1. Contextualism: the Basic Diagnosis

Whatever their differences (and they are substantial), philosophers who think of themselves as epistemological contextualists share certain fundamental ideas concerning knowledge and scepticism. I mention three.

1. The standards for correctly attributing knowledge (or justified belief) are in some way sensitive to context, hence variable rather than fixed.
2. While such context-sensitivity is readily seen in ordinary situations of epistemic appraisal, there is an important difference between all ordinary epistemic contexts and the context created by reflecting philosophically about knowledge or “doing epistemology”. Whereas everyday epistemic appraisals are always in some way restricted, the philosophical examination of human knowledge is unrestricted. Since no knowledge-claim can survive unrestricted examination, in the extraordinary context of philosophical reflection—but only there—our knowledge of the world seems to evaporate entirely. (Perhaps it does evaporate entirely.)
3. Thus although the sceptic claims to have discovered, while reflecting philosophically, that we lack knowledge of the world, he has discovered (at most) that we lack knowledge of the world while reflecting philosophically.

These ideas constitute what I shall call the Basic Contextualist Diagnosis of Scepticism, or the Basic Diagnosis for short.

There are various ways of fleshing out the Basic Diagnosis, corresponding to different ways of thinking about the nature of knowledge: justificationist, externalist-reliabilist, and so on. However, in my view, the most fundamental
division within the contextualist camp cuts across these familiar differences and concerns the question of how we ought to understand the context of philosophy or “doing epistemology”. For while all versions of the Basic Diagnosis see the epistemic context created by philosophical questioning as in some way set apart from ordinary justificational or knowledge-attributing contexts, and while all explain the distinctive character of the philosophical context in terms of the unrestricted character of philosophical questioning, a crucial difference emerges when we ask: in what way exactly is the philosophical examination of knowledge unrestricted, and how does its unrestricted character lead knowledge to (seem to) evaporate?

There are two approaches to these questions. (Interestingly, both draw on hints from the First Meditation.) The most popular by far focuses on what seems to be the extreme severity of the sceptic’s (or philosopher’s) standards for attributing or claiming knowledge. To take this line, I shall say, is thus to adopt the High Standards (HS) version of the Basic Diagnosis, or the High Standards (HS) strategy.¹ The other approach, which I have defended in my own work, directs our attention to the unusual generality of the sceptic’s (or philosopher’s) questions. Since I think that the hypergenerality involved in the attempt to understand human knowledge “philosophically” is not just unusual but highly questionable, I shall say that my alternative version of the Basic Diagnosis follows the Spurious Generality (SG) strategy.² My purpose in this paper is to explore the similarities and differences between the two strategies and to explain my preference for the second.

2. Explanation and Justification

Philosophical scepticism is a problem because, while sceptical conclusions (when clearly understood) are wholly unacceptable, sceptical arguments (at least when we are in a certain frame of mind) can strike us as oddly compelling. As Hume said of Berkeley, we can tell that his arguments are sceptical because, while they admit of no refutation, they produce no conviction.³ Both aspects of scepticism deserve comment.

Philosophical scepticism is unacceptable because it is extreme both in its scope and its depth. With respect to scope, the sceptic does not just suggest that we know less than we like to think, which is probably true. He argues that we know nothing at all, or (in a more limited but still hyper-general way) that we know nothing at all in certain very broad domains: for example, that we know nothing about the external world. As to its depth, philosophical scepticism is radical. The sceptic does not claim merely that we fail to know things by some stricter-than-usual standards. Rather, he argues that we are in no position to draw any invidious epistemic
distinctions. For all we can tell, epistemically speaking one belief is as good as another.

Turning to their seductive air of plausibility, sceptical arguments impress because they appear to be highly “intuitive”. Not only are they short, to the point and free of obvious logical flaws, they do seem not to depend on any arcane theory. Rather, they seem to invoke only our everyday, average ideas about knowledge and justification, and thus seem to bring to light paradoxes implicit in quite ordinary ways of thinking. Scepticism is our problem, not an external threat. Of course, appearances could be deceptive. But if they are, this is something we will need to argue for.

How should we to respond to a problem like this? One way would be to prove, in terms that even a sceptic would have to accept, that we really do know the sorts of things we naturally take ourselves to know. However, the history of attempts to meet scepticism head on is not encouraging. Accordingly, contextualists recommend a more subtle approach. Instead of a proof, they offer something closer to what Robert Nozick called a “philosophical explanation”. The need for a philosophical explanation arises from just the sort of paradox that scepticism represents, where philosophical arguments clash with important, perhaps indispensable, pre-philosophical commitments. A philosophical explanation aims to relieve the tension. In the case of the contextualist response to scepticism, the explanatory/diagnostic goal is to sketch an account of the concept of knowledge that (a) is adequate to the basic linguistic data, (b) reveals how the sceptic goes wrong, and (c) shows how nevertheless sceptical arguments can seem so compelling. Such an explanation should offer a complete dissolution of a philosophical paradox.

Such a strategy seems especially well-adapted to dealing with scepticism. A striking feature of the phenomenology of our encounter with scepticism, perhaps first emphasized by Hume, is that sceptical doubts, however compelling in the study, vanish like smoke when we return to everyday pursuits. Contextualism, by linking the sceptical temptation to a particular context of inquiry or appraisal, accounts smoothly for this. This is one of the principle attractions of the contextualist approach.

