1. The Skeptical Paradox

1.1. Reminders

The Skeptical *Paradox* highlights that the following three propositions are inconsistent with each other: (1) I know that *o*, (2) I don't know that *not-SH*, (3) If I know that *o*, then I know that *not-SH*.

- Here *o* is an ordinary proposition about the external world (e.g. I have hands) and *SH* is a skeptical hypothesis (e.g. I'm a brain in a vat.)

The Skeptical *Argument* resolves this paradox by rejecting the first claim, i.e.

S1. I don't know that *not-SH*. (2, above)

S2. <u>If I know that *o*, then I know that *not-SH*. (3, above)</u>

SC. ∴ I don't know that *o*. (not-1, above. a.k.a. the Skeptical *Conclusion*; from 2, 3)

1.2. Three anti-skeptical strategies

We can know that skeptical hypotheses are false (not-S1)

It is possible to know to have ordinary knowledge while not knowing that skeptical hypotheses are false (not-S2)

The Skeptical Paradox is illusory; careful analysis of (1), (2), (3) shows that they're actually consistent.

2. Relevant Alternatives, Infallibilism, and Closure

2.1. The Big Picture

Consider the strategy in which we deny that knowledge of ordinary propositions requires knowledge of the falsity of skeptical hypotheses. (not-S2)

RA1. If one knows that *o*, then one only needs to know that relevant alternatives to *o* are false.

RA2. <u>Skeptical hypotheses (SH) aren't relevant alternatives to *o*.</u>

not-S2. ∴ It is possible that one knows that *o*, even if one does not know that *not-SH*. (from RA1, RA2)

However, note how *plausible* S2 seems in the Skeptical Argument. If one wants to have a very compelling position that S2 is *false*, one should consider possible arguments *for* S2, and show that they're wrong. There are two possible arguments for S2: the Infallibilist Argument and the Closure Argument.

2.2. Infallibilism

(Infallibilism) If one knows that *o*, then one knows that *all* alternatives to *o* are false.
<u>Skeptical hypotheses (SH) are alternatives to *o*.</u>

S2. ∴ If one knows that *o*, then one knows that all skeptical hypotheses are false.

Thus, one might "diagnose" the skeptical argument as resting on Infallibilism, which is a position that requires further argument. After all, intuitively, we think of skeptical hypotheses as *irrelevant* to our ordinary knowledge-seeking activities, and also don't think that knowledge requires the elimination of *irrelevant* alternatives.

2.3. Closure and S2

A less controversial basis for S2 is the "Closure" Principle:

For all people *S*, and statements ϕ and ψ, if *S* knows that ϕ, and *S* also knows that ϕ entails ψ, then *S* knows that ψ.

- Ex. Khalifa knows that *Frida is a dog,* and also knows that *if Frida is a dog, then Frida is a mammal*. Is it **necessary** that Khalifa **knows** that *Frida is a mammal*? If you answer this question affirmatively, then you accept the Closure Principle. If you answer this question affirmatively, then you reject the Closure Principle (CP).

CP. For all *S*, ϕ, and ψ, if *S* knows that ϕ, and *S* also knows that ϕ entails ψ, then *S* knows that <u>ψ.</u>

1. ∴ If *S* knows that *o* and *S* also knows that *o* entails *not-SH*, then *S* knows that *not-SH*. (from CP)
2. Any *S* who understands *o* and *SH* knows that *o* entails *not-SH* (e.g. If I have hands, then I'm <u>not a brain in a vat.)</u>

S2. ∴ If *S* knows that *o,* then *S* knows that *not-SH*. (From 1,2)

CP is very plausible, and we use it all the time to advance our knowledge. So critics of S2 must show that the CP is implausible when the entailments in question concern irrelevant alternatives.

2.4. Zebras!

1. It is possible that I know that *the animals in the pen are zebras* and also know that *if the animals in the pen are zebras, then they are not mules cleverly disguised to look like zebras, and at the same time*, but don't know that *the animals in the pen are not mules cleverly disguised to look like zebras*. (otherwise, I would have to check with the zoo authorities, examine the animals extremely closely, etc.)

Not-CP. ∴ There are some *S*, ϕ, and ψ, such that *S* knows that ϕ, and *S* also knows that ϕ entails ψ, but *S* does not know that ψ. (From 1)

More generally, if CP were true, it would place too high a demand on our knowledge even in *non-skeptical* cases. So, the skeptic cannot claim to be using everyday features of our knowledge-seeking practices.

3. Sensitivity Accounts and the Denial of Closure

However, we still don't have a very precise notion of relevance. At best we know that relevance has to be something less than what Closure requires.

One suggestion is that if one knows, then one's belief must "track the truth" or be "sensitive" to changes in the facts.

