fails to form his beliefs on the basis of it.

By conjoining and refining these three ideas, we can develop a solution to the evidentiary puzzle, a solution according to which what counts as evidence is relative to a context of attribution of evidence.^{62 63} What counts as evidence varies, I think, with several different factors, most of which are not relevant for our purposes.⁶⁴ But we can isolate the particular factor that is responsible for context-shifting in the skeptical puzzle and the evidentiary puzzle.

Consider an epistemic subject S. Let's say that two hypotheses h1 and h2 are "introspectively indistinguishable for S" just in case:

- (a) If h1 were true, then S would be in mental states M1, and
- (b) If h2 were true, then S would be in mental states M2, and
- (c) Any difference between M1 and M2 is not introspectively available to S.

To say that the difference between two mental states is not introspectively available to S is not to say merely that S can't tell which is which. It is rather to say that there's no difference *for S*, i.e., no difference that's available to S's introspection. For instance, (H1) and "I have hands" are not introspectively indistinguishable for me: if (H1) were true, then I would not have experiences as of having hands, whereas if "I have hands" were true, then I would have experiences as of having hands. And the difference between those experiences is introspectively available to me. For the same reason, (H3B) and (1) are not introspectively indistinguishable for me. Neither are (H3') and (1), and neither are (H3'') and (1). But (H3A) and "I know that I have hands" are introspectively indistinguishable for me: whatever differences there may be between the mental states that I would be in if one were true and the mental states that I would be in if the other were true is not a difference that is introspectively available to me.

Are (H2) and "I have hands" introspectively indistinguishable? No. It's not the case that if (H2) were true, then I *would* have experiences as of having hands. But it's also not the case that I *would not* have experiences as of having hands. Either one *might*

be the case, but neither one *would* be the case. Thus, (H2) and “I have hands” are not introspectively indistinguishable.

So far as I can tell, “I’m drinking Coke” and “I’m drinking Pepsi” are introspectively indistinguishable hypotheses; if they are not introspectively indistinguishable, I have not yet noticed the introspectively available difference. So too are the hypotheses “I’m looking at a photograph of the Atlantic” and “I’m looking at a photograph of the Pacific”. Perhaps there is a difference that is introspectively available to some people, but not to me.

Let’s say that a hypothesis H is “an uneliminated counterpossibility” with respect to S’s knowing that p at t just in case (i) H implies that S doesn’t know that p at t and (ii) H and “S knows that p at t” are introspectively indistinguishable for S. Someone “raises” an uneliminated counterpossibility with respect to S’s knowing that p at t just in case she treats that counterpossibility as relevant to the appraisal of S’s epistemic state, and relevant by virtue of being an uneliminated counterpossibility.

Now we can state the following rule:

(R) When one raises an hypothesis H that is an uneliminated counterpossibility with respect to S’s knowing that p at t, one restricts what counts in one’s context of appraisal⁶⁵ as S’s body of evidence at t to just those mental states that S has, and would have, at t whether or not H is true.^{66 67}

Now, why should we think that (R) is indeed a rule of context-shifting that governs the truth-conditions of our attributions of evidence? And why should we think that the skeptical puzzle and the evidentiary puzzle are generated by the operation of this rule?⁶⁸

Let's begin with the first question. (R) correctly predicts whether various challenges to appraisals of knowledge or evidence will have intuitive force. For instance, we can effectively challenge my claim to know that those animals are zebras by raising the hypothesis that they are cleverly painted mules, but we cannot effectively challenge my claim to knowledge by raising the hypothesis that they are crocodiles. This is because the first hypothesis is an uneliminated counterpossibility with respect to my knowing that they are zebras and the second isn't. Again, we can effectively challenge my claim to know that I have hands by raising the BIV hypothesis, but not by raising the hypothesis that I don't have hands. This, again, is because the first is an uneliminated counterpossibility with respect to my knowing that I have hands and the second isn't.

Another reason for thinking that (R) governs the truth-conditions of our attributions of evidence is that (R) provides a way of refining the three ideas about evidence stated above: for S to have evidence that p is for S to have evidence that favors p over the counterpossibilities relevant in a context of appraisal. S can have such evidence only if p is introspectively distinguishable from all the relevant counterpossibilities. But it can be introspectively distinguishable from all those

counterpossibilities even if S fails to notice the difference, and so fails to appreciate the evidence that she has.

