

Contextualism and the Structure of Skeptical Arguments

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ABSTRACT

In this paper a candidate for a rational reconstruction of skeptical arguments is presented and defended against a competitor called ‘The Argument from Ignorance’. On the basis of this defense, Michael Williams’ claims that foundationalism and epistemological realism serve as presuppositions for skepticism are criticized. It is argued that rejecting these two theses, as his version of contextualism does, is not sufficient for answering the skeptical challenge.

1. Introduction

Skepticism has again roused a lot of interest within epistemology during the last decades. Most often the interest lies in refuting skepticism. But in order to refute skeptical arguments, one must first have an accurate understanding of what the structure of these arguments is. This paper begins with a defense of one rational reconstruction of them.

Following upon this analysis there is a discussion of a contextualist attempt to refute skepticism, Michael Williams’ ‘inferentialist’ version. This version consists of a rejection of a position he calls ‘epistemological realism’, a position he claims both traditional epistemology and skepticism occupy. However, as the main thesis of this paper, it will be argued that one way this version of contextualism fails to refute skepticism is by misunderstanding the structure of skeptical arguments and, consequently, the dialectic interplay between the skeptic and her dogmatic opponent. The basic point is that Williams saddles skepticism with various ‘traditional’ epistemological theses that are *not* essential for skeptical arguments to go through.

Let me first state that I am not going to offer an interpretation of any skeptic, either self-labeled or called so by others. The proposal defended here is a *rational reconstruction* aiming at providing the skeptic with the best argument available for her for the simple reason that in a philosophical discussion the relevance of a refutation of a skeptical argument stands in direct proportion to how good the skeptical argument itself is.

Moreover, I am not offering a uniform structure into which all arguments that have been called skeptical fit; nor do I stipulate that only arguments that fit the

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form argued for below are skeptical. What I shall claim is that the analysis defended below manifests a *typical* skeptical argument. Following Williams, I shall here distinguish between ‘Agrippan’ and ‘Cartesian’ skepticism and the analysis proposed here is intended to fit the Cartesian version.¹

2. *The structure of skeptical arguments*

As a first approximation, which will be substantiated through the ensuing discussion, skepticism is best understood as a strategy parasitic upon its dogmatic opponent. The aim of the strategy is to show, on the dogmatist’s own premises, that her knowledge-claim(s) is unjustified; that is, that the dogmatic attempt at carrying out what could be called the project of validation has not succeeded in this case *by its own criteria*.² It therefore lies in the nature of the skeptical strategy to take over the assumptions of its dogmatic opponent while claiming to make none of its own. Thus, the assumptions the skeptic makes for the sake of the argument may vary. To take an example that will recur below from section 4 and onwards: if the dogmatic opponent subscribes to foundationalism, then the assumptions of this position may occur in the skeptical argument, but all this shows is that – provided that the skeptical argument is valid – foundationalism is a *sufficient* condition for the skeptical conclusion not that foundationalism is a *necessary* condition for the same conclusion. Consequently, from a methodological point of view it is hard to pin down the necessary conditions of skepticism since they depend upon the dogmatic target and that, insofar as the skeptical strategy is successful, the place to find these necessary assumptions in each case is within the targeted dogmatic position.³

Nevertheless, whilst the content of skeptical arguments may vary, all skeptical arguments typically rely on an *underdetermination principle*. The crucial step in the skeptical argument is the claim that the knowledge-claim which the dogmatist makes is unjustified in the sense that the evidence she cites on behalf of it is

¹ For a claim that Williams would agree with, see, for instance, Williams 2001a, 75–7 and sec. 2 below. Agrippan skepticism is introduced in Williams 2001a, Ch. 5, and Cartesian skepticism in Ch. 6. The form of Agrippan skepticism is the Agrippan trilemma which can be directed against all knowledge-claims, while Cartesian skepticism is directed against knowledge-claims about the external world. It may be that their scope together with that of fitting the form proposed in this essay are the only important differences between these two versions of skepticism. Nothing argued for in this essay depends upon there being other differences than these.

² In brief, epistemology consists of two constructive projects. The first is the project of *clarification* within which we seek to clarify epistemologically relevant terms such as knowledge and justification. Second, within the project of *validation* we seek to establish that various knowledge-claims actually fulfill the conditions of knowledge that the project of clarification has laid down. For a fuller account, see Janvid 2001, 12–5.