- Ex. Suppose that I know that there are 15 students in my class. Then, had there been 14 students or 16 students, I would not have believed that there are 15 students in my class.

Generalizing, we get a version of Sensitivity Principle (SP): If *S* knows that ϕ, then *S* has a true belief that ϕ, and in the least remote possibility where ϕ is false, *S* does not believe that ϕ[1].

A possibility is *remote* if it requires a massive departure from how things actually are.

- Ex. It is *not* a remote possibility that my facial hair is a millimeter longer than it actually is; it *is* a remote possibility that my facial hair is a kilometer longer than it actually is. Possibilities can be more or less remote; thus my facial hair being 6 centimeters longer falls somewhere in between the other two possibilities.

This explains why skeptical hypotheses are irrelevant alternatives: they're *very* remote possibilities.

- Ex. if I know that I have hands, then presumably the least remote possibility in which I don't have hands is not when I'm a brain in a vat, but when my hands are, e.g. amputated or severed. However, if my hands were amputated or severed, then I would not believe that I have hands.

This also explains why CP fails: the least remote possibility in which I don't have hands is not nearly as remote as the least remote possibility in which I'm a brain in a vat. Hence, even though my having hands entails that I'm not a brain in a vat, it doesn't thereby follow that my *knowing* that I have hands entails my *knowing* that I'm not a brain in a vat.

4. Problems with Sensitivity Accounts

4.1. Abominable conjunctions

1. If CP is false, then sentences such as the following should be acceptable to most competent English speakers: "I know that I have hands, but I don't know that I'm not a brain in a vat."
2. Such sentences are not acceptable to most competent English speakers.
3. ∴ CP is true. (From 1,2)

4.2. Problems with Remote Possibilities

1. If skeptical hypotheses are not very remote possibilities, then, if SP is true, we do not know ordinary propositions.
2. If SP is true and we do not know ordinary propositions, then SP does not solve the Skeptical Paradox.
3. ∴ If skeptical hypotheses are not very remote possibilities, then SP does not solve the Skeptical Paradox. (From 1,2)

---

[1] Dretske actually uses talk of "possible worlds." This is a technical notion; don't worry about this.

4. If skeptical hypotheses are very remote possibilities, then skepticism is implausible even if SP is false.
5. If skepticism is implausible even if SP is false, then SP is unnecessary for solving the Skeptical Paradox.
6. ∴ If skeptical hypotheses are very remote possibilities, then SP is unnecessary for solving the Skeptical Paradox. (From 4,5)
7. Either skeptical hypotheses are very remote possibilities or they are not.
8. ∴ SP either does not solve the Skeptical Paradox or is unnecessary for doing so. (From 3,6,7)

4.3. Problems about relevance

1. If SP is true, then some relevant alternatives (most notably skeptical hypotheses!) are remote possibilities.
2. All relevant alternatives are non-remote possibilities.
3. ∴ SP is not true. (From 1,2)
4. If all relevant alternatives are non-remote possibilities, then the Closure Principle is true.
5. ∴ The Closure Principle is true. (From 2,4)

5. Semantic Contextualism

Recall that there were three anti-skeptical strategies. One of them claimed that the Skeptical Paradox isn't really a paradox. How does that work? Roughly, it holds that "knows" is a contextually-sensitive word, like "tall." Here's how the analogy works:

In ordinary contexts, I know that I have hands.	In contexts in which I'm compared with my other family members, I'm tall.
In skeptical contexts, I don't know that I have hands.	In contexts in which I'm compared with basketball players, I'm not tall.

Just as there's no contradiction in saying that I'm tall in one context and not tall in another, there's no contradiction in the Skeptical Paradox: (1) I know that *o* (in ordinary contexts), (2) I don't know that *not-SH* (in skeptical contexts); and (3) If I know that *o*, then I know that *not-SH* (in any single context.)

5.1. The Contextualist's Argument

1. Semantic contextualism provides the best explanation of the following three facts:
   I. Ascriptions of knowledge to people in conversational contexts in which skeptical error-possibilities have been raised seem improper.
   II. In 'ordinary' conversational contexts in which no skeptical error-possibilities are in play, it seems perfectly appropriate to ascribe knowledge to people.
   III. All that may change when one moves from a non-skeptical conversational context to a skeptical context are mere conversational factors.
2. The best explanation of any fact is true.
3. ∴ Semantic contextualism is true. (From 1,2)

5.2. What is Semantic Contextualism?

Core idea: The strength of the epistemic position that one needs to be in so as to count as knowing varies according to one's conversational context.

What's an epistemic position? If *S* is in a strong epistemic position with respect to proposition *p*, then *S* has a belief as to whether *p* is true which matches the fact as to whether *p* is true, for all non-remote possibilities.