Now, even if (R) is indeed a rule of context-shifting that we employ, why should we think that the skeptical puzzle and the evidentiary puzzle are generated by the employment of that rule? Recall that, in considering the BIV hypothesis, we are attempting to assess the epistemic support provided to our beliefs about the external world by an evidentiary base that includes no knowledge of the external world. How does bringing up the BIV hypothesis help us to do this? I suggest the following explanation: when I bring up the BIV hypothesis, then, by (R), I restrict what I can truthfully regard as my evidentiary base to just those states that are introspectively available to me whether or not I am a BIV. Thus, I exclude from my evidentiary base all of my (ordinarily so-called) knowledge of the external world. But those are the very states that I wanted to exclude from my evidentiary base. Thus, *if* I am exploiting (R), *then* my raising the BIV hypothesis will restrict what I can truthfully regard as my evidentiary base in the desired way. But if I am not exploiting (R), then it's at least not clear how raising the BIV hypothesis could restrict what I can truthfully regard as my evidentiary base in the desired way. Now, since (3) and (3') are both plausible, it seems that when I raise the BIV hypothesis I do restrict my evidentiary base in the desired way. It seems, then, that a good – and perhaps the best -- explanation of this fact is that I am exploiting (R) in generating the skeptical puzzle and the evidentiary puzzle.

By raising the BIV hypothesis, I restrict what I can truthfully regard as my evidence, and thereby create an epistemic gap between my beliefs about the external world and my evidence. Let's check that this solution satisfies all of our conditions:

(A) It doesn't flatly deny any of (1) - (5). Indeed, it flatly affirms (2), (2'), (4), and (5).

(B) It does not appeal to any mysterious sources of justification for my belief that I am not a BIV. Such justification, on the present solution, derives from such evidence as my seeing that I have two hands – since I see that I have two hands, I can't be a BIV, for BIVs don't have hands. But whether or not my evidence includes seeing that I have two hands varies across contexts of appraisal. In a skeptic's context of appraisal, I cannot truthfully be said to have this evidence. Indeed, in such a context I cannot truthfully be said to have any evidence that I am not a BIV.⁶⁹ Relative to that context, my belief that I am not a BIV simply has no epistemic justification – at least none based on evidence.

(And what else could my justification for that belief be based on?)

(C) The present solution can explain the plausibility of (3) as follows: by raising the BIV hypothesis in the course of a philosophical investigation, we restrict our evidentiary base to just whatever would be equally introspectively available to a BIV. In this context of appraisal, (3') is true. And if (3') is true in that context, then (3) is also true in that context. We consequently recognize that (3) is true (which it is -- relative to our context of appraisal), and so we find it (at least) plausible.

But this is not incompatible with our finding (1) and (2) plausible at the same time. We find (2) plausible because it is (independently of context) true, and we recognize this. And we find (1) plausible because we recognize that, relative to ordinary contexts of epistemic appraisal, it is true.

We can explain the skeptical effectiveness of (H3A) in the same way that we explain the effectiveness of the BIV hypothesis. (H3A) is an uneliminated counterpossibility to “I know that I have hands”. Thus, by raising it in a philosophical investigation, we restrict our evidentiary base to just what would be introspectively available to us whether (H3A) were true or not. We thereby put ourselves in a context relative to which (3') is true. Relative to that same context, (3) is true. We consequently recognize that (3) is true (which it is -- relative to our context of appraisal), and so we find it plausible.

(D) By the same token, the present solution predicts that an effective skeptical hypothesis is one on which my belief that I have hands is based on misleading evidence. For an effective skeptical hypothesis is a hypothesis that is an uneliminated counterpossibility to “I know that I have hands”. And relative to a context in which that counterpossibility is raised, my evidence set does not include evidence that favors the proposition that I have hands over that counterpossibility.

The present solution thereby explains why such hypotheses as (H1), (H2), (H3B), and (H4) cannot typically be used to generate the skeptical puzzle: none of them is an uneliminated counterpossibility to “I know that I have hands”.

(E) In explaining the effectiveness of the BIV hypothesis and (H3A) in generating the skeptical puzzle, we have, along the way, explained their effectiveness in generating the evidentiary puzzle. In the context of appraisal that we generate by considering these hypotheses, (3') is true and so we find it plausible. Nonetheless, we also find (2) plausible because it is (independently of context) true, and we recognize this. And we find (1') plausible because we recognize that, relative to ordinary contexts of epistemic appraisal, it is true.

