

RELEVANT ALTERNATIVES AND THE SHIFTING STANDARDS FOR KNOWLEDGE

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A widely discussed puzzle grows out of skeptical arguments like the following:

The Argument from Ignorance (AI)

1. I don't know that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat (henceforth a BIV).
2. If I don't know that I'm not a BIV, then I don't know that *there is a tree before me*. (Call the italicized proposition *T*.)

So,

C. I don't know that *T*.

Premises 1 and 2 are both plausible. However, *C* seems *false*—I *do* seem to know that there is a tree before me. *AI* presents a puzzle because its two plausible premises yield a conclusion whose *negation* is plausible. And no matter whether we accept or reject *AI*, we find that we must give up something plausible—either premise 1, premise 2, or the negation of *C*. But which of these should we give up? I call this question *the skeptical puzzle*.¹ Recently, Mark Heller² has argued that we can solve the skeptical puzzle by giving up premise 2. I argue, however, that Heller does not adequately respond to an objection to his proposed solution. I go on to argue that we can solve the skeptical puzzle by giving up premise 1.

I. Heller's Proposed Solution to the Skeptical Puzzle

To show why we should give up premise 2, Heller argues for a particular interpretation of the relevant alternatives (RA) theory of knowledge. According to RA, *S* knows that *p* only if she is in a position to eliminate all of the relevant alternatives to *p*.³ Heller claims that *AI*'s second premise is false if his interpretation of RA is true. He calls his interpretation Expanded Relevant Alternatives.

(ERA) *S* knows *p* only if *S* does not believe *p* in any of the closest not-*p* worlds or any more distant not-*p* worlds that are still close enough.⁴

ERA accounts for our inclination to think that if S knows that p, then she does not believe that p in any of the closest worlds in which p is false. However, we also think that something else is sometimes needed if S is to know that p. Imagine that “the actual world is cluttered with *papier-mâché* tree facsimiles which S is unable to distinguish from real trees” (200). In this case, we’re inclined to say that S doesn’t know that T even if she doesn’t believe that T in any of the closest not-T worlds. Here, even though worlds cluttered with *papier-mâché* tree facsimiles are not among the *closest* not-T worlds, they are close *enough* to the actual world to be epistemically relevant. So Heller claims that in at least some cases, if S is to know that p, she must not believe that p in any of the close enough not-p worlds.

Heller claims that since ERA is true, AI’s second premise is false.⁵ For there is some context C in which I know that T but in which I don’t know that I’m not a BIV. According to ERA, I know in C that T because I don’t believe that T in any of the not-T worlds that are close enough to the actual world.⁶ However, I do *not* know in C that I’m not a BIV. Since no worlds in which I am a BIV are among those that are close enough to the actual world,⁷ we must determine what I believe in the *closest* BIV worlds if we are to determine whether I know in C that I’m not a BIV. And since I do believe in those worlds that I’m not a BIV, I don’t know in C that I’m not a BIV. So given that ERA is true, AI’s second premise is false: I can know that there is a tree before me even though I don’t know that I’m not a BIV.⁸ Thus, we can solve the skeptical puzzle by giving up AI’s second premise.

II. Trouble with Heller’s Proposed Solution

But precisely because he is committed to the falsity of AI’s second premise, Heller is committed to the truth of what Keith DeRose calls the abominable conjunction.

(AC) I know that there is a tree before me, but I don’t know that I’m not a BIV.

Like DeRose, Heller thinks that AC seems false and thus recognizes that he needs to explain *why* it seems false. DeRose claims that AC *seems* false because it *is* false. But DeRose’s explanation is not available to Heller since Heller claims that AC is *true*. Nevertheless, Heller believes that he can explain AC’s seeming falsity with resources provided by contextualism, according to which the standards for knowledge vary from context to context.⁹ Heller claims that context alone determines which worlds are close enough to the actual world to count as epistemically relevant.¹⁰ So suppose that we’re in a context in which the skeptic utters the conjunction ‘I know that T, but I don’t know that I’m not a BIV’.

Being accommodating conversational partners, we “adjust the conversational score” (204) in a way that makes those BIV worlds close enough to be relevant.¹¹ In such contexts, it turns out not only that I don’t know that I’m not a BIV, but also that I don’t know that T. For, in BIV worlds, I believe that T even though T is false. Heller concludes that AC seems false because it *is* false in “context[s] in which the conjunction is uttered” (205). However, “this does not stop [AC] from being true in contexts in which it is not asserted” (204). Thus, ERA can explain AC’s seeming falsity while still maintaining its occasional truth.