³ I am indebted to an anonymous referee of this journal for suggesting this elaboration.

underdetermined with respect to a skeptical hypothesis: that I am now dreaming, deceived by an evil demon, a brain in a vat etc. The underdetermination principle involved here is captured by Anthony Brueckner as follows:

For all S , ϕ , ψ , if S 's evidence for believing that ϕ does not favor ϕ over some incompatible hypothesis ψ , then S lacks justification for believing that ϕ .⁴

Since the evidence cited by the dogmatist does not favor her knowledge-claim over the incompatible skeptical hypothesis, the dogmatist is forced to acknowledge *on her own grounds* that her knowledge-claim is unjustified. Note that, given the parasitic nature of the skeptical strategy, this is a principle the dogmatist must adhere to for the skeptical argument to be sound. This is, however, *prima facie* a quite reasonable principle to subscribe to and most dogmatists would do so.

However, this analysis seems to stand in contrast to another way of understanding skeptical arguments that is frequently used in recent discussions of this topic.⁵ Following Keith DeRose,⁶ this alternative will here be called 'The Argument from Ignorance (AI)' and has the following form:

Premise 1: I do not know that not- H (where H may be that I am a brain in a vat).

Premise 2: If I do not know that not- H , then I do not know that O (where O may be that I am now sitting in a chair).

So, Conclusion: I do not know that O .

This would be the skeptic's proposed solution to the paradox that threatens the dogmatist who simultaneously wants to entertain the two premises and the negation of the conclusion.⁷ How, then, does the skeptic argue for her way out of the paradox, or, which comes to the same thing, how is the dogmatist forced to realize that her way of escaping the paradox should be to agree with the conclusion of the skeptical argument instead of giving up premise 1 or 2? Indeed, most non-philosophers would probably be inclined to deny them rather than accept the skeptical conclusion.

The second premise is supported by appeal to the so-called *closure principle*, that knowledge is closed under known entailment. More formally:

For all S , ϕ , ψ , if S knows that ϕ and S knows that ϕ entails ψ , then S knows that ψ .⁸

⁴ Brueckner 1994, 830. Yalçın also offers an analysis of the structure of skeptical arguments as relying on an underdetermination principle in Yalçın 1992, 9–16.

⁵ Pritchard contrasts them in Pritchard 2002, 216 as does Cohen in Cohen 1998. (For the latter essay, see footnote 10 below.)

⁶ In DeRose 1995, 1. AI is earlier discussed by Brueckner in Brueckner 1994 in turn following Nozick 1981, Ch. 3 and Stroud 1983 but without using this label. In his recent overview of skepticism Pritchard 2002, Pritchard subscribes to this analysis.

⁷ See Pritchard 2002, 217–8. See also DeRose 1995, 1–3.

⁸ See, for instance, Pritchard 2002, 219 and Brueckner 1994, 827–8.

Even though some philosophers have rejected this principle, this essay is not concerned with disputing or defending this principle, but will presuppose it.⁹

Let us then turn to the first premise. It is here that the main objection against the AI alternative comes to the fore since, as Williams points out,¹⁰ a good way for the skeptic to argue for this premise is by claiming that the evidence the dogmatist cites does not favor H over not-H. If I were a brain in a vat, then I would now have the same sense experiences as if I were sitting on a chair. Since the evidence cited, i.e. my sensory experience, does not single out either H or not-H, it is dogmatic of me to accept the negation of premise 1. Thus, if the

⁹ Well known representatives of such a rejection are Dretske and Nozick, for instance in Dretske 1970 and Dretske 1971, and Nozick 1981. To discuss them is an essay for another occasion. However, just as in the case of the underdetermination principle, its intuitive force is strong, so the theoretical burden is upon those who want to argue against it to come up with a compelling argument. Williams is a contextualist who accepts the closure principle, see Williams 1996, 185–91 and 316–55, as is DeRose 1995, with some reservations, see pp. 27–33.

Moreover, in (Brueckner, 1994 833, Brueckner construes a skeptical argument which he claims does not rely on any closure principle (as does Yalçin 1992). So, denying this principle would not by itself save us from the skeptical threat (see however footnote 10 below). The reason AI is employed here is for dialectical purposes.

¹⁰ In Williams 2001a, 187–8. (See also pp. 75–7.) Brueckner argues for premise 1 by relying on the underdetermination principle without explicitly contrasting the analyses as competing alternatives in Brueckner 1994. One of his objectives is to give an alternative argument for this premise with respect to Nozick's way of establishing it in Nozick 1981, Ch. 3. DeRose develops Nozick's account further in DeRose 1995. However, DeRose's argument for Premise 1, 'The Subjunctive Conditionals Account' (pp. 17–20) does not really stand out as an alternative to the underdetermination principle. But since underdetermination is not discussed there, it may not be intended to either.