(F) Finally, we can explain the temptation to deny (5) and (1') as follows: in contexts in which the BIV hypothesis is raised, (1') is false. Philosophers interested in solving the problem of the external world have sensed this, and so have not wanted to affirm (1'). But they have wanted to find a way to avoid denying (1). Thus, they have denied (5), and thereby managed to accept (1) while denying (1'). The present solution doesn't force us into this denial of (5), and provides us with an explanation of the varying plausibility of (1') across contexts of epistemic appraisal.

Conclusion

If the reader began with the hope that I would show that we do have evidence of an external world, then she must be disappointed. I have attempted no such thing, but have rather been content to accept our ordinary attributions of evidence as true relative to the contexts in which they're made. Suppose that we're talking on the phone and I claim to know that my basement floor is all wet. You ask me what evidence I have that it's wet, and I reply that I can see that it's wet. Here, my evidence reaches all the way out to the fact: I can't see that my floor is all wet unless it is, in fact, all wet. There is, in this case, no epistemic gap between my evidence and my belief.

Nonetheless, when we face certain skeptical challenges, we move into a context of epistemic appraisal in which we can truthfully say that our evidence fails to support our beliefs about the external world. Once we are in such a context, we can't find evidence for those beliefs, for none of our mental states counts as evidence for such beliefs in that context. Thus, by issuing or confronting skeptical challenges, we create the epistemic gap between our beliefs about that world and our evidence for them.⁷⁰ But this is not to say that, relative to certain contexts of epistemic appraisal, *the skeptic is right*. For what the skeptic wants to say is that there is, *independently of what we may say or think about it*, an epistemic gap between our evidence and our beliefs about the external world. But the present contextualism about evidence denies that there is any

such context-independent truth for the skeptic to be pointing out to us, or for the anti-skeptic to be missing.

To appraise the epistemic standing of someone's beliefs, to assess the extent to which they are supported by one's evidence, is necessarily to do so from within some context of appraisal. Independently of any such context, there are no truths to which one's appraisal is answerable. In attempting to appraise our epistemic standing from the mythical God's-eye point of view, the skeptic fails to make any appraisal at all.⁷¹

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¹ By “the external world”, I mean the world that is the way it is logically independently of how it is represented in thought or experience. When I speak of “our beliefs about the external world”, I do not mean to include such beliefs as that *if there are bachelors then there are unmarried men*. Rather, I mean to include only our beliefs in what might broadly be termed “contingent matters of fact” in the external world.

² Early in this century, it was sometimes spelled out as follows: our beliefs about the external world can be neither deductively nor inductively inferred from our knowledge of our sensory experiences. See, for instance, Moore 1959a, 193 - 222 and Ayer 1956, 75 – 81. More recently, it has been spelled out in one of these two ways: (1) Our theory of the external world is underdetermined by our evidence, and so it can’t amount to knowledge. See, for instance, Vogel 1993, 235 – 50, and Yalcin 1992, 106 – 22. (2) Since our evidence doesn’t provide us with knowledge that its source is not deceptive (a Cartesian demon, say), it doesn’t provide us with knowledge of contingent matters of fact in the external world. See, for instance, Nozick 1981, 167 – 288, Stroud 1984, 1 – 38, and Pollock 1986, 1 - 25. For discussions of the relative importance of (1) and (2) in skeptical arguments, see Brueckner 1994, 827 – 35, and Cohen 1998b, 143 - 59.

³ DeRose 1999 *defines* the term “contextualism” by appeal to the view that there are higher and lower standards for knowledge. Thus, he writes: “As I use it, and as I think the term is most usefully employed, ‘contextualism’ refers to the position that the truth-conditions of knowledge ascribing and knowledge denying sentences (sentences of the form “S knows that P” and “S doesn’t know that P” and related variants of such sentences) vary in certain ways according to the context in which they are uttered. What so varies is the epistemic standards that S must meet (or, in the case of a denial of knowledge, fail to meet) in order for such a statement to be true. In some contexts, ‘S knows that P’ requires for its truth that S have a true belief that P and also be in a very strong epistemic position with respect to P, while in other contexts,

the very same sentence may require for its truth, in addition to S's having a true belief that P, only that S meet some lower epistemic standards." (187 – 205). For some now classic expositions of contextualist solutions to the skeptical puzzle, see Cohen 1988, Lewis 1995, and DeRose 1995.

⁴ This point is nicely brought out in Feldman 1999.