But Heller’s response to DeRose’s objection does not work. Heller claims that for beliefs such as my belief that T, the standards for knowledge—the worlds throughout which my belief that T must track the truth if I am to know that T—*shift*. In *ordinary* contexts, my belief that T must track the truth only throughout the closest and close enough not-T worlds. And since my belief sometimes tracks the truth throughout those worlds, I can know in ordinary contexts that T. Yet in *skeptical* contexts, which include contexts in which the skeptic asserts AC, my belief that T must track the truth to worlds that lie beyond the close enough not-T worlds. In particular, it must track the truth to BIV worlds. And since it does not track the truth to those worlds, I don’t know in skeptical contexts that T.

The problem is that, according to Heller, the standards for knowledge do *not* shift for my belief that I’m not a BIV. In *both* ordinary *and* skeptical contexts, my belief that I’m not a BIV must track the truth throughout the same sphere of worlds, namely, the sphere that is centered on the actual world and that extends to the closest and close enough BIV worlds. Since my belief that I’m not a BIV doesn’t track the truth throughout those worlds, I know that I’m not a BIV neither in ordinary contexts nor in skeptical contexts.

But why do the standards for knowledge shift for some beliefs but not for others? Heller provides no answer to this question. Perhaps he’ll say that the standards shift for beliefs about the external world but not for beliefs to the effect that radical skeptical hypotheses are false. But it’s not clear why the standards should shift only for beliefs of the former sort. In fact, several contextualists claim that the standards shift for beliefs of both sorts.¹²

Heller might also say that the standards shift for my belief that T but not for my belief that I’m not a BIV since my being a BIV is *always* a relevant alternative to my not being a BIV but only *sometimes* a relevant alternative to T. But this simply restates the incongruity and hence fails to explain it.¹³ In the absence of an explanation of this incongruity, it seems *ad hoc* to insist that it exists.¹⁴

Furthermore, the incongruity is not merely irksome. Unless Heller explains the incongruity, it threatens to ruin his contextualist solution to the skeptical puzzle. The success of Heller's solution depends on his being able adequately to respond to DeRose's objection, and the adequacy of his response to DeRose's objection depends on his being able to explain why AC seems false even though it is very often true. And the unexplained incongruity—the unexplained idea that the standards shift for some beliefs but not for others—is precisely the claim Heller needs in order to explain why AC seems false even though it is often true.

Heller says that in ordinary contexts AC is true (i.e. AI's second premise is false). I can know in ordinary contexts that T because my belief that T tracks the truth throughout the worlds relevant to my knowing that T. These worlds are those that are in *the not-T sphere*, the sphere of worlds that is centered on the actual world and that extends to the closest and close enough not-T worlds. But I *don't* know in ordinary contexts that I'm not a BIV, for my belief does not track the truth throughout the worlds relevant to my knowing that I'm not a BIV. These worlds are those that are in *the BIV sphere*, the sphere of worlds that is centered on the actual world and that extends to the closest and close enough BIV worlds.

Yet AC seems false because in skeptical contexts it *is* false. In those contexts, the worlds in the BIV sphere are relevant both to my knowing that T and to my knowing that I'm not a BIV. And neither my belief that T nor my belief that I'm not a BIV tracks the truth throughout the worlds in the BIV sphere. So, in skeptical contexts, I know neither that I'm not a BIV nor that T.

Now, notice that the incongruity is essential to Heller's response to DeRose's objection. For it allows Heller to explain why AC seems false even though it is very often true. If Heller's explanation is to work, two things must be true. First, the standards for knowing that T must shift. My belief that T must track the truth throughout the not-T sphere if I am to know in ordinary contexts that T, but it must track the truth throughout the BIV sphere if I am to know in skeptical contexts that T. If Heller were to say that the standards for knowing that T do *not* shift, he'd have to say that the standards for knowing that T are either invariantly high or invariantly low. If he were to say the former, he'd have to say that I don't know that T even in *ordinary* contexts and thus that AC is *false* in such contexts. If he were to say the latter, he'd have to say that I know that T even in *skeptical* contexts and thus that AC is *true* in such contexts. Since neither of these options is compatible with his response to DeRose's objection, Heller must maintain that the standards for knowing that T shift.