Accounting for the seductiveness of sceptical arguments is more than a bonus. If we do not identify (and thereby demystify) the source of the attraction that sceptical arguments have for us, we will not be able to rest content with whatever we come up with under (a) and (b). We will seem simply to be confronting the sceptic with an anti-sceptical theory of knowledge: Moore’s argument on stilts, as it were. If the sceptic’s questions still look like good ones, the sense of paradox will not be fully relieved. To put scepticism behind us, we want a response to scepticism that is diagnostic rather than (merely) dialectical. Lacking a diagnostic component, a response to scepticism will be incomplete.

A philosophical explanation is not a “neutral” proof. But philosophical explanation is not, in a general way, opposed to philosophical justification.
Because of the way it aims to dissolve a paradox apparently implicit in our ordinary epistemic practices, a philosophical explanation, if successful, will amount to a vindication of them, thus a kind of justification, though indirect.

How should we judge the worth of a contextualist diagnosis of scepticism? No doubt in all sorts of ways. But I will mention three things that we can reasonably expect from a good diagnosis. First, it should apply to an interesting form of scepticism. Today, this means that it should apply to scepticism that is both general and radical. Second, it should give an illuminating (and of course accurate) account of how such sceptical worries arise. Such an account should indicate how scepticism may be avoided, while allowing for a plausible explanation of its prima facie appeal. Such an explanation should not require philosophers who feel the force of scepticism to make egregious mistakes, or be too confused. Third, a good diagnosis should not be overly concessive. The history of epistemology is littered with responses to scepticism that, on reflection, turn out to be difficult to distinguish from scepticism itself. Contextualism needs to avoid looking like one of them.

3. The HS Approach

The HS strategy is principally designed to dissolve worries created by Cartesian scepticism: paradigmatically, scepticism concerning our knowledge of the external world. Cartesian scepticism is distinguished from Agrippan (regress) scepticism by the use it makes of sceptical scenarios (hypotheses, situations). These are apparent “defeaters” to ordinary knowledge-claims (situations such that, if they obtained, our ordinary beliefs would not amount to knowledge) of a special kind. However, they are special in that they involve systematic error or deception. Familiar examples are that we are victims of Descartes’s Evil Deceiver or brains-in-vats, situations in which our experience is manipulated to mimic the experience we have in (what we take to be) our “normal” world.

The important thing about a sceptical hypothesis is that, however we think of knowledge, it seems at first blush very difficult to explain how we could know that we are not in the situation it describes. It seems hard to look for evidence, since anything we appeal to could be part of the deception. But even for externalists, the possibility of such knowledge is less-than-obvious. Suppose, for example, we think that, to count as knowledge, a belief should be sensitive to fact: i.e., if it were false, we should not hold it. Beliefs that sceptical hypotheses are false seem to fail this test. I believe that I am not a brain in a vat. But if I were a brain in a vat, I would still believe that I am not. And there is always the danger of trading scepticism for an equally threatening meta-scepticism. I may have knowledge because my faculties are reliable in a normal world. But can I really be sure what kind
of world I am in? Again, merely confronting the sceptic with an anti-
sceptical conception of knowledge seems less than satisfactory. (Moore on
stilts again.)

Armed with sceptical hypotheses, the sceptic is able to present us with
what Keith DeRose calls the Argument form Ignorance (AI).\(^8\) Letting \(O\) be
some everyday claim—e.g. the Moorean claim that I have two hands—and
\(H\) be some appropriate sceptical hypothesis, the sceptic argues as follows:

\[\text{(AI)} \quad \text{If I know that } O, \text{ I know that } \neg H.\]
\[\text{But I don't (can't) know that } \neg H.\]
\[\text{So I don't know that } O.\]

Since we could let just about any claim about the external world stand in for
\(O\), it seems that we have no knowledge of external reality.

One reason this argument seems difficult to dismiss is that it conforms
to a perfectly familiar pattern. Do I know when the museum opens? Yes,
because I looked it up in the guidebook. But now I notice that the book was
published some years ago and has not been revised. Perhaps, then, it is out
of date and unreliable: I don’t know that it isn’t. Thinking along these lines,
I find myself inclined to judge that I don’t know when the museum opens
after all. This looks like an everyday variant of AI: a defeater that I have not
(and perhaps in present circumstances cannot) know not to obtain under-
mines a knowledge-claim. How is the sceptical version of AI different, other
than in the outlandish character of the defeater in play? The answer is not
obvious. But outlandish does not mean incoherent or impossible. As I said,
sceptical arguments seem to be intuitive. It begins to look as though ordi-
nary practical “knowledge” involves turning a blind eye to theoretical prob-
lems, which is what Hume thought.\(^9\)

While, by offering a template for a sceptical argument, examples like that
of the guidebook may seem to encourage the sceptic, HS theorists see them as
offering the key to the sceptic’s mistake. Recognising a new error-possibility
or “defeater” (the guidebook may be out of date) raises the standards for
claiming or attributing knowledge. In Robert Fogelin’s useful phrase, noti-
cing a new error-possibility may serve to raise the “level of scrutiny” to which
a knowledge-claim is subject.\(^10\) Bringing into play yet more remote error-
possibilities would raise it even higher. But while the level of scrutiny can be
raised indefinitely, ordinary contexts of epistemic assessment are always
restricted. When deciding whether to attribute knowledge, we do not ordi-
narily consider any and every way in which the knowledge-claim in question
might fail. Rather, we tacitly confine ourselves to a possibly quite extensive
but still ultimately limited range of “relevant” or “serious” defeaters.

