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# An analysis of DeRose's attributor contextualism as a response to scepticism

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**Abstract:** This paper contends that attributor contextualism, as Keith DeRose advocates, fails to effectively address the challenges of scepticism. DeRose presents compelling approaches to addressing the sceptical problem. DeRose asserts that he has resolved the sceptical problem, going beyond merely addressing the concerns of sceptics. DeRose posits that contextualism has predominantly been formulated to address scepticism. To this end, this study examines how tenable DeRose responds to the sceptical challenge. The study is noteworthy as contextualism preserves the robustness and appeal of scepticism while asserting a resolution to the sceptical challenge. Ultimately, the study concludes that DeRose's proposal falls short of providing a satisfying response to scepticism. Contextualism is self-defeating. Despite my assessment of DeRose's attributor contextualism, I believe that it is commendable that DeRose has come up with some kind of explanation for the factors that contribute to such an inclination given that knowledge attribution might be contextual.

**Keywords:** contextualism, scepticism, knowledge attribution, attributor, DeRose.

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## Introduction

Being one of the main branches of philosophy, epistemology has been bedeviled with a number of problems and issues which have been discussed as far back as Plato. These issues remain very alive and interesting, even today. One of such thriving issues in epistemology is the problem of scepticism. There have been many theories developed to surmount the challenges posed by the various forms of scepticism. The various attempts to refute scepticism have been particularly challenging because, for everything we may claim to know, there are very powerful sceptical arguments that threaten to show that one did not know after all. That notwithstanding, various attempts continue to be made to go around the challenges posed by scepticism. How adequate are these arguments in addressing the concerns of the sceptics, is a question worthy of an answer. In this paper, I will refute DeRose's contextualism by showing that DeRose's answer to scepticism is self-defeating and does not adequately address the concerns of scepticism.[2] My view is that DeRose's answer to scepticism is based on a faulty understanding of the sceptical challenge.

## Scepticism and the contextualist response

Sceptics establish their claims in a number of ways. One of the most compelling ways is by means of sceptical hypotheses.[3] These skeptical hypotheses describe situations that are subjectively indistinguishable from our normal circumstances, but if true, they would completely undermine most of the knowledge we attribute to ourselves.[4] In formulating their arguments about the scepticism of knowledge, modern sceptics draw heavily on two of Rene Descartes' strongest arguments for scepticism in his *Meditations* and Hilary Putnam's *Brain-in-a-vat (BIV)* argument.

So he would discover the fundamental principles of philosophy, Descartes puts forward *the dream argument* and *the evil demon argument* as causes for doubt, and he agrees to suspend judgment about everything to which any of the sceptical considerations apply. It is important to note that Descartes attempted to establish certainty in the beliefs we hold. That is, he set out to use sceptical arguments to give emphasis to the certainty of our knowledge claims. Thus, Descartes posits that if we examine by subjecting everything to doubt, we are likely to discover at some point if there is anything that cannot be doubted.

By employing 'methodic doubt', as he called it, Descartes simply used scepticism as a means to discover that which is certain. My point here is that, Descartes uses the dreaming hypothesis to enforce scepticism about sensory-generated beliefs about the external world, which includes his own bodily existence. Descartes argues, as cited by Springett[5], that there is a sufficient similarity between the two experiences for one who is awake and a dreamer to be routinely deceived into believing that he is awake while he is actually asleep and dreaming.[6] Another

[2] Contextualism denotes a variety of closely related epistemological positions according to which the issues of knowledge and/or justification are somehow relative to context.

[3] A sceptical hypothesis is a hypothetical situation that can be used to argue for scepticism about a particular claim or class of claims.

[4] Beebe, "Constraints on Sceptical Hypotheses."; Pritchard, "Contemporary Skepticism."

[5] Springett, 2000 Springett, "Philosophy of Dreaming."