Second, the standards for knowing that I'm not a BIV must *not* shift. In both ordinary and skeptical contexts, my belief that I'm not a BIV must track the truth throughout the BIV sphere if it is to count as knowledge. Here, too, if Heller were to say that the standards for my belief that I'm not a BIV *do* shift, he would presumably say that the standards are low in some contexts but high in others. This opens up the possibility that I *do* know in ordinary contexts that I'm not a BIV. Thus, if the standards for knowing that I'm not a BIV shift, it seems quite likely that AC's second conjunct, and thus AC itself, is *false* in ordinary contexts. Again, this is incompatible with Heller's claim that AC is true in such contexts. He must maintain, therefore, that the standards for knowing that I'm not a BIV do not shift.

So the unexplained incongruity is essential to Heller's response to DeRose's objection. Heller must maintain the incongruity if he is to respond as he does to that objection. Unfortunately, this means that Heller's response to DeRose is unfounded, for he leaves the incongruity unexplained. And in the absence of an explanation, we need not believe that any such incongruity exists. Furthermore, since the success of Heller's solution to the skeptical puzzle depends on the success of his response to DeRose's objection, I conclude that Heller's solution to the skeptical puzzle is unsuccessful. He must rely on something other than an unexplained and seemingly *ad hoc* incongruity if he is to solve the skeptical puzzle.

III. A Moorean Solution to the Skeptical Puzzle

There are three ways to eliminate this incongruity from a solution to the skeptical puzzle. First, we can say that the standards for knowledge can shift for *all* beliefs.¹⁵ We might also say that the standards shift for *no* beliefs. The skeptic claims that the standards are invariantly *high*, while the Moorean, as I will call her, claims that the standards are invariantly *low*. In what follows, I sketch an argument for the Moorean position.¹⁶

Both contextualism and skepticism must admit that there are contexts in which I don't know that T. The skeptic believes that I never know that T, and the contextualist believes that I don't know that T in contexts in which the standards for knowledge are unusually high. Few of us are willing completely to concede to the skeptic, and even the contextualist's small concessions—if they really are *small*—are somewhat disagreeable, if not altogether unpalatable. Perhaps, then, we should favor a Moorean response. Such a response, unlike either skepticism or contextualism, is forced to make no concessions to the skeptic.

I begin my sketch of a Moorean response by pointing out that solutions to skepticism, and epistemology in general, should address *our* situation as epistemic agents. This means, among other things, that when epistemology is concerned with belief-forming methods and with ways of coming to know, it should be concerned only with *our* methods and ways. Given this, the only alternative situations that are epistemically relevant are those in which we use *our* belief-forming methods.

So are BIV worlds relevant to my knowing that I'm not a BIV? No, for the methods that BIVs use in forming their beliefs are not my belief-forming methods. I believe that I'm not a BIV either via perception—perhaps I believe that I'm not a BIV because I perceive that T—or via an inference from perceptual beliefs—perhaps I believe that I'm not a BIV on the basis of an inference from my perceptual belief that T. But the BIV's belief is based on its phenomenal experiences, which are produced by scientists who are using a sophisticated artificial process in order to stimulate its brain electrochemically. And this method is not among our perceptual methods.

But perhaps the following analysis of visual perception supports a different conclusion:

Some belief-forming method B is visual perception if and only if its final experiential upshots are the same as the final experiential upshots of method A, where method A is the method that we ordinarily count as visual perception.¹⁷

But this analysis is mistaken. It counts as visual perception methods that seem to be something other than visual perception.

Suppose that Ray has been blind from birth. One day, however, he has a phenomenal experience as of a purplish light, and he mistakenly believes on the basis of this experience that he is gaining his sight. Of course, Ray's purplish experience is the final upshot of some method—call it Ray's belief-forming method—and we may suppose that his experience is the same as the final experiential upshots of visual experience. (Perhaps it's the same as my visual experience of a purple light flashing in a dark room.) Now, according to the above analysis, Ray's belief-forming method counts as visual perception. But this seems to be a mistake; ordinarily, we wouldn't say that Ray's belief-forming method counts as visual perception. Just as we might say that the final upshots of last night's dream are the same as the final upshots of visual perception, we might say that the final upshot of Ray's belief-forming method is the same as the final upshots of visual perception. But just as in the case of dreams, we conclude from this only that Ray has had an experience of a certain sort. We do not conclude that Ray's belief-forming method—or last night's dreaming—counts as visual perception.

This suggests that the above analysis of visual perception is unsatisfactory.