For everyday purposes, some logically possible ways of going wrong, or
otherwise failing to know, are too bizarre to be worth considering. In the
case of the museum’s opening hours, I may judge that to re-institute my
claim to knowledge I need to consult a more recent guidebook. I won’t, however, consider the possibility that all guidebooks contain deliberate mistakes, inserted to frustrate the unwary tourist. True, I will not have investigated the possibility of such a conspiracy—such a possibility will not cross my mind—but, ordinarily, failure to exclude such a remote defeater will not undermine my epistemic standing.

Things are different when we reflect philosophically. Philosophical reflection is *unrestricted* in that, when reflecting philosophically, we are open to any coherent error-possibility. The effect of “going philosophical” is thus to raise the standards for attributing knowledge to the maximum. But now disaster threatens, for among defeaters ordinarily treated as too remote to take seriously we find sceptical hypotheses. When we come across them, not merely are we open to considering these bizarre error-possibilities, we have a tendency, as Fogelin insists, to *dwell on* them. And dwelling on them leaves us wondering whether we really know any of the things we ordinarily take ourselves to know.

The HS-strategy tells us not to worry. Standards for claiming or attributing vary with the conversational context, with whatever defeaters or explicit knowledge-claims are in play. In everyday contexts, we are not concerned to claim that we are not brains in vats. The thought that we might be brains in vats never so much as enters our heads, and there is no reason why it should. In such contexts, therefore, sceptical hypotheses and their denials are *hors de combat*. Everyday knowledge is thus safe from sceptical undermining. Scepticism works by eliding conversational shifts in epistemic standards. Such a shift can take place *in the course of sceptical argumentation itself*, and indeed does so when explicit mention is first made of a sceptical hypothesis. Making explicit mention of a sceptical hypothesis (whether with sceptical or anti-sceptical intent) takes us out of all everyday contexts of epistemic appraisal and projects us into the philosophical context, with its characteristically extreme standards for attributing knowledge.

Recognizing the contextual variability of epistemic standards, we can see that the sceptic is wrong to suppose that he has undermined everyday knowledge. So why are we tempted to go along with him? In part, because his mistake (or deception) is subtle: it is easy to lose track of standard-shifts, particularly when they occur in the course of what seems to be a single argument. But there is something else. This is that the sceptic *seems* right because he *is* partly right. While he is *wrong* to suppose that our inability to meet the epistemic standards that define the philosophical context casts doubt on everyday knowledge claims, he is *right* about that inability. At a minimum, when doing epistemology we are strongly tempted to impose standards for claiming knowledge that we cannot meet.

What about the standards themselves? As far as I can see, no HS strategist sees anything unintelligible or in principle objectionable about them. They are *different* from ordinary standards, but not for that reason...
defective. Indeed, it is hard to see what theoretical resources the HS strategy commands for arguing that philosophical standards are unreasonable in any sense other than excessively severe (for everyday purposes).

If I am right about this, the HS version of the Basic Diagnosis adopts a rather tolerant attitude towards “doing epistemology”. In so doing, it follows what we may call a “pure insulation” strategy. It explains the appeal of scepticism by allowing the sceptic a narrow victory. The sceptic’s ruse is just to trick us into thinking that his conclusion, correct in its way, has a wider significance than in fact it has.

Now in explaining why scepticism is a problem, I said that sceptical arguments are seductive because they seem to be highly intuitive. To adopt the HS strategy’s tolerant attitude towards doing epistemology is, in effect, to concede that the sceptic’s doubts are more than apparently intuitive: they are genuinely intuitive. They are, so to say, the outcome of an extreme instance of an ordinary epistemic procedure. So while, in a way, the context of philosophy stands apart from all ordinary contexts of assertion and appraisal by being unrestricted, philosophical appraisal is not in any deep way discontinuous with ordinary evaluation, but more like a limiting case of it.

I think that this is a concession that we ought not to make. Sceptical doubts are much more peculiar, much less intuitive, than the HS strategy allows for.

4. The SG Alternative

With respect to the idea of “doing epistemology” (that is, sceptical or traditional epistemology), the SG strategy is much less tolerant than its HS rival. The main idea of the SG strategy is that sceptical doubts are not really intuitive at all, so that the philosophical examination of human knowledge is radically discontinuous with ordinary epistemic procedures.11

The SG strategy takes off from a quite different account of the character of philosophical reflection. Barry Stroud captures it well. “In the traditional question of our knowledge of the material bodies around us,” Stroud writes, “we want to know how we know anything at all about such bodies.”12 We could put it like this: in philosophy, we are not interested in any restricted kind of worldly knowledge—either what such knowledge we have, or how we come by it—but rather in knowledge of the world as such. As I sometimes say, the sceptic (or traditional philosopher) imposes a Totality Condition on a properly philosophical understanding of our knowledge of the world.

As Stroud argues, while this traditional philosophical project seems at first blush to present us with “a perfectly intelligible goal”, we find that once involved in the pursuit of it we are easily led to a sceptical (or perhaps meta-sceptical) conclusion. Either we conclude that “we do not know the things
we thought we knew” or “we cannot see how the state we find ourselves in is a state of knowledge.”13 This happens precisely because of the unusual generality of the philosophical project, for we are easily led to think that, if we are to explain how we know anything at all about the external world, we cannot begin by taking it for granted that we have such knowledge: to do so would be to fail to respect the Totality Condition. Thus the pursuit of a properly philosophical understanding of our knowledge of the world leads us naturally to look for a basis or foundation for that knowledge: something that is knowledge, but not knowledge of the world.