In Cohen 1998, Cohen responds to Brueckner by arguing that solely relying on an underdetermination principle and solely relying on a closure principle, as supposedly adherents to AI claim to do, provide two independent arguments for skepticism. Moreover, he goes on to claim that the latter argument 'is, by one measure, the stronger argument' (p. 143) since it can have skeptical consequences without the former having so, while the converse is not true. The premise in the latter argument reads 'My evidence does not justify not-H' (p. 146) and while this argument is independent from the former in that one is not compelled to argue for this premise by relying on an underdetermination principle, this still seems to be a *better* way of doing so than the way Cohen briefly sketches as an alternative (pp. 146–7). In a recent paper (Pritchard forthcoming) Pritchard convincingly confirms Cohen's theses that the underdetermination principle is indeed logically distinct from the closure principle (both as formulated on pp. 2–3 above) and that the former is weaker than the latter. However, he also shows that the underdetermination principle is logically equivalent to a weaker closure related principle (formulated on p. 12) that he claims to be conceptually more fundamental. (See also footnote 20 below.)

In discussing AI in Williams 2001b, 8, Williams charges the underdetermination principle of not being 'genuinely intuitive' and too 'theoretically loaded'. While not being committed to 'intuition mongering', the skeptic's way of answering such charges would be to unload this problem upon the dogmatist. If the skeptical argument appears counterintuitive, which it does not according to this author, then this undesirable feature is a function of the counterintuitive way the dogmatist has carried out the project of validation in this case. Recall that the skeptical strategy presupposes that its dogmatic opponent agrees with the underdetermination principle. Indeed, the skeptic has taken over this principle from the dogmatist.

skeptic relies on this natural way of defending premise 1 of the skeptical argument, then AI is not an independent alternative to the one relying on the underdetermination principle, but presupposes it.

AI thus only superficially differs from the form presented and defended here in that the soundness of AI presupposes the underdetermination principle. One could say that AI captures the structure of skeptical arguments, but only in part and the thesis argued for here is that AI is best complemented by grounding the first premise on an underdetermination principle. Accordingly, AI does not really offer an alternative. Next, a common stronger way of formulating the conclusion of the skeptical argument will be criticized.

3. *Skepticism and the impossibility of knowledge*

One frequent interpretation of the conclusion of the skeptical argument, or a skeptical thesis somehow connected to the skeptical argument, is that the skeptic claims that knowledge is *impossible*. In other words, the use of a modal operator is often attributed to skepticism and this is done irrespective of how the skeptical argument itself is construed. Notwithstanding their disagreement concerning the structure of skeptical arguments and that the conclusion of the argument in both cases lacks any modal operator, both Pritchard and Williams,¹¹ among many others, interpret the skeptic as claiming that knowledge is impossible.

One way to get to this modal operator from the skeptical argument would be to do as Williams does and make the stronger point on behalf of the skeptic concerning the underdetermination principle and claim that all the evidence the dogmatist *could ever have* still leaves her in a state of underdetermination.¹² If that were the case regarding all possible evidence for O, then knowledge concerning O would indeed be impossible.

There are at least four objections to such a modal interpretation of the skeptical thesis. First of all, as already has been pointed out, the conclusion of the skeptical argument, both in the underdetermination form and in the AI version, is that I do not know O, not that I *cannot* know O. Attaching this modal operator to the conclusion makes the skeptical argument invalid. In line with Williams point above, to strengthen premise 1 to read instead that I cannot know that not-SH would of course make the skeptical argument valid and there may be dogmatists who hold that view (see below). However, this is a problematic way of formulating the premise in its own right, which the skeptic should stay clear of, and directly leads to the third and fourth objection. (The third objection deals with William's suggestion as to how to deal with this first objection.)

¹¹ Pritchard 2002, 215 and Williams 2001a, for instance, on pp. 58 and 75.

¹² Williams 2001a, 75.