[6] Descartes claims that the experiences in dreams could in principle be indistinguishable from waking experiences. Whatever apparent subjective differences there are between waking life and dreaming, they are insufficient

hypothesis that builds up the arguments for scepticism with a more extensive scope than the dream argument is the evil demon and BIV arguments. Briefly, according to the evil demon argument, all of our very own experiences of the world around us are manufactured by a powerful evil demon, determined to deceive us. This demon creates in us the impression that we are in a physical world, and we have certain experiences that appear to represent this world. The epistemological implication of this argument is that since there is nothing introspectively available that would allow us to claim that this supposed experience is indeed our own, it is difficult to determine what validation we have to claim to know what we say we know. Quite the same impact of the evil demon argument is attained by means of a more scientific sceptical hypothesis according to which we are a bodiless brain-in-a-vat (BIV) who have been electrochemically stimulated to have accurately the sensory experiences we have and have had. A strong argument could be made to the effect that if we were brain-in-a-vat being stimulated, we would not know. However, most of the evidence we have for claims about the external world comes from our sensory experiences. But then again in the Brain-in-a-vat scenario, we would be having the same kind of sensory experiences we are in fact having. Thus, it seems our actual sensory experiences are not proof(s) against the Brain-in-a-vat scenario. And if we have no evidences against the scenario, it seems to follow that we do not know that the Brain-in-a-vat scenario does not actually hold.[7]

Undeniably, the assumption that we are Brains-in-a-vat does not violate any physical law and the hypothesis is very consistent with everything we have experienced. Like the evil demon argument, the brain-in-a-vat argument induces scepticism in the sense that if I cannot be sure that I am not a brain-in-a-vat, then I cannot rule out the possibility that all of my beliefs about the external world or of anything I supposed I knew are false. Stated differently, if I were a brain-in-a-vat, then I would have experiences that are qualitatively identical to those of a normal perceiver. If I come to believe on the basis of some computer-stimulated experience that I am reading this text right now or I am sitting in a chair, then I am quiet mistaken. Descartes' dream and evil demon arguments and their ilk have received extensive discussions in academia.

The sceptical scenarios or hypotheses are not only logically irrefutable but psychologically inescapable. Given the various hypotheses, the sceptic finds grounds to either suspend judgement or utterly refuse any knowledge claim. These sceptical hypotheses are used in the formulation of sceptical arguments as thus:

1. You do not know that you are not in the sceptical predicament (dreaming, being deceived by an evil demon, a brain-in-a-vat, or any other).
2. If you were in that predicament, nothing in your experience would reveal to you that you were, since the experience would be identical to what you would otherwise have. But
3. If you do not know that you are not in the predicament, then you do not know anything else (about the external world, at least).[8]

In other words, keeping our focus on knowledge, where 'O' represents a proposition one would normally claim to know, and 'H' is any of the sceptical hypotheses, the sceptical argument can be formulated as thus:

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differences to gain certainty that I am not now dreaming. Therefore, one cannot be sure, for example, that the laptop I have in front of me is real or whether I am dreaming of its existence.

[7] Huemer, *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings*, 507.

[8] Luper, "The Epistemic Closure Principle."

1a. I do not know that not-H.

2a. If I do not know that not-H, then I do not know that O

3a. I do not know that not-H, thus I do not know that O

Though the sceptic's argument is simple, it is very powerful and somewhat impossible to refute. This is because it has become quite impossible to prove that not-H. It is really challenging to disprove and invalidate the possibility of any of the sceptical hypotheses especially the evil demon and/or brain-in-a-vat (BIV) hypotheses. This is the case particularly because assuming any of the sceptical scenarios were the case, one will not know anything at all. DeRose calls this argument *The Argument from Ignorance (AI)*.[9] The sceptic's arguments are valid and use premises that instinctively are true.[10]

That notwithstanding, in normal, everyday contexts, where we are not entertaining the possibility of being a BIV or any of the sceptical hypotheses, we seem to know that we have hands and we are not BIVs, making (1) and (1a) false. This then creates a puzzle. Do we or do we not know what we normally take ourselves to know: that we have hands, that we are sitting in chair, that we are reading this text, and so on? Common sense says we do; philosophical reflection tells us that we do not.[11] This is the puzzle scepticism thrive on. Nevertheless, since no one is really going to give up his belief of the external world, or other minds on the basis of some sceptical argument, some will think it is simply an idle waste of time to examine sceptical arguments. Irrespective of the supposed irrelevance of considering sceptical arguments, reflecting on them can sometimes lead us to reject some possible assumptions about the nature of knowledge. It can lead us to revise, and perhaps improve our views about the nature of knowledge and what justification requires.[12]