What makes one epistemic position stronger than another? The more remote these possibilities become, the stronger *S's* epistemic position.

How do conversational contexts change? The introduction of a statement *q* changes the conversational context if: (a) *q* was previously implicit and is subsequently made explicit, and (b) *q*'s falsehood is a more remote possibility than any statement that was explicit prior to *q*'s being made explicit, i.e. *q* is more demanding than these other statements.

Ex. Consider the following to be facts about the actual world:

p = I'm having dinner with my brother.

q = The garden gate is closed.

Presumably, it would require a bigger departure from actuality for me not to be having dinner with my brother than for the garden gate to be open. According to the preceding,

- If I know that *I'm having dinner with my brother*, then the least remote possibility in which the I'm **not** having dinner with my brother is also a possibility in which I don't believe that *I'm having dinner with my brother*.
- If I know that *the garden gate is closed*, then the least remote possibility in which I'm **not** having dinner with my brother **and** the garden gate is **open** is also a possibility in which I don't believe that *the garden gate is closed*.

5.3. Explaining the Facts

Explanation of Fact I: Suppose that a skeptical hypothesis is an *implicit* statement in this context. In the least remote possibility in which I'm not eating dinner with my brother (e.g. because he cancels), I'm still not a brain in a vat. Furthermore, there is no possibility less remote than this in which I falsely believe that I'm not a brain in a vat. So, in all the relevant possible worlds, my beliefs as to whether I'm a brain in a vat track with the facts. So, I **know** that I'm not a brain in a vat.

Explanation of Fact II: If, by contrast, a skeptical hypothesis is made *explicit*, then it raises the epistemic standards. It's now the most remote possibility in the context, and furthermore, if we were brains in vats, we wouldn't believe that *we're brains in vats*. So, our beliefs don't track with the relevant facts, and we **don't know** that *we're not brains in vats*.

Explanation of Fact III: What's the difference between contextualist treatment of I and II? Just that certain things are made *explicit*. Thus, the contextualist shows that mere changes in conversational contexts can affect whether you know something or not.

6. Problems with Semantic Contextualism

6.1. Semantic contextualism concedes too much to the skeptic

1. Even if contextualism is true, there is no way to tell whether:
   a. The skeptic's standards are high and invariant, and everyday standards merely reflect loose talk, i.e. if skepticism is true; or
   b. Epistemic standards are context-sensitive, and we thereby do have knowledge in everyday contexts, i.e. if contextualism is true.
2. If there is no way to tell whether skepticism or contextualism is true, then we don't know whether we know anything.
3. <u>If we don't whether we know anything, then skepticism is true.</u>
4. ∴ Even if contextualism is true, skepticism is true. (From 1-3)

6.2. Semantic contextualism does not explain Fact I

1. If contextualism is true, then we know that skeptical hypotheses are false in everyday contexts only if they are implicit.
2. If we know that skeptical hypotheses are false in everyday contexts, then this knowledge is acquired empirically.
3. If knowledge that *p* is acquired by leaving *p* implicit, then knowledge that *p* is not acquired <u>empirically.</u>
4. ∴ Contextualism is not true. (From 1-3)

6.3. Semantic contextualism is unnecessary

1. If contextualism is true, then in ordinary contexts we know ordinary propositions.
2. If, in ordinary contexts, we know ordinary propositions, then the Skeptical Paradox can be resolved without any additional contextualist assumptions, i.e. semantic contextualism is <u>unnecessary for resolving the Skeptical Paradox.</u>
3. ∴ Even if semantic contextualism is true, then it's unnecessary for resolving the Skeptical Paradox. (From 1-3)

7. Neo-Wittgensteinian Epistemology

7.1. General Template

1. A *hinge proposition* is any statement that does not require empirical support, cannot be coherently doubted, and that is a presupposed by knowledge of ordinary propositions.
2. The denials of skeptical hypotheses are hinge propositions.
3. ∴ The denial of skeptical hypotheses does not require evidential support and cannot be coherently doubted.

Main challenge: How are hinge propositions possible?

7.2. Wright

1. If I'm warranted in believing things purely through reflection, then I'm warranted in believing that *I'm not dreaming*.
2. Skeptics are warranted in believing things purely through reflection (including that if *they know that that o, then they know that they're not dreaming*.)
3. Skeptics are warranted in believing that *they're not dreaming*.
4. If skeptics are warranted in believing that *they're not dreaming*, then the proposition *I'm not dreaming* does not require empirical support, cannot be coherently doubted, and is a presupposed by knowledge of ordinary propositions, i.e. is a hinge proposition.
4. ∴ *I'm not dreaming* is a hinge proposition.