Secondly, there seems to be no need to make the skeptical argument stronger by attaching this modal operator to the conclusion. The argument, in any of the forms discussed above, merits our attention even without it. An argument showing that we do not have knowledge of the external world is serious enough, even if the mere possibility of us attaining such knowledge still is left open. Since O varies over all knowledge-claims about the external world, the conclusion is not that I merely do not know some particular O-type proposition, but that I do not know any O-type propositions at all.¹³

Thirdly, one would like to know what kind of impossibility is involved here. It does not seem to be a logical, metaphysical or natural impossibility. The skeptic is under no obligation to make any of these three claims of impossibility. On the contrary, it is precisely part of the skeptical strategy to allow the dogmatist's claim that she knows O to be logically, metaphysically and naturally possible; it is just that the evidence the dogmatist cites does not favor her claim over the conclusion of the skeptical argument. This point opens for an interpretation of the kind of possibility involved on the dogmatist's part that will be developed below.

Fourthly, by making this modal claim the skeptic has to adhere to a view along the lines suggested by Williams that all the evidence the dogmatist could ever have does not favor her knowledge-claim. This strong claim invites us to question the skeptical thesis by asking 'How do you know that?'. In order to make such a strong claim the skeptic needs to back it up with something like the Kantian project of drawing a limit for the reach of our knowledge. This is a project that is immensely difficult by itself and also quite alien to the skeptical strategy as outlined in section 2 above.¹⁴ The dogmatist may be involved in precisely such a project so that the modal thesis may be inferred from her position (see below), but the skeptic would be wise not to play along with this aspect of the dogmatic project. This familiar objection to skepticism is reason enough for reconsidering the claim that knowledge is impossible in its own right and it is all the easier to abandon such an interpretation since, as we saw above, it is both unnecessary for the relevance of skepticism and foreign to its spirit.

Where, then, does such a modal interpretation come from? The suggestion advanced here is that it arises from a misunderstanding of the dialectic interplay between the skeptic and her dogmatic opponent. It is the dogmatist who attaches this modal operator to the conclusion of the skeptical argument in despair of refuting it or coming up with another way of validating the knowledge-claim(s) in question. Recall that in order to be successful, the necessary assumptions for the skeptical strategy must be found within the particular dogmatic project of validation under attack. The relevant kind of impossibility that adequately would

¹³ I am grateful to an anonymous referee of this journal for this clarification.

¹⁴ This, by the way, is the reason why Kant's claim that we cannot have knowledge of the thing in itself is not a skeptical thesis.

express the despair of the dogmatist should, in line with these considerations, be a possibility of an epistemic kind. The dogmatist regards it as impossible to validate the knowledge-claims in question with the kind of evidence she has recourse to according to her own theory.

It may be that the despair of the dogmatist is well founded or at least a natural reaction, but the impossibility of knowledge does not follow from the skeptical argument alone. The despair has its origin in the skeptical argument, but *only* in conjunction with the epistemological theory of the dogmatist. It is from this conjunction that Williams can arrive at his claim that all the evidence the dogmatist could ever have still leaves her in a state of underdetermination. From her own epistemological position, the dogmatist realizes that all the evidence she could ever have would still not favor her knowledge-claim over the skeptical one. We then have an impossibility of a theory-relative kind that the skeptic may dialectically agree with. However, if the dogmatist is willing to make a thorough revision of her epistemological theory – by invoking for instance other kinds of evidence than in the original attempt at validation – then the skeptic, in virtue of the parasitic nature of her strategy, may be required to devise a new skeptical argument directed against these other kinds of evidence. However, that the skeptical strategy is open ended and offers a kind of ‘put up or shut up’-challenge to the dogmatist is *not* a problem for the skeptic according to the proposed rational reconstruction.

I shall now go on to discuss two points made by Brueckner in connection with his analysis of the structure of skeptical arguments concerning the rôle foundationalism plays for this structure.

4. *The rôle of foundationalism*

In his interesting analysis of the structure of skeptical arguments, Brueckner stresses the rôle played by the underdetermination principle, and then on the basis of his analysis goes on to pose two problems for the skeptical claim that the evidence the dogmatist cites for believing that O does not favor O over H.¹⁵

The first of them is what is meant by the claim that my evidence for believing in O is *sensory* evidence. Depending on how the details are filled in here the skeptic may be criticized for presupposing an ‘objectionable foundationalism’.¹⁶ Brueckner is sketchy here, but both the alternatives he mentions, that it is the sensory experience in itself or beliefs expressing them that *alone* constitutes the evidence for knowledge-claims about the external world, may run guilty of this

¹⁵ Brueckner 1994, 834–5.

¹⁶ Brueckner refers to another philosopher who regards foundationalism as a presupposition for skepticism (together with what he calls ‘epistemological realism’): Williams; see Williams 1996, for instance pp. 41, 113 and 370, and Williams 2001a, 84 and 192–4. For a discussion of epistemological realism as the other presupposition, see section 5 below.

charge (see below). In that case we can easily escape the skeptical conclusion by denying the foundationalist assumption that our evidence *solely* depends upon sensory evidence in either of these two ways.