Contextualists have attempted to respond to the threat that is posed by the sceptical argument to our knowledge claims by suggesting two contexts[13] of knowledge. The general contextualist view is that the truth value of sentences containing the word 'know' vary from one context to another. What this means is that, a sentence of the form 'S knows (does not know) that p', may be false in one context and true in another despite a fixed subject, proposition, and evidentiary status.[14] Contextualists posit that in everyday contexts where ordinary standards are in force, we can know all sorts of things. In such a context our ordinary claims to know are correct. For example, in ordinary contexts, one can claim to know that one has hands or one is reading this text or that there are shapes and so on. However, once we begin to introduce scepticism, the standards for knowledge change. Here, we see that the contextualist attempts to establish that the context in which the sceptic makes their argument imposes different requirements for knowledge than that required by the context of our everyday claims. This means that the sceptical argument cannot be generalized to cover our everyday claims. Thus, much of the

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[9] DeRose, "Solving the Skeptical Problem," 1.

[10] Brendel and Jager, "Contextualist Approaches to Epistemology: Problems and Prospects," 145. Though it seems awkward to think that we can be BIV, it also seems that we do not know that we are not. How can we know that we are BIV even if we were?

[11] Rieber, "Skepticism and Contrastive Explanation," 189.

[12] Lemos, *An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, 133.

[13] Context, here, refers to the setting or situation in which a sentence is uttered. Context, however, for DeRose ("Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense," 189–90) and Cohen ("Contextualism, Skepticism, and the Structure of Reasons," 57) context means none other than the interests, expectations, and so forth for knowledge attribution.

[14] Rothenfluch, "Epistemic Contextualism: A Defense and Analysis," 11.

claims we make will be left intact. This is the case because the standard a subject must meet, in relation to a proposition in order for it to be correct to say that the subject knows (does not know) the proposition, changes according to context.[15] Contextualism tries to maintain a balanced treatment of scepticism and the fact that we do have some knowledge claim in everyday contexts. The contextualist response implies that scepticism is mistaken to deny common-sense kinds of knowledge that it takes itself to achieve.[16]

The contextualist response took centre stage as the anti-sceptical theory by the perspective introduced by Professor Keith DeRose. I will not be wrong to say that quite a number of epistemologists have paid attention to DeRose's contextualism because it purports to offer the best solution to the sceptical paradox. I will now try to rehearse DeRose's arguments for a better appreciation of my arguments.

DeRose's 'Contextualism: an explanation and defense' is one that explicates the position he calls 'contextualism'. He defines contextualism as:

> The position that the truth-conditions 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.[17]

He adds that what differs is the epistemic standards that the subject 'S' must meet in order for such a statement to be said to be true. What this means, as he (DeRose) posits is that, what 'S knows that *p'* needs for its truth is not only that S should have a true belief that *p* but also that S should be in a very strong epistemic position with respect to *p*. Similarly, in another context, what may be required for the truth of the same statement, in addition to S's having a true belief that *p*, is only that S meets some lower epistemic standards. In other words, like his ilk, DeRose posits that an attributor can rightly say 'S knows that *p*, while another attributor, can also rightly say 'S does not know that *p*, in a different context where a higher standard is in place, though both attributors are referring to the same S and the same *p* at the same time.[18]

DeRose's argument for contextualism is illustrated in the famous analogy known in epistemology as the "Bank Cases", which according to DeRose provides "the best grounds for accepting contextualism".[19] The 'Bank Cases' is as follows:

> Bank Case A. My wife and I are driving home on a Friday afternoon. We plan to stop at the bank on the way home to deposit our paychecks. But as we drive past the bank, we notice that the lines inside are very long, as they often are on Friday afternoons. Although we generally like to deposit our paychecks as soon as possible, it is not especially important in this case that they be deposited right away, so I suggest that we drive straight home and deposit our paychecks on Saturday morning. My wife says, 'Maybe the bank

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[15] Feldman, "Contextualism and Skepticism," 93.

[16] Wright, "Contextualism and Scepticism: Even-Handedness, Factivity and Surreptitiously Raising Standards," 5.

[17] DeRose, "Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense," 1.

[18] DeRose, and like most contextualists, appeal to the way in which ordinary speakers use 'know' in a number of everyday contexts. They also appeal to our use of intuitions about what happens in our everyday conversational contexts as prima facie support for contextualism.

[19] DeRose, "The Case for Contextualism: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context," 47. Stanley ("Modality and What Is Said," 1–2) calls it the direct argument: one of the most influential arguments favouring contextualism.

won't be open tomorrow. Lots of banks are closed on Saturdays.' I reply, 'No, I know it'll be open. I was just there two weeks ago on Saturday. It's open until noon.'