Traditionally, this basis has been sought in experience. This is no accident, for it has seemed independently evident to many philosophers that, if we are to have knowledge of the world, experience is ultimately all that we have to go on. But what sort of knowledge does experience provide us with? At this point in the dialectic, sceptical hypotheses make their presence felt. Such hypotheses suggest that our experience could be just what it is, even if the world were very different from the way we normally take it to be. So it seems that experience only tells us how things appear to us, not how they are. But having driven us back to this restricted basis for knowledge of the world, sceptical hypotheses threaten to confine us to it. For precisely because of the way in which they limit what experience tells us, they seem also to show that experience, so conceived, is neutral with respect to competing accounts of external reality. For since our experience could be just as it is, even if the world were very different, how can experience be (or how can we see it as) any guide to external reality? The only basis we have for knowledge of the world turns out to be no basis at all.

Ordinarily, we are not troubled by this problem. We take it for granted that experience is an imperfect but still more-or-less reliable guide to how things are in the world around us. But this thought, however natural, is a thought about the external world. So it can easily come to seem to us that, if our goal is to explain how we can know anything at all about the world, we cannot take this thought for granted in the way that we do when involved in more restricted inquiries. If we did take it for granted, we would simply be helping ourselves to an instance of the very kind of thing we are trying to explain. We would thus fail to explain how it is that we know anything at all of that kind.

Why would we fail? What is wrong with invoking what we know about the world in an explanation of how we come by that knowledge? Perhaps nothing, if all we want is the kind of explanation provided by some empirical discipline, such as cognitive science. But the kind of explanation or understanding that we have traditionally sought in philosophy is not like that. What we want as philosophers is to understand how we can be unproblematically entitled to claim knowledge of the world. In that limited sense, what we want from philosophical reflection is a justification of our conception of ourselves as knowers. We want this whether or not we think
that knowledge itself is to be understood always and everywhere in justificational terms. We want it because there are powerful arguments—sceptical arguments—to the effect that knowledge of the world is impossible, arguments that can be adapted to just about any account of knowledge. We may cease to hanker after proof, but the need for some kind of vindication remains strong.

These reflections reinforce a point made earlier: that our need for understanding is thus not fully met by offering a “naturalistic” or purely externalist-reliabilist account of knowledge. Such an account may indeed show how we come by our knowledge in a normal world. But the sceptical challenge calls in question our right to see the world as normal. Notice that to say this is not to say that such theories are altogether wrong. I would not say this, since I think that there is an element of truth in externalism. But it is to say that we cannot fully assuage sceptical worries by simply confronting the sceptic with such a theory. To do that is just to do in a more elaborate way what Moore did when he held up his hands. We need to come to terms with scepticism in order to earn the right to be externalists. Both the HS and SG strategies, because they are diagnostic rather than dialectical, try to meet this demand. They offer explanations that are also vindications.

Supposing that philosophical reflection, conceived among the foregoing lines, pushes towards scepticism. Still, why do discoveries supposedly made in the context of such reflection threaten everyday knowledge? The answer is that the sceptic (or traditional philosopher) does not take himself to have discovered that only knowledge-claims fail to meet some especially rigorous philosophical standards. Rather, he takes his inquiry into knowledge of the world as such to have uncovered a disquieting fact about our fundamental epistemic situation: that experience, the only basis we will ever have for our beliefs about the world, cannot be seen unproblematically as a source of worldly knowledge. That is to say, he takes himself to have discovered, in the context of philosophical reflection, an obstacle to knowledge that is present in all contexts, however mundane.14

The fact that, ordinarily, we ignore this problem does not insulate everyday knowledge from sceptical undermining. Rather, it leads us to see that everyday “knowledge” is not really knowledge at all, but something less: knowledge for all practical purposes (or for some practical purpose or other). The unrestricted examination of knowledge characteristic of philosophy reveals something that we are ordinarily blind to, or choose to ignore.

The line of thought just sketched is of course enormously complex and can be challenged at many points. But the SG strategy asks what seems to me an absolutely fundamental question: why do we think that it is so much as possible to investigate knowledge of the world as such. What makes knowledge of the world so much as a candidate for explanation or understanding? Philosophers do not often press this question. This is understandable. I agree with Stroud that, at first blush, the request for a fully general
understanding of human knowledge seems perfectly intelligible. It looks like lots of other requests for explanation. To that extent, it seems intuitive.

These are the appearances. But is the philosopher’s question really so intuitive? This question is worth following up because we can see, on further reflection, that we do not suppose that just any definable category of things is an appropriate object of theoretical inquiry. As Jerry Fodor likes to say, there is no science of things that happen on Tuesdays, though we do not feel that this leaves us with a gap in our understanding. As I have put it, we expect understanding in cases where we already see, however vaguely and inarticulately, some kind of theoretical integrity in the things we want to understand. So the question becomes: what kind of integrity does the traditional philosopher attribute to knowledge, or to knowledge of the world, so that we can seek to understand such things as such?