Question: How does knowledge of ordinary propositions support knowledge that skeptical hypotheses are false? See Neo-Mooreanism.

7.3. Williams' Inferential Contextualism

Similarities with Semantic Contextualism	*Differences with Semantic Contextualism*
Which error-possibilities are salient is a contextual matter. Closure Principle is true in a single context; apparent violations equivocate between contexts. The skeptic is right in her context; ordinary people are also right in theirs.	Contexts are individuated not by conversational features (what's explicit/implicit), but by the inferential structure of that context (what is taken as a premise/ "methodological necessity"/hinge proposition, what counts as a good explanation, which inferences are relevant, etc.) Skeptical contexts don't have *higher* standards than ordinary contexts; simply *different* standards.

1. If skepticism is true, then only statements about immediate experience (*it seems to me that p*) can justify statements about the external world (*p*).
2. If only statements about immediate experience (*it seems to me that p*) can justify statements about the external world (*p*), then *epistemological realism* is true, i.e. there is only a single, fundamental, and context-independent inferential structure for knowledge.
3. There are multiple context-dependent inferential structures for different kinds of knowledge, none of which is more fundamental than another.
4. ∴ Skepticism is not true.

8. Neo-Moorean Responses to Skepticism

8.1. General Template

1. If I know that *o*, then I know that *not-SH*.
2. I know that *o*. (not-S1)
3. ∴ I know that *not-SH*.

8.2. Safety/Anti-Luck Epistemology

How can one affirm not-S1 without begging the question against the skeptic?

Pritchard invokes the *Safety Principle: S* knows that *p* if *S's* true belief that *p* could not easily have been false.

- The only possibilities in which *S's* belief that *p* is false are remote possibilities.

This is compatible with the Closure Principle: if my belief that *p* could not easily have been false, and *p* entails *q*, then my belief that *q* could not easily have been false.

Safety accounts only treat non-remote possibilities as relevant alternatives. It thus has decided advantages over sensitivity accounts (see Section 4).
Safety accounts also do not have to capitulate anything to the skeptic, e.g. that the skeptic is correct in her own, high-standards contexts. It thus has decided advantages over semantic contextualism (see Section 6).

8.3. *Diagnosing skepticism's appeal*

Why do skeptical arguments seem so compelling if they can be refuted by such a simple or 'flat-footed' rebuttal as the Neo-Moorean's argument?
Pritchard suggests that semantic contextualism should be revised: instead of being a theory about how standards for *knowledge* change from context to context, it is better construed as a theory about how standards for making *correct assertions* about knowledge change across contexts. The skeptic exploits these "assertion maneuvers" to make it *seem* as if standards of knowledge are changing.

9. Epistemological Externalism and the New Skeptics

9.1. Unger's Infallibilism

Just as careful reflection on concepts such as *flatness* and *emptiness* reveal that nothing is, strictly speaking, *flat* or *empty*, so too does careful reflection on knowledge reveal that nothing is, strictly speaking known, because we will always fail to know that some skeptical hypotheses are false.

9.2. Nagel and the view from nowhere

1. If knowledge of the external world is possible, then we need some way of knowing that is completely free of human subjectivity.
2. <u>No way of knowing is free of human subjectivity.</u>
3. ∴ Knowledge of the external world is not possible.

9.3. Stroud and understanding

1. If it is impossible to understand our cognitive relation to the external world, then skepticism is true.
2. <u>It is impossible to understand our cognitive relation to the external world.</u>
3. ∴ Skepticism is true.

9.4. Internalism versus externalism?

1. If internalism is true, then there is some substantive necessary condition of knowledge (typically a kind of justification) that a person can know by reflection alone.
2. If knowledge that skeptical hypotheses are true has some substantive necessary condition that a person can know by reflection alone, then neither semantic contextualism nor neo-Mooreanism <u>is true.</u>
3. ∴ If internalism is true, then neither semantic contextualism nor neo-Mooreanism is true.
4. If there is some substantive necessary condition of knowledge (typically a kind of justification) that a person can know by reflection alone, then the Closure Principle is true.
5. <u>If the Closure Principle is true, then sensitivity accounts are false.</u>
6. ∴ If internalism is true, then sensitivity accounts are false.

9.5. Do externalists cheat in resolving the Skeptical Paradox?

1. We cannot know that our beliefs are safe/sensitive by reflection alone.
2. If we cannot know that our beliefs are safe/sensitive by reflection alone, then even if we know <u>because our beliefs are safe/sensitive, we do not know that we know.</u>
3. ∴ Even if externalism solves "lower-level" skeptical problems, there are "higher-level" or "meta-epistemological" problems that only internalism solves.