Bank Case B. My wife and I drive past the bank on a Friday afternoon, as in Case A, and notice the long lines. I again suggest that we deposit our paychecks on Saturday morning, explaining that I was at the bank on Saturday morning only two weeks ago and discovered that it was open until noon. But in this case, we have just written a very large and very important check. If our paychecks are not deposited into our checking account before Monday morning, the important check we wrote will bounce, leaving us in a very bad situation. And, of course, the bank is not open on Sunday. My wife reminds me of these facts. She then says, 'Banks do change their hours. Do you know the bank will be open tomorrow?' Remaining as confident as I was before that the bank will be open then, still, I reply, 'Well, no, I don't know. I'd better go in and make sure'.[20]

Here, when the two cases are considered separately (without the other in mind), as DeRose would want readers to assume, it seems that (without thinking about Case B), (1) "when I say that I know that the bank will be opened on Saturday in Case A, my claim is true" and it would also seem (without thinking about Case A) that (2) "when I admit that I don't know the bank will be open on Saturday in Case B, my admission is true". This is the position he defends. Like DeRose, contextualists use the likes of (1) and (2) as premises to argue and illustrate what contextualism is, by explaining how it handles such cases. That notwithstanding, with a careful look, one realizes that the shift in context is what accounts for DeRose's response in Case B. Here, higher justification is what is needed for DeRose to rightly assert to know that the bank will be opened. This means that the word 'know', in Case A, assumes a context whose range of domain ignores somewhat remote possibilities. The implication is that the attributor chose to ignore certain possibilities or considerations that have the potential of nullifying the subject's assertion to know. It means that some possibilities are not relevant for her to consider. In Case B however, the word 'know' has assumed a context whose range of domain is expanded, and more possibilities are considered. By this therefore, the sceptic only wins by shifting the conversation to a more demanding context. The question by the attributor changes the contextual parameters governing the context-sensitivity of what it means to know or have a knowledge claim.

Having explained what contextualism is,[21] DeRose uses this understanding in responding to the sceptics. First, he mentions that a sceptical puzzle is created by our inability to recognize the fact that the sceptic only tries to manipulate the semantic contexts for knowledge by raising the standards to the point that it will only be false to claim to know anything. Thus, in his estimation:

As soon as we find ourselves in more ordinary conversational contexts, it will not only be true for us to claim to know the very things that the sceptic now denies we know, but it will also be wrong for us to deny that we know these things. But then, isn't the sceptic's

[20] DeRose, "The Case for Contextualism: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context," 1–2. The Case A illustrates contexts in which there is no mention of sceptical hypotheses. Thus, the stakes are lower. This is sometimes referred to as knowledge LOW. Conversely, Case B illustrates contexts where the demands for knowledge ascription are high or strict: contexts where sceptical doubts are brought to the table, as known as knowledge HIGH.

[21] That knowledge is context sensitive and depending on which side you are or what the speakers wish to consider or disregard, a subject can be said to know (or does not know) a given proposition

present denial equally false? And wouldn't it be equally true for us now, in the sceptic's presence, to claim to know?[22]

This implies that we can know ordinary claims in ordinary conversational contexts. DeRose's explanation safeguards our everyday knowledge claims from the persuasiveness of the argument of the sceptics. This is to say that, the fact that we do not measure up to the standard set by the sceptics does not mean that we do not meet up to the more relaxed standards that are in place in more ordinary conversations and debates.[23] DeRose reaches this hypothesis by accounting for how persuasive *The Argument from Ignorance (AI)* is, by providing the best account for how all the three propositions of the sceptic's puzzling triad seem true. He then expresses a strong endorsement of AIs second premise.

To better explain his endorsement of the second premise of AI, DeRose devices what he calls 'comparative conditionals'. The comparative conditional is illustrated as thus:

> One can have a variety of grounds for assenting to conditionals like If Mugsy is tall, then Wilt is tall, and If Wilt is not tall, then Mugsy is not tall. But one very good basis for assenting to these conditionals is the comparative knowledge that Wilt is at least as tall as Mugsy. Likewise, where S is a putative subject of knowledge, *p* is a true proposition that S believes, and A and B are situations in which S is found, we can have similarly comparative grounds for assenting to conditionals of the form If S knows that *p* in A, then S does not know that *p* in B. In such a case, the comparative grounds for our assent is our realization that S is in at least as strong an epistemic position with respect to *p* in situation B as he is in with respect to that same proposition in situation A, and this comparative conditional serves as a good intuitive test for that comparative fact: It brings that fact to light.[24]