To ask this question is to engage in what I call “theoretical diagnosis”. As we have noted, the sceptic claims to be a philosophical naïf. He raises his questions without having an idea in his head, beyond whatever ideas are implicit in our most commonsensical conceptions of knowledge and justification. As we have noted, this is the principle source of scepticism’s problematic character: it appears to be a paradox buried in our most mundane ways of thinking. But the peculiarity of the sceptic’s hyper-general questions hints that this may not be so; and if it is not so, then the sceptic’s doubts and arguments are not wholly intuitive after all. They may have intuitive elements—if they did not, they could hardly even appear to be intuitive—but they will refract those elements through the lens of unacknowledged theoretical commitments. A good theoretical diagnosis will make explicit how this happens.

We can see right away that, by design, the philosopher neither sees nor wants the kind of integrity that belongs to particular “first-order” subject matters. Precisely not, for he wants to investigate knowledge in a far more general way. So the answer to the question “How can we investigate knowledge in general?” is this: we think that we can do so to the extent that we suppose that knowledge comes from certain generic sources—“the senses” or “reason”, for example. With that idea on board, we can ask the familiar questions. Are our sources up to the job? Can we defend them in a non-circular way? That is to say, we can ask the sorts of questions that threaten to lead to scepticism.

The idea of generic sources of knowledge is the common property of sceptics ancient and modern. The twist that Descartes gave scepticism was to insist that (what we naturally take to be) the source of our knowledge of the world—sense-experience—is severely restricted as to the kind of information it provides. Experience tells us how things appear to us, where what we want to know is how they are. Thinking of experience as informationally bounded in this way, we can ask how we get from experience to knowledge of the world. Giving that question a sceptical inflection, we can
ask, is knowledge of the world—any knowledge—so much as possible? Either way, we can investigate knowledge of the world as such.

Actually, things are a bit more complicated even than this. Of course, in a sense, there are generic sources of knowledge: personal observation, testimony, inference from evidence, and so on. But the sceptic, or traditional philosopher, while no doubt borrowing some intuitive plausibility from this mundane fact, understands it in a much more problematic way. Take experience or “the senses”: not only is this generic source of knowledge traditionally taken to be informationally bounded, it is also taken to be autonomous. That is to say, though it might not tell us everything we want to know, it tells us whatever it can without our needing to be already in possession of collateral knowledge that goes beyond what it can provide. So, for example, we can know all sorts of things about how things appear to us without knowing anything whatsoever about external reality.

There are powerful reasons—familiar from the work of Sellars, Quine, Austin, Wittgenstein, Davidson and others—for doubting whether there are generic sources of knowledge, as the sceptic or traditional philosopher supposes. For example, it is doubtful that observation is informationally bounded, for there seems to be no a priori limit on what we can be taught to report on spontaneously and reliably. It is doubtful that knowledge of how things appear constitutes an autonomous stratum of knowledge, autonomous in the sense that we could know any amount about how things appear to us but nothing about how they are. It is doubtful too that we can learn anything by observation without being already in possession of an extensive body of collateral knowledge. More generally, there are reasons to think that, if we did not have many true beliefs, and many reliable methods for acquiring more, we could not be believers at all. That is to say, we could not be believers unless we were knowers.

I am not going to defend these views here: obviously not—we would be here for ever. My point in alluding to them is to throw into sharper relief the central idea of the SG strategy, which is that the intelligibility of the sceptic’s demand for a fully general understanding of our knowledge of the world cannot be taken as given. This demand makes sense if we think of knowledge in a certain way. But if we think of it in a different way, the sceptic’s question looks like a bad question, as bad as a demand for a science of things that happen on Tuesdays.

If we become suspicious of the generality of “philosophical” questions about knowledge, we are led to a view of knowledge and justification that can reasonably be called “contextualist”. It is contextualist in the sense that it holds that all epistemic questions arise in a definite informational and methodological context, where not everything is up for grabs. This contextualist conception is related to the view of knowledge gestured at by Neurath’s well-known metaphor of the boat. Neurath likens our belief system to a boat in which we are always at sea. We can repair or modify any plank, but only
by standing on others. There is no philosophical dry dock, where we could take the whole thing to pieces. But it may be that even Neurath’s metaphor may be too concessive. It is not clear that, we can always fiddle with just any plank. Wittgenstein argues that, in particular situations, there are beliefs that we cannot even intelligibly call in question. If he is right about this, the contextual limitations on doubting and justifying may be even more severe than Neurath’s metaphor suggests.  

I said “informational and methodological” because one important source of constraint on doubting is the direction of inquiry. In a particular context of inquiry or epistemic appraisal, some things are exempted from doubt because calling them into question would change the subject. This does not, of course, make them indubitable. But as long as we are concerned to investigate a particular issue, they remain off the table. In my terminology, they have the status, relative to a particular type of investigation, of methodological necessities.

We can use this idea of a body of methodological necessities as constitutive of particular forms of theoretical inquiry to further illuminate the SG strategy’s approach to the traditional epistemological project. The key idea is that “doing epistemology” enjoys no exemption from the stricture that theoretical questions always arise in some definite methodological context Soi-disant naïf, the sceptic thinks that, in the course of philosophical reflection, he has discovered a fundamental fact about—which of course turns out to be a fatal deficiency in—our “epistemic situation”. This is that all our knowledge of the world depends ultimately on “experience” (understood as a generic, informationally bounded and autonomous source of knowledge). But all he has really brought to light is how, as a matter of methodological necessity, we must conceive of knowledge if we are to think that he has presented us with a possible form of inquiry. What he thinks of as our epistemic situation is just his own theoretical preconceptions in disguise, preconceptions that are far from obviously correct.