The second problem concerns what the claimed underdetermination of the evidence the dogmatist cites really consists of. The skeptic points out that the same evidence obtains irrespectively of whether O or H is the case. Brueckner calls the conjunction of the evidential propositions for O and H E and says that the skeptical point boils down to the claim that E does not entail O. But having such requirements is to make too strong a demand on evidential justification, Brueckner rightly claims. If the skeptic really does subscribe to such a view, then she would turn out to demand conclusive justification. But to drop conclusiveness as a criterion of knowledge is a desirable alternative in its own right, so it is a concession most philosophers in the last decades have been happy to make.

However, while Brueckner undeniably points to two crucial problems in need of solution within the project of validation, he misdirects the burden of proof upon skepticism instead of dogmatism. Given the parasitic nature of the skeptical strategy, a lack of precision concerning how sensory evidence supports knowledge-claims about the external world is primarily a problem for the dogmatist who is determined to make them.

Let us begin with the second problem. So E does not entail O, but what should be the precise evidential relation obtaining between these two propositions in order for O to be justified so as to qualify as knowledge? The details here have occupied philosophers for millennia and until they are spelled out the dogmatist herself must according to her own premises concede that the project of validation has not succeeded. Of course, if the dogmatist comes up with an evidential relation that, while not entailing O, still singles out O from H and other competitors, then the project of validation has succeeded, the skeptical challenge is answered, and the label 'dogmatist' no longer fits her.¹⁷ Until then, the skeptic could claim that the quest for validation concerning, for instance, knowledge of the external world is at best a prospect and it is, to repeat, not a problem for the skeptic to acknowledge the open character of this project. In the meantime, one way to exploit this lack of precision concerning the evidential relation is the skeptical strategy of showing O to be underdetermined by a skeptical hypothesis given the evidence the dogmatist cites.

This point is also of relevance for the first problem Brueckner poses about skepticism presupposing 'an objectionable foundationalism'. First we should ask what is meant by foundationalism here. Since Williams' view on foundationalism

¹⁷ Another way of establishing O would of course be to show that E *does* entail O, as perhaps a caricature of a foundational sense data theorist would want to do. Note, as Cohen points out in Cohen 1998, 148 (footnote 11) in response to Brueckner's essay, that as long as entailment is not obtained then the *possibility* of a skeptical counterexample remains.

will be discussed in section 5 and Brueckner himself refers to him in an attached footnote to his comment, let us use part of Williams' characterization of foundationalism here. Two important features for our purposes follow from his characterization: first, the purely structural demand upon justification, that justification is a one-way relation so that no reciprocal justification is possible and, second, the claim that what serves as justification, structured in this way, belongs to a kind of knowledge that is epistemically prior to what is justified by it.¹⁸

Given this characterization, and presupposing the validity of the skeptical argument, one could claim that while having a foundational view upon the evidential relation obtaining between E and O constitutes a sufficient condition for being exposed to the skeptical challenge, foundationalism does not constitute a necessary condition.¹⁹ Once again, we would have to examine particular examples of projects of validation for details. What seems clear is that if one denies that sensory experience has *any* evidential relevance for O, then one is not affected by the Cartesian skeptical challenge. However, the skeptical conclusion may hold even if sensory evidence does *not alone* constitute E, but as part of a conjunction with other kinds of evidence²⁰ – from now on 'the conjunction view'. The mere fact that other kinds of evidence are added or allowed is not sufficient for escaping skepticism. The skeptical strategy would still be to show either that the other conjuncts face similar underdetermination problems or that they do not remove

¹⁸ Williams 2001a, 81–5. His characterization in fact lays stronger conditions upon a position in order to qualify as foundationalism. For instance his structural thesis specifies an end to the chain of justification to which another 'substantive' demand is added that the *terminata* constitutes a self-evident foundation (see section 5 below). However, the features pointed to here still play a crucial rôle in his conception and if it can be shown, as is attempted in this section and in section 5, that a weaker claim regarding the evidential rôle of sensory evidence is all that is needed to bring skepticism about, then Williams' stronger claim regarding the rôle of foundationalism is anyway refuted. (The present author makes an attempt at characterizing foundationalism in Janvid 2001 15–7.)

Brueckner refers to Williams in footnote 9 of Brueckner 1994, 834–5.

