1. TWO KINDS OF CONTEXTUALISM

Keith DeRose defines epistemological contextualism as “the position that the truth-conditions of knowledge ascribing and 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” (DeRose, 1999, p. 187). As he notes, there are several competing versions of this general view. For example subject contextualism and attributor contextualism divide over whether the shifting standards that a person must meet to count as knowing are set by the context of that person or by that of whoever is describing him as knowing or not knowing. De Rose argues forcefully in favour of the attributor (DeRose, 1999, pp. 190–191). However, subject and attributor are closely related. According to both views, the standards for (truly) saying of a person that (s)he knows that \( P \) can be more or less severe depending on the (subject’s or attributor’s) conversational context. Thus both are versions of conversational contextualism. Indeed, both are versions of what I call simple conversational contextualism (SCC). I shall say more about what I mean by this in the next section, where I articulate the position in more detail.

Conversation contextualism contrasts importantly with what DeRose calls structural contextualism (DeRose, 1999, p. 190). On this view, hints of which can be found in Austin and Wittgenstein, justification (hence knowledge) presupposes a definite issue context. Proponents of structural contextualism tend to see it as an alternative to foundationalism and coherentism. DeRose thinks that it is better seen as a (non-standard) version of foundationalism. Either way, structural contextualism must be distinguished from SCC, since the latter implies no view about the structure of knowledge or justification. I have my doubts about this. Accordingly, I shall adopt more neutral terminology and call DeRose’s structural contextualism issue contextualism.
Do these two forms of contextualism have more than a name in common? I think they do.

First, both sorts of contextualism are committed to the following generic claim about knowledge:

(C) The standards for (truly) attributing (or claiming) knowledge are not fixed but vary (somehow) with the context in which knowledge is attributed (or claimed).

Furthermore, both exploit C in their approach to scepticism. Indeed, they offer competing articulations of the Basic Contextualist Diagnosis:

(BCD) The sceptic reaches his paradoxical results by exploiting the context-sensitivity of epistemic standards. Sceptical conclusions seem plausible because the very practice of sceptical argumentation or “doing epistemology” tends to set epistemic standards so as to make such conclusions true. However, this fact does not invalidate everyday knowledge-claims and attributions, which remain true at everyday (“non-philosophical”) standards.

If BCD is correct, the sceptic’s mistake is to think that he has discovered, while doing epistemology, that knowledge is impossible. In fact, the most that he has discovered is that knowledge is impossible while doing epistemology.

This is an attractive thought. Scepticism is a problem because while, on the one hand, sceptical conclusions are difficult (if not impossible) to accept, sceptical arguments seem (or can be made to seem) intuitively compelling. BCD accounts for this smoothly. As Hume saw, while scepticism leaves us cold in everyday situations, it tends to triumph in the study (the site of “doing epistemology”). But as Hume did not see, the context-bound appeal of sceptical claims reflects the logic of knowledge-attributions, not the psychology of belief. This isn’t quite right, for this way of putting things is too concessive for issue contextualists. More of this as my argument proceeds.

So much for common ground. The topic of this paper is the differences in how attributor contextualists and issue contextualists flesh out BCD. I will explore this issue by focussing on a particular question. According to these different articulations of contextualism, why do we take sceptical arguments seriously? In particular, why do we take seriously sceptical hypotheses (that I am a victim of an Evil Deceiver, or a brain in a vat), given that all of us regard them as completely outlandish? I shall argue that issue contextualism has a much better answer to this question. As a result, issue contextualism offers an anti-sceptical strategy that promises much deeper insights into how scepticism arises and how it can be avoided.