⁵ Stroud 1984, especially 67 – 82. I use quotation marks here and elsewhere as scare-quotes.

⁶ Clarke 1972 argues that we have no conception of what it is to occupy the "detached external" position that the skeptic, and Stroud, wish to occupy. His arguments are more fully developed in Cavell 1979.

Stroud himself has recently entertained doubts about whether we have any such conception. See Stroud 1998.

⁷ This way of stating my view may make it sound similar to what Williams 1988 calls "contextualism".

For a fuller statement of Williams's view, see Williams 1996. There are several crucial differences between my view and Williams's, perhaps the two most obvious of which are these: (1) on Williams's view, what epistemic state someone is in is not relative not to the *appraiser's* context, but rather solely to the *appraisee's* context, and (2) on my view (but not Williams's) all empirical knowledge of the external world requires evidence.

⁸ In this paper, I assume that to see that p is, in part, to have evidence that guarantees the truth of p. Same for remembering that p. For a defense of these assumptions, see Neta ms (c). For a defense of (what I take to be) the weaker theses that x's perceptually appearing F to S provides S with justification for believing that x is F, see Audi 1998, ch. 1, Alston 1999a, Alston 1999b, and Pryor forthcoming. (Pryor regards such "perceptual appearances" as propositionally contentful mental states, whereas Alston does not.) If attributions of evidence are, as I argue, semantically context-sensitive, then so too will attributions of perceiving that p and remembering that p be context-sensitive. I argue for such contextualism concerning perceiving in Neta ms (a).

⁹ In this paper, I shall not address the objection that this hypothesis (in one or another version) is self-refuting, i.e. that it is a condition of the possibility of entertaining the hypothesis that it is false. Several philosophers have leveled this objection, most influentially: Putnam 1981 and Davidson 1986. Specifically, Putnam argues that the hypothesis that *we have all always been BIVs* is self-refuting. And Davidson argues that the hypothesis that *my beliefs about my perceptible surroundings are, by and large, false* is self-refuting. An intriguing and unjustly neglected argument for the self-refuting character of any skeptical hypothesis framed in the first person is to be found in Long 1992.

Although I have some sympathy with the views advanced by Putnam, Davidson, and Long, I believe that there are at least three *strategic* problems with all such responses to skeptical hypotheses: (1) Such responses rely on philosophical views (concerning reference or belief) that are – at least apparently – more dubious than is the claim that we can coherently conceive of such skeptical hypotheses. See Nagel 1986. (2) Such responses are as likely to induce skepticism about one’s own states of consciousness as they are to solve the problem of skepticism about the external world. See Rorty 1986. (3) Finally, such responses fail to explain why skepticism about the external world is so much easier to motivate than is skepticism about one’s own states of consciousness. I believe that the solution here offered to the skeptical puzzle avoids all of these problems.

¹⁰ Maybe (2) would be more plausible if it said: “If I know that p, and I know that p entails q, *and I form my belief that q because I know that it follows from p*, then I know that q.” For the sake of brevity I avoid this qualification in the text. But, if it were necessary, the argument of this paper could be modified throughout to accommodate such a qualification. (The point made here applies equally to (4) below.)

¹¹ I take this way of posing the puzzle directly from Schiffer 1996. This way of posing the puzzle does not spell out its implications for the epistemic status of our contingent *a posteriori* beliefs about the external

world quite generally. For a statement of the puzzle in its full generality, see DeRose 1995. A more extensive discussion of the puzzle in its full generality is to be found in Unger 1975.

¹² Skeptics deny (1). For instance, see Unger 1975. Many philosophers have denied (2). Prominent examples include Dretske 1971, Dretske 1970, Alvin Goldman 1976, and Nozick 1981. Finally, many philosophers have denied (3). For instance, see Putnam 1981, Davidson 1986, and Klein 1981. Also, see Broad 1923, Broad 1925, BonJour 1985, Alan Goldman 1991, and Vogel 1990, all of whom would deny (3) by appeal to an inference to the best explanation, though the role of this inference differs in these authors' differing accounts of why (3) is false. G.E. Moore's reply to the skeptic's dreaming doubt is analogous (though not identical) to a denial of (3). See Moore 1993a. Specifically, Moore replies to the skeptical dreaming doubt by claiming to know that he is not now dreaming. He exhibits some uncertainty concerning *how* he knows this, but he exhibits no uncertainty as to *whether* he knows it. We should note, however, that Moore never considers the BIV hypothesis. This is important, for when Moore briefly considers the question how he can know that he's not dreaming, he does not consider appealing to anything other than whatever unlikeness there may be between his waking experience (his sensory experiences, or his memories of the immediate past) and his dreams. But, by hypothesis, there is no unlikeness between one's actual experiences and the experiences that one would have if one were a BIV.