¹⁹ Stroud makes this point in Stroud 1984. Williams comments upon it by saying that '[b]ut now the burden is on the sceptic to formulate an argument that does not depend on this doctrine. In my view, no such argument has ever been given' (Williams 2001a, 187). The present author takes on this challenge in this section and in section 5 below.

²⁰ If E is instead regarded as a disjunction with sensory evidence, or a proposition reporting them, as one of the disjuncts, then one escapes Cartesian skepticism. But then one does not claim that sensory evidence constitutes a necessary condition for the validation of knowledge-claims about the external world. The present author is also at loss to find an actual example of such a position.

Throughout this paper the focus is upon evidential relations within an internalist framework. Externalist views of justification and internalist theories that allow non-evidential justification are thus disregarded. Discussing their relation to skepticism is a topic for another occasion. I am grateful to an anonymous referee of this journal for pressing me to further clarify this demarcation. Concerning this demarcation, Williams claims that '[e]xternalism in the theory of knowledge is acceptable only in the aftermath of a successful theoretical diagnosis of sceptical problems' (Williams 1996) pp. xx. See also Williams 1996, 318 and the discussion in Ch. 2 of Williams 2001a.

the crucial underdetermination of the sensory experience conjunct.²¹ Moreover, *even* if one of the other conjuncts would indeed block the inference to the skeptical conclusion, this does not show that foundationalism serves as a necessary condition, rather than as a sufficient one, which is the claim at stake here and which the conjunction view serves as a counter example to.

If the obtained conjunction does not favor the knowledge-claim O over the skeptical hypothesis H, then O is unjustified and the skeptic has the upper hand. Though sketchy, the conjunction view shows that not only ‘an objectionable foundationalism’ is implicated, but many other epistemological positions,²² perhaps including contextualism, as we shall see in section 5 below. In short, the burden of proof is upon the dogmatist to come up with a validation – including a solution to the second problem and a way of dealing with the skeptical ‘solution’ of the first – which is not vulnerable to the skeptical challenge. Merely accusing the skeptic of presupposing foundationalism does not offer a way out of the trap set by skepticism.

Thus, foundationalism does not serve as a necessary presupposition for Cartesian skepticism. Williams is a philosopher who recently has argued that this position together with a position he calls ‘epistemological realism’ do indeed constitute such necessary assumptions for the skeptical argument to go through. In the next section, his claim concerning the additional assumption of epistemological realism will be considered.

5. *Contextualism and epistemological realism*

In two recent books,²³ and in a number of papers, Williams offers what he calls a ‘theoretical diagnosis’ of skepticism. According to this diagnosis, the traditional epistemologist and her skeptical opponent share the assumption of epistemological realism, which Williams claims constitutes a necessary condition for the possibility of skepticism. If that assumption is abandoned, then Cartesian skeptical arguments remain valid, but end up as unsound since the premise of epistemolog-

²¹ Certain candidates of the other conjuncts spring to mind, though in the end they are unhelpful. Quine, among others, has shown that underdetermination is not a phenomenon that merely affect sensory evidence, but instead a global feature of theories. Showing how the skeptic may exploit this phenomenon concerning candidates for other conjuncts is, however, a paper for another occasion. One of Quine’s responses to skepticism, ‘the no cosmic exile’-strategy, would be an example of a non-foundationalist strategy where other kinds of evidence play a rôle. It is discussed and criticized in Ch. 4 of Janvid 2001.

²² Yalçın argues for the same conclusion. In Yalçın 1992, 18, he writes ‘there is nothing in the concept of non-foundationalism that precludes the possibility of the same body of evidence justifying incompatible sets of statements’. The point is well taken.

²³ Williams 1996 and Williams 2001a. Although the former work gives a fuller account, I shall for the sake of brevity here focus upon the latter work. The basic point relevant for our purposes about epistemological realism as a presupposition for skepticism, is advocated in both works.

ical realism is false. Contextualism, in Williams' version, precisely consists in a denial of this premise and in this way contextualism offers a way out of the skeptical quagmire.²⁴

It is this claim regarding epistemological realism and its status as a presupposition for skepticism that will be examined here, so most of Williams' interesting development of his contextualist alternative will be left out of this essay.²⁵

In Williams' terminology epistemological realism does not depict what it usually does. Traditionally, epistemological realism is the well-known view that the epistemological object's existence and constitution is independent of the epistemological subject. The alternative to this position is epistemological *idealism* which holds the negation to be true. Instead, Williams uses the label to characterize a meta-epistemological view about the object of epistemology itself, that is knowledge. If you are an epistemological realist on this second-order level, then you hold knowledge to be a context-invariant entity, as having an essence and as constituting a natural kind like gold and water. According to epistemological realism, beliefs have an intrinsic epistemic status.²⁶