Having explored the two contextualist strategies, I will try to explain why I think that the SG strategy is to be preferred.

5. How Interesting?

A good diagnosis of scepticism needs to deal with an interesting form of scepticism: scepticism that is both general and radical. Both strategies acknowledge the generality of the threat of scepticism. But what about scepticism’s radical character? The SG approach easily accommodates it: in reflecting on knowledge of the world in general, we are forced to recognize that the ultimate basis for such knowledge is no basis at all. But what about the HS strategy? It seems that, in the nature of the case, the HS strategy only applies to high standards scepticism, which is too weak to be
interesting. The radically sceptical worry is not that we lack knowledge by extreme philosophical standards, but that we lack knowledge even by the most relaxed everyday standards. Sceptics take themselves to have put this issue on the table, and since the HS strategy cannot explain how or why, it is diagnostically inadequate.

We might be tempted to make an even stronger claim. In crediting us with everyday knowledge, HS theorists take it for granted that everyday knowledge, even if it doesn’t live up to the strictest philosophical standards, is still knowledge. So at a minimum, they take it for granted that our everyday epistemic procedures are not wildly unreliable. What gives them the right to assume this? Isn’t our commitment to the reliability of ordinary epistemic procedures exactly what sceptics call in question? Lacking a diagnosis of radical scepticism, the HS approach to everyday knowledge simply confronts the sceptic with our ordinary beliefs.

While, at first, this line of objection may seem powerful—certainly, it used to seem so to me—the question of whether the HS strategy deals with radical scepticism is complex. First of all, we must remember that the HS strategy does not aim to prove to the sceptic that, say, he really does have hands, or more generally that the external world really exists. Its goal is to provide a philosophical explanation, combining an account of knowledge with a diagnosis of scepticism’s deceptive appeal. To be sure, it is never sufficient simply to confront the sceptic, either with particular common-sense certainties or with a non-sceptical theory of knowledge. On the other hand, the sceptic’s attempt to undermine everyday epistemological beliefs should not worry us any more (or less) than his attempt to undermine other everyday knowledge-claims. So let us turn the tables on the sceptic and ask why he thinks that we need to justify the reliability of everyday epistemic procedures. Why, we should ask, does he suspect that they might be wildly unreliable? The answer is that he is haunted by sceptical scenarios, and the HS strategy shows that he shouldn’t be. The sceptic’s more generalized worries thus yield to the same treatment as his attack on everyday knowledge-claims concerning particular matters of fact. So, the reliabilist element in the HS strategy allows for everyday knowledge, while the contextualist element insulates that knowledge from the corrosive effects of sceptical reflections, while explaining their appeal.

In the second place, we must remember that a satisfactory diagnosis need only give a plausible account of how a sceptic might think that he has argued for radical scepticism, even if he hasn’t. The HS strategy easily meets this requirement. Sceptical arguments work by exploiting unacknowledged shifts in epistemic standards. In this way, they appear to falsify everyday knowledge-claims, entered at everyday standards. Of course, they do not really do so; and if we keep track of contextual standard-shifts, we see that everyday knowledge-claims remain true at everyday standards; they appear to turn false, but only because sceptical arguments, by making remote
defeaters salient, change the context of appraisal. However, if we fail to bear in mind the ways in which epistemic standards shift with context—which is easy to do, when the shift takes place within the course of a single argument—we are liable to fall prey to an illusion of having argued for radical scepticism.

We can see, then, that while it might seem obvious that a “high standards” diagnosis can deal only with high standards scepticism, the high standards approach has considerable defensive resources. Nevertheless, I do not find the defence just given fully satisfying. My worry is that the diagnosis of radical scepticism just given makes sceptics (and philosophers who take scepticism seriously) too confused. Sceptics are perfectly well aware that everyday knowledge-claims are not held to “philosophical” standards. What they deny is that this insulates them from philosophical criticism. What they claim that we discover, in the context of philosophical reflection, is that ordinary knowledge-claims somehow fall short even in everyday contexts. Somehow, their failure to meet the extraordinary standards that we are inclined to impose when doing philosophy reveals some defect that they carry with them even in everyday situations. Sceptics make this claim in full awareness of the fact that there are, or seem at first to be, stark differences between philosophical and everyday evaluation. The conclusion they draw is that what passes for knowledge in everyday situations is really only “knowledge for all (or perhaps some) practical purposes”. Philosophical reflection thus reveals that everyday “knowledge” is in some way deeply defective, even in its own terms. This sense of a deep and pervasive defect in our epistemic position may be illusory; but it needs explaining and, in my view, the HS strategy doesn’t do an adequate job.

6. Raising the Standards or Changing the Subject?

Doubts about whether the HS strategy deals convincingly with radical scepticism lead naturally to questions about whether that strategy offers an adequate account of what happens when we “go philosophical”. According to the HS strategy, going philosophical raises (to extreme levels) the standards for attributing or claiming knowledge. If all we mean by this claim is that, when doing philosophy, or at least the kind of philosophy that involves dwelling on sceptical hypotheses, we are apt to impose standards for knowing that are difficult—perhaps impossible—to meet, the claim is obviously, even trivially, true. But I have argued that HS theorists mean something more. They are inclined to see sceptical doubts as essentially continuous with ordinary doubts, the only difference being that they encompass error-possibilities that are too remote to be taken seriously in everyday situations. Call this the “Continuity Thesis”. It is an aspect of what I earlier
referred to as the HS strategy’s “tolerant attitude” towards doing (sceptical) epistemology.