He uses this understanding (of comparative conditionals) as a litmus test for the relatively strong epistemic position of the speaker in discussing AI's second premise. Thus, as he explains, where the sceptical hypotheses are well chosen (e.g. BIV), we are in a good position to know that the hypothesis is false. What this means is that following the comparative conditionals proposed by DeRose, we are in a strong epistemic position to know both not-H and O, and this will result in if I don't know that not-H, then I don't know that O. This conditional will still hold irrespective of the standards for knowledge that are in place.

Having settled with the notion of strength of epistemic position as one of the notions central to his attempt to solve the sceptical puzzle, DeRose turns his attention to the second notion: the Nozickean notion of the sensitivity of belief. Nozick, in his *Philosophical explanations*, contends that the sceptic uses sensitivity to make the sceptical hypothesis so credible to conclude that we do not know that the hypothesis is false. He uses what DeRose calls the "*Subjunctive Conditional Account (SCA)*" to explain the plausibility of AI's first premise. According to the Subjunctive Conditional Account (SCA):

> The problem with my belief that I'm not a BIV, and I do have such a belief, as do most of us, is that I would have this belief (that I'm not a BIV) even if it were false (even if I were one). It is this that makes it hard to claim to know that I'm not a BIV. For, according to SCA, we have a very strong general, though not exceptionless, inclination to think that we don't know that P when we think that our belief that P is a belief we would hold even

[22] DeRose, "The Case for Contextualism: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context," 41–42.

[23] DeRose, 42

[24] DeRose, "Solving the Skeptical Problem," 30.

> if P were false. Let's say that S's belief that P is insensitive if S would believe that P if P were false.[25]

We can restate this rule as follows: We most likely judge that 'S does not know that P' when we conclude that S's belief that P is insensitive. Following the subjunctive conditional, we can say, as DeRose would have us believe, that our belief in not-H is insensitive. Nonetheless, one is in at least as strong an epistemic position with respect to not-H as one is with respect to O at the same time.

According to DeRose, the sceptic uses what he calls '*the Rule of Sensitivity'* as a mechanism to raise the standard of knowledge attribution. Generally, the rule is this:

> When it is asserted that some subject S knows (or does not know) some proposition P, the standards for knowledge (the standards for how good an epistemic position one must be in to count as knowing) tend to be raised, if need be, to such a level as to require S's belief in that particular P to be sensitive for it to count as knowledge. Where the P involved is to the effect that a sceptical hypothesis does not obtain, then this rule dictates that the standards will be raised to a quite high level…one must be in a stronger epistemic position with respect to a proposition stating that a sceptical hypothesis is false-relative to other, more ordinary, propositions - before a belief in such a proposition can be sensitive.[26]

Context, as we have already seen, is what determines the strength of one's epistemic position in order to have knowledge. As the context changes, what is epistemically relevant becomes extended. Thus, briefly, the rule of sensitivity can be stated as thus: When we claim that S knows (or doesn't know) that P, then, if necessary, extend that which is epistemically relevant to at least include the closest worlds in which P is false.

So far, we see that DeRose accounts for the persuasiveness of the AI by showing that the sceptic gets the truthfulness of her conclusion by changing the context for knowledge in the AI. This does not threaten the truthfulness of our ordinary claims to know the same Os that the sceptic tries to attack. The fact that we do not measure up to the standard created by the sceptic, does not discredit the fact that we do actually satisfy the more relaxed standards that are in everyday conversational contexts. Again, we notice that the solution DeRose provides makes true the second premise of the sceptical hypotheses regardless of what epistemic standards are at stake. Consequently, the plausibility of the second premise has been accounted for and the first premise is only true in some context. Thus, for DeRose's solution, we know that according to ordinary low standards, ordinary propositions are true but false, according to high standards. The puzzle therefore consists of conjointly inconsistent propositions, but all of which are independently plausible. Having explained the threat posed by sceptics away, DeRose believes we know that ordinary propositions such as 'I know that I have a laptop in front of me' is true according to ordinary low standards but false, according to high standards.