The connection that is supposed to hold between epistemological realism and foundationalism is not completely clear, but seems to go along the following lines. Cartesian skepticism presupposes what Williams calls 'substantive' foundationalism.²⁷ Substantive foundationalism is what one gets when a foundationalist structure of justification (what Williams calls structural foundationalism; see section 4 above) is coupled with epistemological realism.²⁸ As a result, a substantive foundationalist holds that knowledge-claims concerning the external world, which are conceived of as a distinct context-invariant kind of knowledge, must be grounded upon an epistemically more basic kind of evidence – sensory evidence. Williams also says that substantive foundationalism is an *articulation* of epistemological

²⁴ In his recent overview of skepticism (Pritchard 2002), Pritchard calls this version 'inferentialist' contextualism, to distinguish it from, for instance, 'semantic' versions, which DeRose, whom we saw advances the AI form, represents. Williams' inferential contextualism is presented on pp. 234–6 and semantic contextualism in section 5 (pp. 224–8).

For an account of the term 'theoretical diagnosis', see Williams 1996, xv–xvii and 31–40 and Williams 2001a, 146–7 and 253–5.

²⁵ The present author hopes to return to Williams' version of contextualism on another occasion. It is for instance not clear whether epistemological realism and contextualism are contradictories or contraries. Presumably Williams intends contextualism and epistemological realism to constitute a contradictory pair, but this is a questionable thesis.

²⁶ See, for instance, Williams 1996, 113. These four characterizations are not *prima facie* equivalent. Since contextualism is the alternative (contradictory?) view, it can be assumed that it is the first characterization which constitutes the definition of epistemological realism, but then it can be questioned whether the second and third really are equivalent or follow. (The fourth could charitably be read as a reformulation of the first.)

Williams says that his choice of label comes from the analogy with scientific realism's view upon the objects of inquiry for science in Williams 1996, 108–9 and Williams 2001a, 193.

²⁷ Williams 2001a, 187.

²⁸ Williams 2001a, 83–4.

realism.²⁹ It is perhaps not the only possible articulation, but still the traditionally most common or typical articulation of epistemological realism.

As his contextualist alternative, Williams holds that the epistemic status of a knowledge-claim, whether it is justified so as to constitute knowledge, depends upon various contextually variable factors, what Williams calls constraints or necessities of different kinds, like intelligibility constraints, methodological, dialectical constraints and so on.³⁰ Mere sensory evidence, understood from the point of view of substantive foundationalism, is not enough. Such evidence can only come into play *qua* evidence within a context determined by such constraints. Without them neither sensory input nor beliefs caused by them have any epistemic status whatsoever. Williams claims that this contextualist point is missed by all epistemological realists, both substantive foundationalists *and* skeptics. With this contextualist thesis in place, Williams argues that skeptical doubts concerning our knowledge-claims about the external world become as epistemologically moot as worries about knowledge-claims made on Wednesdays.³¹ We would not, *prima facie* at least, regard such knowledge-claims as forming an epistemic *kind*. From a contextualist point of view the same negative conclusion holds for knowledge-claims about the world, the past and so on.

Now, with the point concerning the rôle of foundationalism in isolation from section 4 in place, the claim concerning foundationalism and epistemological realism in tandem, that is substantive foundationalism, can be met as well. If we add the various contextual constraints as conditions for a knowledge-claim to constitute knowledge, as Williams may be interpreted as claiming, then we precisely form the evidential proposition for a knowledge-claim as a conjunction along the lines suggested in section 4 with sensory evidence as one conjunct in the conjunction together with the contextual constraints. Each conjunct is a necessary condition and together they are held to express both necessary and sufficient conditions for a knowledge-claim to constitute knowledge (in a specific context). This view is surely different both from foundationalism in general *and* substantive foundationalism where the evidence for such a knowledge-claim *only* consists in sensory evidence.

However, the conjunction view is so far as exposed to skeptical arguments as substantive foundationalism is. As we saw in section 4, merely allowing other kinds of evidence does not by itself block the skeptical argument. That the addition of some specific kind of evidence would do so is something that needs to be shown before the skeptic admits defeat. Until then, as long as the dogmatist makes

²⁹ Williams 2001a, 193.