This allows us to say, then, as perhaps we should, that our method of visual perception includes

the lenses of the eyes focussing ... light on the retinas, where a pattern of retinal cell stimulation occurs that sends electro-chemical impulses along the optic nerve to the visual cortex, where a pattern of brain cell stimulation occurs with the upshot that the subject has a visual experience.¹⁸

Typically, processes like the one described here must occupy a central position in the characterization of a belief-forming method if we are to count that method as visual perception.¹⁹ This means that things like (properly-functioning) retinas help to individuate our visual perceptual belief-forming method. And, *ex hypothesi*, BIVs lack retinas. This suggests that the BIV's belief that it isn't a BIV is produced by methods that are different from ours. So no BIV worlds are worlds in which my belief that I'm not a BIV is produced by the same methods that produce it in the actual world. Thus, no BIV worlds are relevant to my knowing that I'm not a BIV. We may therefore maintain that the standards for knowledge are invariantly low. None of my beliefs, not even my belief that I'm not a BIV, needs to track the truth to BIV worlds in order to count as knowledge. I can therefore know across contexts not only that T, but also that I'm not a BIV. Since this Moorean solution to skepticism salvages our ordinary claims to knowledge while committing us to no disagreeable skeptical conclusions, I conclude that we should prefer it over both skepticism and contextualism.²⁰

Notes

¹ I present the puzzle as having implications only for a particular belief (or only for a few beliefs) about the external world. Nevertheless, the puzzle has general implications. For a presentation of the puzzle that brings out these general implications, see Keith DeRose, "Solving the Skeptical Problem", in Keith DeRose and Ted A. Warfield, eds., *Skepticism: A Contemporary Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 183-219.

² Mark Heller, "Relevant Alternatives and Closure", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1999), pp.196-208. All page references in the text are to this article.

³ This theory was first proposed by Fred Dretske and by Alvin I. Goldman. See Fred Dretske, "Epistemic Operators", in *Perception, Knowledge and Belief: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 30-47; Fred Dretske, "The Pragmatic Dimension of Knowledge", in *Perception, Knowledge and Belief: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 48-63; and Alvin I.

Goldman, “Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge”, in George S. Pappas and Marshall Swain, eds., *Essays on Knowledge and Justification* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 120-145.

⁴ See Heller, “Relevant Alternatives and Closure”, p. 201. On its face, ERA might not look very much like a relevant alternatives theory. But Heller says, “RA tells us that ‘S knows p’ contains, after analysis, a component like ‘S can rule out all of the relevant not-p worlds’. We might understand this in the following way: there is a certain set of worlds selected as relevant, and S must be able to rule out the not-p worlds within that set” (“Relevant Alternatives and Closure”, p. 197). So even though ERA makes no apparent mention of relevant alternatives or of eliminating them, it is nonetheless a relevant alternatives theory.

⁵ See Heller, “Relevant Alternatives and Closure”, p. 196.

⁶ Here, we need to consider only the close *enough* not-T worlds since those worlds include the *closest* not-T worlds.

⁷ See Heller, “Relevant Alternatives and Closure”, p. 202.

⁸ Still, Heller claims that there are times when the truth of AI’s second premise “is preserved” (“Relevant Alternatives and Closure”, p. 205). He claims that at those times, I don’t know the things I ordinarily take myself to know (e.g. that there is a tree before me), nor do I then know that I’m not a BIV. (In fact, he suggests that I *never* know that I’m not a BIV. That is, he suggests that premise 1 of AI is *always* true. See Heller, “Relevant Alternatives and Closure”, p. 206.)

⁹ Contemporary contextualists are primarily concerned with the truth conditions of knowledge-ascribing and knowledge-denying sentences, sentences such as ‘Keith knows that he has hands’ and ‘Stewart doesn’t know that he’s not a BIV’ (see, for example, Keith DeRose, “Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense”, in John Greco and Ernest Sosa, eds., *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 187-205). Nevertheless, contextualists often “semantically descend” from talk of the truth conditions of such sentences to talk of the standards for knowledge (see Keith DeRose, “Now You Know It, Now You Don’t”, in *Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy: Volume V, Epistemology* (Bowling Green, OH: Philosophy Documentation Center, 1999), pp. 1-16). DeRose seems to believe that such a semantic descent is permissible as long as we remember that the primary concern is with the truth conditions of certain sentences. So, like DeRose and others, I often talk of the standards for knowledge rather than of the truth conditions of knowledge-ascribing and knowledge-denying sentences.

Also, contemporary contextualists seem to believe that *contexts* are *conversations*. So whatever the criteria are for the individuation of conversations, those same criteria, or at least some very similar ones, will be the criteria for the individuation of contexts.

¹⁰ See Heller, “Relevant Alternatives and Closure”, pp. 201, 203.