## An evaluation of DeRose's Contextualism approach

I should acknowledge the efforts made by Keith DeRose in raising and defending the contextualist thesis. Indeed, I acknowledge that we are always prone to attribute knowledge to others or ourselves in some contexts and are quick to deny such attributions in other contexts.

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[25] DeRose, 18.

[26] DeRose, 36-37.

The assumption that contextualism is based on is, therefore, legitimate. In addition, given the possibility that knowledge ascription is contextual, it is conceivable, in principle, to come up with some theory that will account for how those inclinations vary. Though I have acknowledged the possibility of the inclination that knowledge ascription is contextual, I do not mean to endorse that we are right both when we attribute knowledge and when we deny knowledge. Whether contextualism offers a good explanation to such an inclination or whether contextualism address the main concerns of the sceptic is worth considering.

First, what is implied by the *Rule of Sensitivity* is that once an attributor mentions that one does, or does not, know the falsity of some sceptical hypothesis raises the standard of knowledge to a point that makes our claims of knowledge false. This is one of the main features of DeRose's theory. Once a conversation includes a statement of a sceptical hypothesis, the standard for knowing any proposition is raised. This supposition is quite challenging. This is because if our assertions about knowledge claims were to be guided by this rule then we would deny that we know more readily than we actually do. Stated differently, if DeRose is correct then once an attributor says that one does not know that one is not a brain-in-a-vat (or any other such sceptical scenario), there should be agreement among the participants that the subject knows or does not know the proposition provided the participants in the conversation are familiar with the standards in effect. But this is not the case. People somewhat find ludicrous the mere assertion that one does not know one is not a brain-in-a-vat. They rather need some form of persuading and luring and some form of explanation or reason to think that they lack such knowledge. In the end, they come to agree that they do not know. It is therefore quite wrong to say that the mere mentioning of a sceptical hypothesis raises the standard of knowledge.

Contextualists assume that we do meet ordinary standards for knowledge. In that case, the sceptical challenge does not receive the needed attention. Contextualists indeed take for granted that our ordinary claims to knowledge are true. Also, with their categorization of contexts, i.e., LOW and HIGH, DeRose misses the force of the arguments for scepticism. DeRose accuses sceptics of trying to manipulate the semantic standards for knowledge by raising the standards to the point that it will only be false to claim to know anything.[27] He further accuses the sceptics of only creating a context in which it is only true to say we know very little or nothing at all. I should state that the main idea behind scepticism is not to show that we fail to meet some HIGH standard for knowledge but rather that, we typically do not meet the standard for knowledge; ordinary knowledge or knowledge in LOW contexts included. Indeed, DeRose offers some form of explanation by showing the different kinds of sceptics there are and how some will concede to the contextualist theses.[28]

The sceptics' claim about whether we are justified or not in attributing a knowledge claim has nothing to do with whether we are able to meet some HIGH standards or whether there are shifting standards for knowledge. The main concern of scepticism is whether we can know irrespective of the context. The sceptical arguments, as we have seen, do not turn on requiring extraordinarily high standards for knowledge. However, by the sceptical arguments, we come to doubt that we know. It is never the case that by the sceptical arguments, the sceptics have shifted, without notice, to some high standard for knowledge. The question that one would wish DeRose could answer is; does an attributor shift or raise the standard for knowledge if he tries to probe further or asks whether the subject is sure or certain of a particular claim made by the subject? No participants of a conversation would want to go about or work with some

[27] DeRose, "The Case for Contextualism: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context," 41.

[28] DeRose, "The Appearance of Ignorance: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context, Volume 2."

knowledge claim without ascertaining the truth-value of the claim. Such questions have nothing to do with context. Such questions and the likes of the sceptical hypotheses are simply to help find stronger grounds by which one is to hold on to a belief. Ordinarily, we are inclined to avoid falsehood and fallacies so any question from the sceptics about whether we meet the standards for knowledge evokes doubts about any knowledge claim we may hold.[29] The simple fact that there are varying inclinations that knowledge ascription is contextual does not by itself indicate the context-sensitivity of knowledge.