The general picture is that the severity of standards for knowing is directly proportional to the remoteness of the defeaters that command our attention. As we come to take seriously ever more remote defeaters, the standards for knowledge go up. We are thus invited to think of defeaters as located on a scale that runs from Pressing to Hyper-remote. In terms of the guidebook case:

**Pressing.** The guidebook was published several years ago and is likely to contain information that is out of date.

**Remote.** Although the guidebook is up to date, in a fit of pique the museum director has deliberately forwarded false information to the publisher.

**Very Remote.** Companies publishing guidebooks have been infiltrated by members of an underground group bent on undermining the world economy. Part of their plan to disrupt tourism, the world’s number one industry, involves corrupting the information in popular guidebooks. As a result, most recently published guidebooks contain substantial inaccuracies.

**Hyper-remote.** There is no guidebook; there is no museum: I’m a brain in a vat.

There are reasons to be suspicious of this picture.

First, if the Continuity Thesis were true, we should expect that, in general, less remote defeaters would be more worrying because easier to take seriously. This doesn’t seem to be true. In the right frame of mind, sceptical scenarios seem interesting, important and distinctly disturbing. The story about the global conspiracy to undermine the tourist industry seems merely silly. This is my intuitive reaction anyway. It suggests to me that the epistemic peculiarity of sceptical scenarios—the fact that we are tempted to think that we cannot know them not to obtain, because they involve systematic deception—is much more important than, and, in the right context, over-ride, their remoteness (= commonsense implausibility). This in turn suggests that more is going on than a simple raising of standards.

Second, standards can be raised indefinitely within particular investigative disciplines without our ever getting close to considering sceptical defeaters. Take historical research: a particular documentary source may support a claim I want to make; but I may suspect that source of bias and decide to look for further evidence before committing myself. And even if I find such evidence, I may still not be satisfied. The more distrustful I am of sources, the more I insist on corroboration, the higher my standards. But if I start worrying about Bertrand Russell’s sceptical scenario, according to which the world came into being five minutes ago complete with deceptive evidence of great antiquity, am I now being hyper-rigorous about my historical sources?
Again, my intuitive reaction is to say "No". I have stopped doing history and started doing sceptical epistemology. And while both subjects can be done sloppily or rigorously, the epistemologist is not by vocation more scrupulous than the historian. The suggestion is that when we pass from history to epistemology, we do not so much raise the standards as change the subject. And the same holds true when we abandon informal everyday contexts for the context of philosophical reflection.

The SG strategy accommodates these intuitions seamlessly. Reflecting on knowledge in general is a special undertaking, informed by its own theoretical commitments. Those commitments revolve around a particular conception of generic sources of knowledge. Sceptical defeaters are interesting because they are themselves generic: they undermine vast swathes of knowledge, if they undermine anything. To engage in sceptical epistemology is not to raise the standards but to change the subject.

In support of this view, we should recall Fogelin's point that, when doing epistemology, we do not just acknowledge sceptical possibilities: we *dwell on* them. Fogelin's remark, surely correct, suggests that, in the context of philosophical reflection, sceptical possibilities have a special salience. This fits in well with the fact, noted above, that (in the right frame of mind) we take them *more* seriously than the average remote defeater. Prioritizing the generality of the quest for philosophical understanding explains why this is so. The attempt to understand knowledge in general gives the possibility of error in general a special interest.

Noticing that the generic character of sceptical defeaters is more important than their remoteness should lead us to wonder whether talk of remoteness is a good idea at all. After all, they are "remote" in the sense of outlandishly unlikely, given our commonsense and scientific picture of the world. But the radical sceptic doubts our entitlement to that picture. From the sceptic’s standpoint, the question of whether sceptical hypotheses are unlikely to be true, given our ultimate epistemic resources, is precisely what is at issue.

Part of what is intended by describing sceptical possibilities as "remote" is that the situations they describe are drastically different from the way we take the world to be. But appeals to similarity (or difference) are always dangerous. To be sure, sceptical hypotheses describe worlds that are factually distant from the world as we ordinarily conceive it. But this does not worry the sceptic. We must remember that the sceptic thinks that, in the course of philosophical reflection, he discovers something about our underlying—by which he means fixed and permanent—epistemic position. This is that, when it comes to knowing about the world around us, in the end experience is all we have to go on. This is so in both "normal" and "sceptical" worlds. So while sceptical worlds may be factually remote, along the dimension that really matters—similarity of epistemic position—they are not remote at all. The SG strategy acknowledges this. It explains the special salience of sceptical hypotheses. But the cost of their special
salience is that the sceptic does more than raise the standards: he changes the subject. Philosophical appraisal is radically discontinuous with everyday epistemic assessment.

7. Too Concessive

The conclusion reached in the previous section leads to my final reason for thinking that the SG strategy is preferable to the HS alternative. This is that it is much less concessive. Whereas the HS strategist is apt to concede that we do not have knowledge by “philosophical standards”, the SG theorist takes a much harder line.