¹³ Some philosophers have claimed that, although the truth-conditions of our attributions of knowledge do not vary across contexts of attribution, our standards for making and accepting those attributions vary across such contexts. For instance, see Fogelin 1994. The proponent of such a view is committed to claiming that at least one of (1) – (3) is false, even if she isn't going to say which one.

¹⁴ For instance, see Yourgrau 1983, Schiffer 1996, and Feldman 1999. For a reply to Yourgrau, see DeRose 1992. For a reply to Schiffer, see Cohen 1999. The present paper may be read as a reply to Feldman. It is easy to think that contextualism mistakes the context-sensitivity of warranted assertibility

conditions for the context-sensitivity of truth-conditions. For a careful reply to this intuitive objection, see DeRose 1999.

¹⁵ Stine 1976. The seeds of contextualism are older. For instance, see J.L. Austin's discussion of "If I know I can't be wrong" in Austin 1961.

¹⁶ In Dretske 1970.

¹⁷ Though Stine does not offer any general account of which circumstances are ordinary and which circumstances are extraordinary, she says that in practice we don't have much trouble telling which sort of circumstances we're in. Presumably, she would grant that this is true only if we're not actually BIVs.

¹⁸ It may well suffer from more than the two problems that I discuss here. For a criticism of relevant alternatives theories of knowledge, see Vogel 1999.

¹⁹ Cohen 1988.

²⁰ By "sufficient evidence to know", I do not mean evidence the mere possession of which suffices for knowledge. Rather, I mean evidence the possession of which suffices, *so far as evidence goes*, for knowledge. This leaves it open whether the possession of such evidence suffices to satisfy the other conditions for knowledge.

²¹ I use the phrase "some sufficient evidence" to mean some non-zero amount of evidence that is sufficient, so far as evidence goes, for knowledge.

²² *Ibid.*, 99. Cohen claims that Stine is committed to denying (4), but, for the reason I've given, it seems to me that Stine is only committed to denying the conjunction of (4) and (5).

²³ See Gettier 1963.

²⁴ Though it's not as general as what he does conclude, which is that knowledge isn't the same as true belief for which one has sufficient justification.

²⁵ The soundness of Gettier's argument has been disputed. See Thalberg 1969. Thalberg's challenge to (4) depends upon a probabilistic conception of evidence, which I don't share.

²⁶ One might nonetheless challenge (4) as follows: From the fact that I have sufficient evidence to know that p , and I know that p implies $p \vee \neg p$, it doesn't follow that I have sufficient evidence to know that $p \vee \neg p$, for nothing can serve as *evidence* for the proposition that $p \vee \neg p$. This objection is based on a more restricted notion of evidence that I am here employing (and, I think, a more restricted notion than we ordinarily employ). As I use the term "evidence", a logician can have evidence that a particular proposition is a tautology, and thereby have evidence for that proposition. And we can have evidence that a proposition of the form $p \vee \neg p$ is true: for instance, we might wonder whether it is true that *Herman is bald* or *it is not the case that Herman is bald*. Upon seeing Herman, we might come to have evidence that one of these disjuncts is true, and so the disjunction is true – or we might come to have evidence that neither of these disjuncts is true. Thus, the present objection does not tell against (4), as understood here.

²⁷ For instance, see Sosa 1964, Williams 1996, and McGinn 1989.

²⁸ See Alston 1999a and Plantinga 1993b. Plantinga recognizes the compatibility between (5) and the points he wishes to make. He writes: "My perceptual beliefs are not ordinarily formed on the basis of *propositions about* my experience; nonetheless they are formed on the basis of my experience. You look out of the window: you are appeared to in a certain characteristic way; you find yourself with the belief that what you see is an expanse of green grass. You have *evidence* for this belief: the evidence of your senses. Your evidence is just this way of being appeared to; and you form the belief in question *on the basis of* this phenomenal imagery, this way of being appeared to." (98)

²⁹ See Cargile 1972.

³⁰ See Wittgenstein 1969, §§80 – 1.