³⁰ Williams 2001a, 159–64. See also Williams, 1996, for instance, pp. 119, 121–5 and 133–4.

³¹ To take an example (which might be questioned) by Williams from Williams 2001a, 191. See also Williams, 1996) pp. xx, 101–2 and 108–9.

reference to what she saw, heard or sensed etc., the skeptic can argue that even if the conjunction that the sensory evidence is part of obtains, the dogmatic knowledge-claim in question does still not constitute knowledge since the conjunction does not favor the dogmatic knowledge-claim O over the skeptical hypothesis H. Besides, just as in the case of foundationalism alone, the possibility that some conjunct would indeed block the skeptical inference, does not show that substantive foundationalism serves as a necessary condition for Cartesian skepticism.

Furthermore, the vulnerability of the conjunction view does not depend upon requiring the conjunction serving as justification to be epistemically more basic or certain than what it justifies.³² To raise that demand in order for sensory evidence to serve as justification, is to read foundationalism in a question-begging way. The conjunction view shows that this demand is superfluous for sensory evidence to serve as justification and, accordingly, for the validity of the skeptical argument. As a brief elaboration of the conjunction view, if I justify my knowledge-claim that my colleague has arrived by saying that I just saw her enter her office, then it seems reasonable to hold that what it takes for my perception to serve as justification are conditions such as that it reports a true event etc. Certainty need not enter the picture. The same goes for metaphors of hierarchy, like being more basic, which we associate with foundationalism. Nor does the vulnerability of the conjunction view in itself presuppose that one regards knowledge-claims involving references to sensory evidence as forming a context-invariant natural kind or essence. Knowledge must indeed be subject to necessary conditions, but this is a far weaker demand.³³ Accordingly, epistemological realism *in any articulation* is not a presupposition for skepticism.

Since Williams claims that skeptical arguments are valid, but unsound from a contextualist perspective, this objection spells trouble for his position. Perhaps other conjuncts in the evidential conjunction could block the inference to the skeptical hypothesis H and so be made to favor O after all, but the burden of proof is upon the dogmatist including the inferential contextualist. It may also be the

³² It is true that if the justificatory rôle of this conjunction solely depended upon it in turn having an epistemically more basic foundation, so that its justificatory rôle was purely derivational, then such a view would not be affected by Cartesian skepticism. This would, however, not be a view where sensory evidence has any rôle to play on its own and it certainly does not capture Williams' own position, which lacks these kinds of fixed justificatory hierarchies and epistemic priorities.

Note that the points made in this paragraph of course also holds for a view where sensory evidence alone constitutes the evidence for knowledge-claims about the external world, but which lacks the substantive foundationalist features.

³³ This has been pointed out by Jacobson, in Jacobson 2001, 383–4, against Williams' claim that to regard knowledge as a natural kind serves as a presupposition for skepticism. Jacobson points out that knowledge can be subject to necessary conditions without constituting a natural kind. The skeptic can then argue that these conditions can be fulfilled without thereby favoring the dogmatic knowledge-claim over the rival skeptical hypothesis. The conjunction view would be a case in question.

case that the conjunction view does not capture this contextualist position, but then it at least provides a counterexample to his claim about the presuppositional rôle that both substantive foundationalism and epistemological realism alone play for skepticism.

6. Conclusion

It has here been argued that skeptical arguments typically and crucially depends upon an underdetermination principle which has been shown to be presupposed by a current rival analysis of the structure of skeptical arguments, the AI form. Moreover, the conclusion of the skeptical argument should not state that we *cannot* know the knowledge-claim under dispute since that is unnecessary for the relevance of the skeptical argument and invites the too easy counterobjection that this is something the skeptic does not know. Instead, the conclusion should just be that we do not know the knowledge-claim in question.

Furthermore and primarily, the claims that foundationalism and epistemological realism serve as necessary presuppositions for Cartesian skepticism, either in isolation or in tandem, have been refuted by showing how such arguments merely presuppose that sensory experience must play some indispensable rôle in the justification of knowledge-claims about the external world. Thereby many epistemological positions besides these two positions are exposed, perhaps even William's version of contextualism. In any case, skeptical arguments have hereby been shown to contain less objectionable assumptions than many of its critics have claimed.*

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* I am grateful to Henrik Bohlin, Caroline Hainer, Jan Willner, two anonymous referees of this journal and the editor of this journal, Philipp Keller, for comments upon earlier versions of this paper. Hans Mathlein's view on skepticism has also had a general influence on me that hereby is acknowledged. Work on this paper has been financed by a grant from The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation.

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