¹¹ See Heller, “Relevant Alternatives and Closure”, p. 204.

¹² See DeRose, “Solving the Skeptical Problem”; Stewart Cohen, “How to be a Fallibilist”, *Philosophical Perspectives* 2, *Epistemology* (1988), pp. 91-123; Stewart Cohen, “Contextualism, Skepticism, and the Structure of Reasons”, *Philosophical Perspectives* 13, *Epistemology* (1999), pp. 57-89; and Steven Rieber, “Skepticism and Contrastive Explanation”, *Nous* 32 (1998), pp. 189-204.

¹³ Furthermore, it seems that we need not believe that the BIV alternative is *always* relevant to my knowing that I’m not a BIV and *sometimes* relevant to my knowing that T. Dretske claims that the possibility that an animal is a cleverly disguised mule is always relevant to my knowing that it’s not a cleverly disguised mule. However, he suggests that the cleverly disguised mule alternative is *never* relevant to my knowing that this animal is a zebra. (See Dretske, “Epistemic Operators”.) Likewise, we might think that the BIV alternative is never relevant to my knowing that T. So we need not believe that the standards for knowledge shift for some beliefs but not for others.

¹⁴ David Henderson, who commented on this paper at the Southwestern Philosophical Society’s meetings, helped me to realize that Heller’s incongruity might not be wholly unexplained. Why, then, might the standards shift for my belief that T but not for my belief that I’m not a BIV? The *content* of my belief that I’m not a BIV demands that my belief track the truth to the closest BIV worlds if it is to count as knowledge. And since those worlds are astonishingly distant, no *context* can demand that my belief track the truth farther. Furthermore, the content of my belief that T demands that my belief track the truth to the closest not-T worlds in order to count as knowledge. But since those worlds are not very far away, some contexts *can* demand that my belief track the truth to worlds beyond the closest not-T worlds.

However, even though this might help to explain the incongruity, it does not, I think, fully explain it. Heller recognizes two interpretations of the relevant alternatives theory of knowledge. First, the subjunctive conditionals account, or (SC), says that S knows that p only if S doesn’t believe that p in any of the closest not-p worlds. According to (SC), whether or not a world is relevant to my belief’s counting as knowledge depends solely on the content of my belief. Second, as I’ve noted, (ERA) says that S knows that p only if S doesn’t believe that p in any of the closest not-p worlds or any of the more distant not-p worlds that are still close enough. According to (ERA), whether or not a world is relevant to my belief’s counting as knowledge depends both on the content of belief and on the *context*. But there is a third interpretation of the relevant alternatives theory, an interpretation according to which whether or not a world is relevant to my belief’s counting as knowledge *depends solely on the context*. On this third alternative, my belief that T and my belief that I’m not a BIV must, when considered in the same context, track the truth throughout the same contextually-determined sphere of worlds if they are to count as knowledge. Thus, since Heller does not give us a reason to believe that this alternative is unavailable, he has not yet fully explained why the standards for knowledge should shift for some beliefs but not for others.

¹⁵ DeRose and other contextualists adopt this strategy. See DeRose, “Solving the Skeptical Problem”; Cohen, “How to be a Fallibilist”; Cohen, “Contextualism, Skepticism, and the Structure of Reasons”; Rieber, “Skepticism and Contrastive

Explanation”; and David Lewis, “Elusive Knowledge”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1996), pp. 549-567.

¹⁶ Unfortunately, I will here be able only to sketch the argument. For the details, see my “A Moorean Response to Brain-in-a-vat Skepticism”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, forthcoming.

¹⁷ For an analysis of this sort, see Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), especially pp. 179-185. From now on, I will focus, as so many writers do, on vision.

¹⁸ Brian P. McLaughlin, “Lewis on What Distinguishes Perception from Hallucination”, in Kathleen Akins, ed., *Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 198-231. The quotation is from page 200. I do not mean to suggest that our notion of visual perception includes *only* these things. Our notion of visual perception seems to include certain core physiological and neurophysiological elements while still allowing for variation. Thus, our notion of visual perception can accommodate the fact that human beings with prosthetic rather than natural eyes see. See David Lewis, “Veridical Hallucination and Prosthetic Vision”, in *Philosophical Papers, Volume II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 273-286.

¹⁹ Processes similar or analogous to the one described should occupy central positions in the characterization of other belief-forming methods—such as hearing, tasting, and smelling—if we want to distinguish them from methods that do not count as perceptual belief-forming methods.

²⁰ I would like to thank Albert Casullo and David Henderson for their very helpful comments on this paper.