In *Bank Case A*, DeRose presumes that we generally satisfy conventional criteria for knowledge and accept our usual assertions of knowledge as true. I hold, on the contrary, that *Bank Case A*, which is supposed to illustrate that an attributor spontaneously will ascribe 'knowledge' in such situations, is rather a reflection of a superficial understanding of the concept of 'knowing'. It only shows how for convenience's sake, participants in conversations sometimes ignore what it essentially means to know. The attributor ignores the possibility of error in the assertion made by the subject. Ignoring to probe whether the subject is adequately justified about his claim does not make his claim knowledge: (equally, it does not show that there is a context where error possibilities are and/or must be ignored). To know, it is supposed, is to be free from error, and to be certain of the proposition in question. The fact that an attributor fails to ensure that the subject is indeed justified to hold the said proposition does not qualify or make the said proposition knowledge. In other words, failure to ensure that a belief is justified and admits no error (that is if conclusive reason is possible) does not guarantee the said belief to be knowledge. If my objection is true, then it is indeed true that we ordinarily ascribe knowledge claim to a subject where due diligence is sometimes overlooked. When we say that 'S knows that *p'*, it only shows that we grant that the subject knows that *p* for the sake of expediency or for pragmatic purposes.

Again, I contend that contextualism not only fails to solve the issues of scepticism but is also fundamentally self-defeating. I will demonstrate this accusation against contextualism in two ways. Contextualism is inherently self-defeating, firstly by yielding to scepticism and secondly by articulating the apparent. That is, in the ordinary context, what I call the "*naïve context*", an attributor is justified in attributing knowledge to a subject.

DeRose misses the force of the sceptical argument by positing that ordinary claims to knowledge are true. Rather than dealing with the questions the sceptics raised, contextualism, as a theory of knowledge, concedes and accommodates the very idea it set out to solve. DeRose extensively argues to show how the sceptic employs the *Rule of Sensitivity* to make the sceptical hypothesis so plausible to suppose that we do not know the falsity of the hypothesis. For him, in instances where there is no philosophical sceptic or sceptical hypothesis, there is no need to meet any high epistemic standard in order to attribute knowledge. The converse is that, where such contemplations or remote possibilities do feature or are considered, we cannot affirm but deny a subject of any knowledge claim. DeRose suggests that we should therefore accept the skeptical response in those contexts. In short, the reason for DeRose's postulation of a HIGH context is that he agrees that scepticism and the sceptical charge are right.

The admission that there is a context in which we should accept the sceptical argument is difficult to come to terms with. Contextualism sets out to reply to the sceptics' allegation but ends up adopting it. This concession to the sceptic is somewhat disappointing, if not altogether unpalatable. DeRose's endorsement of scepticism in what is supposed to be a cure to scepticism appears to be the Achilles' heel of his theory. The sceptics formulate their argument to show

[29] Feldman, "Contextualism and Skepticism," 110–11.

that there is a possibility that we could be mistaken about knowing that which we claim to know. A good response, I assume, should be that which would show that scepticism is in some important ways mistaken or confused or wrongheaded or can perhaps even be circumvented entirely. But to formulate a theory that concedes to the very idea it seeks to respond to or reject is self-defeating. Contextualism has been couched as a solution to scepticism. Thus, it is an indictment on a full-blown theory that is set out to solve the sceptical charge and ends up embracing it in one part.

More seriously, DeRose posits that in LOW contexts, there is no need to meet any high epistemic standard in order to attribute knowledge. In such a context, one can confidently attribute or affirm that a subject knows a given proposition. This is also a disappointing claim to be made by DeRose. I have indicated that there seems to be some contextual inclinations in how we attribute knowledge claims to others or ourselves. This means that there is an assumption that knowledge ascription is contextual. My argument is that at the LOW context or in the everyday ordinary context, which I refer to as the naïve context, epistemic agents do not normally think about scepticism. DeRose is therefore right on this score but wrong to claim that it is the reason for which an attributor is right to ascribe knowledge to a subject. At the naïve level, nobody cares about sceptical hypotheses or sceptical arguments.

It is where the stakes are high that people think about scepticism. Scepticism is not for ordinary knowledge. It is a charge against reflective knowledge. Reflective knowledge aims to exclude luck of the epistemically apt formation of true belief. This level provides a higher quality to knowledge. According to Sosa:

> Reflective knowledge goes beyond animal knowledge, and requires also an apt apprehension that the object-level perceptual belief is apt. What competence might a believer exercise in gaining such meta-apprehension? It would have to be a competence enabling him to size up the appropriateness of the conditions.[30]

Reflective knowledge confers some form of epistemic value to our overall process of knowing. Particularly, reflective knowledge adds justification to our beliefs and strengthens the cognitive success in the particular circumstances by contributing to reduce luck in this achievement. Borrowing from Sosa, who mentions that in order to achieve this level of knowledge, the first thing to consider is:

> Principle of epistemic ascent: if one knows full well that p and considers whether one knows that p, then one must be justified in thinking that one does.[31]

The next thing to consider is the exclusion of possible undermining alternatives. Thus, he posits the:

> Principle of closure of epistemic justification: if one is fully justified in believing that p necessarily, unless it is so that q, it cannot be so that p, then one must also be justified in believing that q.[32]

Ensuring that the two principles are involved in how a subject come to have knowledge, the subject can now form the judgement that he/she justifiably knows that *p*. A subject forms such a conclusion by the:

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[30] Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology: Volume I: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge*, 108.

[31] Sosa, 114.

[32] Sosa, 115.

> Principle of criterion: PC2. In order to know full well that p one must be justified in believing (at least implicitly or dispositionally, if not consciously) that one's belief that p is formed in a way that is at least minimally reliable, that it has at least minimally reliable source (if the proposition that one's source is thus reliable is within one's grasp).[33]

My point is that, it is at the level of reflective knowledge that sceptical hypotheses come into force. Scepticism is an intellectual phenomenon. It is to propel epistemic agents to doubt. At the LOW context, epistemic agents do not doubt. They are dogmatic. They take everything the way they see it. This is precisely the reason for naïve realism.

At the LOW context, of course, the whole issue about scepticism does not emerge. It is at the high level of thoughtful reflection that scepticism emerges. And this is where we have all the issues about sceptical hypotheses. DeRose is therefore suggesting the obvious which does not seem to yield any novel perspective on the issue.[34] DeRose does not meet the sceptics at the level of reflective knowledge. What this means is that DeRose has actually not solved or answered the sceptics. DeRose is in effect only attempting to maintain, what Schiffer calls, "a happy-face solution to the sceptical paradox".[35]

DeRose's explanation[36] is, nevertheless, somewhat attractive. However, he fails to address the sceptical challenge. Contextualists do not address the doubts that have been raised about whether we have knowledge. It does not only try to side step the challenge posed by scepticism but it is also self-defeating. Sceptical hypotheses are concerns for reflective knowledge. It is upon reflection that doubts about our knowledge claims are raised and contextualism does not respond to these doubts raised by sceptics about reflective knowledge. At this point, I stand to agree with Barry Stroud who believes that "the problem (of scepticism) has no solution; or rather that the only answer to the question as it is meant to be understood is that we can know nothing about the world around us". Barry also adds that none of the several major attempts to defeat traditional scepticism, which he examines, is successful.[37] Contextualism is no different: contextualism is not a successful response to scepticism.

## Conclusion

So far, this paper has acknowledged the ingenuity of contextualism as a theory of knowledge which tries to reconcile the possibility of attributing a knowledge claim to a subject and denying the subject the same claim in another context and the attributor is right in both instances. Contextualism poses a challenge to invariantist thinking. I have attempted to demonstrate that DeRose's responses are far from answering the challenges posed by scepticism. Whether contextualism provides the best solution to the sceptical problem is far from clear. The fact that there seems to exist some form of intuitive inclination about the different contexts that exist in our ordinary conversation does not mean that knowledge is contextual. My view is that we ordinarily attribute knowledge to others and ourselves simply for convenience's sake. This does

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[33] Sosa, 122.

[34] It is upon proper reflection that people begin to raise doubt about whether we could not be mistaken about what we claim to know or whether we know at all. Ordinary people do not think this way. It does not even occur to them. Where scepticism actually serves as a threat is at the high level of reflection. This is what DeRose and all contextualists retain. I think this is quiet disappointing.

[35] Schiffer, "Contextualist Solutions to Scepticism," 329.

[36] I contend that DeRose's theory is descriptive rather than normative.

[37] Stroud, "The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism," 1.

not mean that the subject indeed knows whatever the proposition is, in the strict sense of one having knowledge or at the reflective level. Attributor contextualism as championed by Keith DeRose, does not really meet the challenges highlighted by the sceptics. The mere truth of contextualism is inadequate to provide us with a solution to the problems associated with scepticism. This is a point about which, I think, DeRose would agree. In so far as we have a deep-seated desire to know what the truth is and avoid falsehoods and fallacies, scepticism will continue to be a biting and potent threat to our intuition to attribute knowledge claims to ourselves or to others.

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