The HS strategy explains why scepticism seems right by suggesting that, in the rarefied atmosphere of philosophical reflection, scepticism is right. It may seem that the SG strategy makes the same claim. However, we should distinguish two forms that this claim can take. We may agree (weak claim) that the sceptic is conditionally correct. That is, with “philosophical” standards in play, we lose all our knowledge of the world. Thus if there is nothing objectionable about those standards, the sceptic triumphs, albeit only in the context of philosophical reflection. But if we see nothing wrong with the sceptic’s standards, we will conclude that the sceptic is unconditionally correct, though again only in the extraordinary context of doing epistemology. To take this line is to offer what I called a “pure insulation” approach to scepticism.

The SG strategy is much less concessive. The whole point of this strategy is to suggest that there is something fishy about the sceptic’s standards, so that scepticism is not correct even in the context of philosophical reflection. That is to say, the sort of epistemology that requires us to dwell on sceptical hypotheses is not a well thought-out theoretical enterprise. To give it up would be no loss. It would be like doing without a science of things that happen on Tuesdays. If the aim of philosophical explanation is to get rid of scepticism completely (or as completely as possible), then other things being equal, a less concessive approach is to be preferred.

All the reasons for preferring the SG strategy circle around this one. Explaining how sceptical doubts acquire a radical character, and why becoming prey to such doubts is not best thought of in terms of a simple raising of standards, brought us back repeatedly to the peculiar theoretical underpinning of what Stroud calls the traditional epistemological project. There is a kind of scepticism here. But it is not philosophical scepticism. Rather, it is scepticism about the traditional epistemological project. To explain in a convincing way just how this project is theoretically defective would be a long and complicated affair. Let me just say that to give such an
explanation we would have to go beyond epistemological questions narrowly conceived, to engage issues about thought and meaning.\textsuperscript{18}

I cannot undertake such an inquiry here. What I do want to claim, however, is this: that in virtue of its tolerant attitude to “doing epistemology”, the HS strategy discourages us from going down what strikes me as the most promising avenue of anti-sceptical thinking: theoretical diagnosis, the investigation of the sceptic’s rich body of theoretical preconceptions.

Scepticism is a problem because, while wholly unacceptable (and thus a substantive threat), it presents itself as wholly intuitive. The lesson of theoretical diagnosis is that it cannot be both. \textit{Nihil ex nihilo fit}. In philosophy as in life, you need some to get some.

Notes


4. To be sure, there was a time when less radical forms of scepticism were important: for example, when knowledge properly so-called was thought to demand demonstrative certainty. But since we no longer think of knowledge this way, these forms of scepticism are no longer that interesting.
7. This point really needs a lot more argument. When we encounter sceptical arguments for the first time, we may be already dimly familiar with them (particularly these days, when the brain-in-vat scenario has invaded popular culture). More than that, we are introduced to them by instructors who are thoroughly familiar with them and know how to dramatize the problems. So it could be argued that the “intuitiveness” of sceptical arguments and problems is partly an artifact of how we learn about them. But even if this is so, there are limits. Not every problem can be made to look intuitive. There must be something about sceptical arguments that lends itself to this kind of treatment.
9. Hume thought that, in the end, we are saved from scepticism only by “carelessness and inattention”. See *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Selby-Bigge, revised by Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), Bk. 1, Conclusion.
11. In making this argument, I mean to correct an impression that *Unnatural Doubts* makes on some readers, namely, that my own anti-sceptical strategy is fundamentally one of insulation. It is true, I think, that there are places in *Unnatural Doubts* where I sound more concessive than I should. I am thinking particularly of the Conclusion, where I discuss the “instability of knowledge”: its apparent tendency to evaporate under the philosopher’s searching gaze. Robert Brandom takes me to task for being overly concessive in “Fighting Skepticism with Skepticism: Supervaluational Epistemology, Semantic Autonomy, and Natural Kind Skepticism,” *Facta Philosophica* (2000), pp. 163–178. Even there, however, my more carefully stated view is the instability of knowledge that the sceptic can derive from his philosophical reflections. But it would be wrong to suppose that I take a tolerant attitude towards the traditional epistemological project. But an appearance of tolerance is created, not just by my willingness to at least contemplate the possibility that knowledge may be unstable, but by my reluctance to declare either sceptical doubts (or traditional epistemology) unintelligible, as opposed to loaded by (dubious) theoretical preconceptions. I retain this reluctance, though I acknowledge that the traditional epistemological project is freighted by theoretical ideas about meaning, which complicates the question of scepticism’s ultimate intelligibility.
14. This commitment to an unchanging (and unchangeable) epistemic position is an articulation of what I call “epistemological realism”.
15. On Descartes’s originality, see my “Descartes and the Metaphysics of Doubt” in A.O. Rorty, ed., *Essays on Descartes’ “Meditations”* (Berkeley: University of


17. In a somewhat indirect way, Keith DeRose notices this problem. It comes up in connection with a counter-example, offered by Nozick himself, to a simple subjunctive conditionals account of knowledge. Nozick notices that a person’s belief can fail to be sensitive because, if it were false, the person’s way of determining whether it was true would also change. DeRose suggests that, in determining the range of worlds across which S’s belief needs to be sensitive, we should place “heavy emphasis . . . upon similarity with respect to the method of belief-formation utilized by S” (“Solving the Skeptical Problem,” p. 21). I think that this concession seriously complicates the HS strategy’s response to scepticism. For my own take on Nozick’s difficulties, see Unnatural Doubts, ch. 8.