³¹ See Austin 1964. Austin writes: “The situation in which I would properly be said to have *evidence* for the statement that some animal is a pig is that, for example, in which the beast itself is not actually on view, but I can see plenty of pig-like marks on the ground outside its retreat. If I find a few buckets of pig-food, that’s a more evidence, and the noises and the smell may provide better evidence still. But if the animal then emerges and stands there plainly in view, there is no longer any question of collecting evidence; its coming into view doesn’t provide me with more *evidence* that it’s a pig, I can now just *see* that it is, the question is settled.” (115) Austin is right to point out that it is, in some sense, improper, to describe a normal person in normal circumstances as having *evidence* that she has hands: she simply sees that she has hands. I suspect that the impropriety here is of the same sort as the impropriety of understatement: the person who sees that the animal is a pig doesn’t *merely* have evidence that it’s a pig, but rather has *conclusive* evidence.

³² See Kaplan 1991. Kaplan’s point concerns justification rather than evidence, but I assume that having evidence is a way of having justification.

³³ See the distinction between Subject Factors and Attributor Factors in DeRose 1992 and also in Alvin Goldman 1976.

DeRose 1999 claims that Stine, like Cohen, regards relevance as partly a function of features of the situation in which the knowledge attribution is made. DeRose may be right about this, but I have not found clear textual evidence bearing on the issue.

Throughout this paper, I use the phrase “knowledge attribution” to cover both attributions of knowledge and their denials. Also, I speak of such attributions as being “made” when I mean to refer to cases in which they are so much as *entertained* (whether as assertions, suppositions, questions, etc.).

Cohen, Lewis, DeRose, and I are all concerned with the semantic context-sensitivity of knowledge-attributions, *be they spoken or unspoken, asserted or unasserted*. For all of us, the contextual conditions of true assertion are the same as the contextual conditions of true belief, supposition, etc.

The idea that the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions are a function of features of the situation in which such attributions are made need not be tied to a relevant alternatives theory of knowledge. For instance, Sosa 1974 claims that the truth-conditions of “S knows that p” vary as the attributor considers S’s epistemic state from different points of view.

³⁴ Cohen 1988, 102 - 3. For Cohen, (i) and (ii) are each sufficient conditions of relevance. Clause (ii) uses the term “relevance” in an eccentric way, for an alternative is relevant (by condition (ii)) just by virtue of S’s being unable to rule it out.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁶ Cohen revisits this issue in Cohen 1999. Some semantic or psychological externalists might wish to claim that, if my beliefs concerning my own states of consciousness are intrinsically rational, then so too is my belief that I am not a BIV. But this conditional seems hard to swallow (as does any form of externalism that implies it) precisely because it requires us to make a hard choice: do we reject the antecedent, or accept the consequent? Neither choice is plausible.

³⁷ Lewis 1995, 551.

³⁸ For a related criticism of this argument of Lewis's, see footnote 6 in Cohen 1998a. The view that knowledge involves justification has been challenged by many others. For instance, see Alvin Goldman 1967, Alan Goldman 1991, Plantinga 1993a.

³⁹ See William Alston's distinction between Simple Foundationalism and Iterative Foundationalism in Alston 1976. Some philosophers might protest that we cannot *have* a justification for a belief and yet fail to know what it is. (For instance, see Chisholm 1966.) Harman 1970 offers some compelling

counterexamples to this internalist view. The view is also subject to all the criticisms levelled in Alvin Goldman 1999.

⁴⁰ Lewis 1995, 551 and 553. According to Lewis, "the uneliminated possibilities are those in which the subject's entire perceptual experience and memory are just as they actually are." (553)

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 559.

⁴² I say "at least *some* contexts" because other Rules besides the Rule of Attention may operate in such contexts to prevent our being able truthfully to assent to (1).

⁴³ The earlier proposal of Lewis's is in the section entitled "Example 5: Vagueness" of Lewis 1979.

DeRose's criticism of this proposal is in section 3 of DeRose 1995.

⁴⁴ DeRose 1995, 16 – 7. A similar criticism can be leveled against the solution proposed by Hamburger 1987. According to Hamburger, knowledge is relative to a standard of caution in force in a given context of attribution. But what is it about the BIV hypothesis which makes it such that, relative to the highest standards of caution, my evidence doesn't suffice to enable me to know that it's false?

⁴⁵ DeRose 1995, 18.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, section 10.

