ABSTRACT. Externalism about knowledge commits one to a modest form of contextualism: whether one knows depends (or may depend) on circumstances (context) of which one has no knowledge. Such modest contextualism requires the rejection of the KK Principle (If S knows that P, then S knows that S knows that P) - something most people would want to reject anyway - but it does not require (though it is compatible with) a rejection of closure. Radical contextualism, on the other hand, goes a step farther and relativizes knowledge not just to the circumstances of the knower, but to the circumstances of the person attributing knowledge. I reject this more radical form of contextualism and suggest that it confuses (or that it can, at least, be avoided by carefully distinguishing) the relativity in what S is said to know from the relativity in whether S knows what S is said to know.

1. INTRODUCTION

I am an externalist about knowledge.¹ Factual knowledge depends on conditions – they are usually external – the knower has (or may have) no knowledge of. I look in the cookie jar and see – and thus know – that there are cookies there. This piece of perceptual knowledge depends on there not being potentially misleading circumstances present. If, unknown to me, people sometimes put fake cookies in this jar, objects I cannot distinguish from real cookies, then, unknown to me, even when there are cookies there, I would not be able to tell, just by looking, that there are cookies in the jar. I would still see the cookies in the jar, but that wouldn’t be good enough to know there were cookies in the jar. The knowledge I obtain simply by looking in the jar depends on the absence of a condition I do not know to be absent.

I may, of course believe that there are no potentially misleading circumstances present. And this background belief may be entirely reasonable. Such a belief may be necessary for me to come to believe, just by looking, and, therefore, to see, that there are cookies in the jar. But the point remains: I do not have to know that no such condition exists for me to see that there are cookies in the jar. If I had to know that no such condition existed in order to see whether there are
cookies in the jar, there would be precious little, if anything, I could ever come to know by seeing. If there is, unknown to us, a Cartesian demon at work in the universe, deceiving us in random, unpredictable ways, we do not know much, if anything, about the world. Even when we are right (the demon doesn’t fool us all the time), we don’t know. Skepticism is true. Externalism tells us that whether or not skepticism is true, whether or not we know, depends not on our knowing there is no such demon, but on there not being one. That is something we may not know at all. It isn’t even clear that we could know it.

Externalism can be expressed in many different ways. The way I have found it convenient to express it is in terms of information. Knowledge requires information, but whether or not a signal carries information is not itself information the signal carries. You can get the information you need to know without getting the information that what you are getting is information. Instruments that give us information – and, therefore, knowledge – about the quantities they are designed to measure do not provide us with information that what they deliver is information. A broken, miscalibrated, or malfunctioning speedometer can look and behave in exactly the way a reliable speedometer behaves. The same is true of the experiences we use in forming perceptual beliefs. We come to know what is happening in our world – we see, hear, and feel what is happening – when our perceptual systems give us information about the world. We don’t also have to know that that is what they are giving us. If we had to know this, if, in order to get the information that we were going 60 mph, we always had to get information that the instrument we relied on was, in fact, delivering this information, we would be on the slippery slope to skepticism. We’d never know how fast we were going.

I’m not here going to defend externalism about knowledge. It seems to me pretty obvious. Indeed, if one is going to avoid skepticism, it seems to me inevitable. But, as I say, I’m not here interested in defending this claim. I’ve done that elsewhere (Dretske, 1969, 1971, 1981). I simply accept this general account of knowledge for purposes of exploring its implications. I’m particularly interested in what it tells us about contextualism.

2. MODEST CONTEXTUALISM

Depending on what one means by contextualism, externalism commits one to – indeed, it is simply a form of – contextualism. Whether Clyde, who believes that \( P \), knows that \( P \), depends on conditions –