⁴⁷ DeRose discusses this "SCA" account of knowledge in *Ibid.*, sections 5 – 8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁹ DeRose: "Introducing a skeptical hypothesis into a conversation in any number of ways other than in attributions and denials of knowledge can ... raise the standards for knowledge. For instance, instead of arguing, 'You don't know that the paper isn't mistaken about the result of last night's game; therefore, you don't know that the Bulls won,' a skeptic may urge, 'Consider this proposition: The newspaper is mistaken about who won the game. Now, keeping that proposition clearly in mind, answer me this: Do you *really*

know that the Bulls won?' Of course... not just any mention of a skeptical hypothesis seems to trigger the mechanism for raising the standards of knowledge." (*Ibid.*, 36).

⁵⁰ Rieber 1998 points out that DeRose's proposed solution, like Lewis's, is *ad hoc*. The Rule of Sensitivity, like the Rule of Attention, has no plausibility independently of its use in apparently solving the skeptical puzzle, and puzzles structurally like it (e.g. the zebra puzzle). We should, according to Rieber, try to solve the skeptical puzzle by appeal to principles that would be plausible anyway, independently of their usefulness in solving such puzzles. Rieber's own proposed contextualist solution deserves a fuller treatment than I can offer here. But see Neta ms (b).

⁵¹ Another feature of DeRose's proposed solution may deserve comment: It depends upon the assumption that the world in which I'm a BIV is farther away than the world in which I've simply lost my hands. But why should we assume this? And why should we think that the *nearest* world in which I'm a BIV is a world in which I believe that I'm not? Why isn't the world in which I'm a BIV *who believes that I'm a BIV* nearer than the world in which I'm a BIV who believes that I'm not? The only thing that DeRose says about what determines distance of worlds from the actual one is this: similarity in the method by which I acquire my belief as to the truth or falsity of *p* weighs heavily in this determination. (DeRose 1995, 21)

Worlds in which I acquire my belief as to the truth or falsity of *p* in the same way in which I acquire it in the actual world are closer than worlds in which I don't so acquire it. So let's say that, in forming my belief as to whether or not I have hands, I use method *M* (whatever it may be). Furthermore, let's suppose that, *ceteris paribus*, worlds in which I use method *M* in forming my belief as to whether or not I have hands are nearer than worlds in which I don't use method *M* in forming this belief. Now, if *M* is a method that a BIV cannot use to form its beliefs as to whether or not it has hands, then worlds in which I'm a BIV will be farther away on account of that fact. But again, if *M* is a method that handless people cannot use (e.g. handwaving) to form their beliefs as to whether or not they have hands, then worlds in which I'm

handless will also be farther away on account of that fact. Is M a method that handless people can use and BIVs cannot use? We don't know, since DeRose doesn't tell us what M is. Does something else explain why worlds in which I'm a BIV are farther away than worlds in which I simply don't have hands? Perhaps what explains it is the fact that worlds in which I'm a BIV are so much more *different* from the actual world than are worlds in which I simply don't have hands. But more different in what way? The former worlds are worlds in which things *seem to me* just as they do in the actual world, whereas the latter worlds are worlds in which things seem different. So what makes the former worlds more different?

⁵² Or at least, it cannot be so used unless it is embellished with such addenda as are contained in, e.g. (H3A).

⁵³ I stress that it *seems* that way. It might not be that way: the Rule of Sensitivity would have to be more finely Chisholmed to generate such specific predictions.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵⁵ Lehrer 1971 offers a skeptical hypothesis according to which we are caused to hold our (mostly false) beliefs by a race of super-intelligent aliens who send out signals that affect our brains in particular ways. This hypothesis can also be interpreted in two ways, depending on whether or not it is any part of the hypothesis that the signals affect our experiences as well as our beliefs. But the difference between these two interpretations matters to us only because we assume (for the purposes of this paper) that we can have knowledge of our own states of consciousness. Lehrer makes no such assumption.

⁵⁶ Some philosophers may wish to appeal to some form of inference to the best explanation in explaining how our "hand experiences" can provide us with evidence that we have hands. For a criticism of this appeal, see Plantinga 1993b, especially ch. 5, Williams 1977, especially 128 – 44, and Alston 1993, chapter 4. Strawson 1985 points out that, even if it is possible to offer a philosophical justification of our beliefs

about the external world in terms of an inference to the best explanation of our sensory data, nonetheless, it is no part of our reason for holding those beliefs that they can be so justified.

⁵⁷ Puzzles similar to this triad (but having to do with justification, and with reason to believe, rather than with evidence) are discussed in chapter 5 of Unger 1975.

⁵⁸ Again, see Sosa 1964, Williams 1977, and McGinn 1989.

⁵⁹ DeRose 1995, 28.

⁶⁰ Bayesians will challenge (2') as follows: e is evidence for h only if $p(h/e) > p(h)$. But, no matter what e and h are, $p(h \vee \neg h/e) = p(h \vee \neg h)$, and so e is not evidence for $h \vee \neg h$, even if it is evidence for h . Since we all know that h implies $h \vee \neg h$, (2') is false. Again, no matter what e and h are, there is some h' such that: $p(h \& h'/e) > p(e)$ but $p(h'/e) = p(e)$. Thus, e is evidence for $h \& h'$, but is not evidence for h' , which we know to be implied by h . But this argument is only as compelling as its premise that e is evidence for h only if $p(h/e) > p(h)$. This premise may be true if it involves some technical (though perhaps useful) sense of "evidence". But it is not plausible if it involves our ordinary notion of evidence, which I intend to be using here. In that ordinary sense, a logician can have evidence (supplied by a long proof) for a complicated logical truth, even though nothing can probabilify any logical truth. (Shall we say, then, that the logician's proof provides evidence not for its conclusion but rather for the proposition that a particular sentence (the one used to express its conclusion) expresses a logical truth? This is implausible: presumably, the premises are not about sentences.) Thus, the foregoing arguments do not give us good reason to reject (2').

⁶¹ See Stine 1976, 258 and Cohen 1988, 112.

⁶² Here again, I use the phrase "attributions of evidence" to cover attributions of evidence and their denials, as well as questions concerning whether they are true, suppositions that they are true, and so on.

Williamson 1997 argues that a subject's evidence consists of all and only what the subject knows. If this argument is sound, then it provides a way to argue from the context-sensitivity of the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions to the context-sensitivity of the truth-conditions of evidence attributions. But it does not provide a way to argue for the specific rule of context-shifting specified below. Williamson himself does not endorse contextualism about either knowledge or evidence.

⁶³ A similar claim is suggested in DeRose (forthcoming) DeRose does not, however, make use of such contextualism concerning evidence to solve the skeptical puzzle.

⁶⁴ Annis 1978 claims that one's epistemic justification for believing that *p* varies with such factors as: what is the issue regarding *p*, what is the cost of being wrong about *p*, and so on. Though Annis is concerned not specifically with evidence but rather with justified belief, and though he is concerned not with features of the context of appraisal but rather with features of the context of the appraisee, I think we can smoothly adapt his account of the various factors that matter in determining justification for our own purposes. For lack of space, however, I shall not attempt to do so here.

⁶⁵ One's listeners may refuse to enter into one's context of appraisal by refusing to treat *H* as relevant to the appraisal of *S*'s epistemic state. One can expect this to happen when one raises skeptical hypotheses in a courtroom or a scientific laboratory.

⁶⁶ If *H* is an uneliminated counterpossibility with respect to *S*'s knowing that *p* at *t*, then wouldn't *S* have *all* the same mental states at *t* whether or not *H* is true? Williamson 1995 persuasively defends a negative answer to this question. Also see McDowell 1982. To avoid controversy, I shall not attempt to rest my case on their arguments. Rather, I'll simply say that I'm using the phrase "mental states" in my statement of (R) in such a way as to include states of knowledge.

⁶⁷ Some internalists may object that if *H* and "S knows that *p* at *t*" are introspectively indistinguishable for *S*, then what evidence *S* has cannot depend upon whether or not *H* is true – and this is true independently of

any context of epistemic appraisal. This objection rests upon the assumption that the only facts that qualify as someone's evidence for p at t are facts that the agent can know by introspection at t . But, as Alvin Goldman 1999 argues, this assumption founders on "the problem of stored beliefs".

⁶⁸ There is a more general question that we might wish to ask in connection with this: what good does it do to have a semantically context-sensitive words and concepts. An answer to this general question is provided in Gross 1998.

⁶⁹ Recall that I am assuming that "inference to the best explanation" responses to skepticism are unsuccessful: see footnote 51.

⁷⁰ Throughout this paper, I have presupposed that we can entertain beliefs about the external world even if we can have no evidence for any such beliefs. In a fuller treatment of these matters, I would want to examine this presupposition.

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