

## **A Relevant Alternatives Solution to the Bootstrapping and Self-Knowledge Problems**

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The main argument given for relevant alternatives theories of knowledge has been that they answer scepticism about the external world. I will argue that relevant alternatives also solve two other problems that have been much discussed in recent years, a) the bootstrapping problem and b) the apparent conflict between semantic externalism and armchair self-knowledge. Furthermore, I will argue that scepticism and Mooreanism can be embedded within the relevant alternatives framework.

Several philosophers have defended similar approaches.<sup>1</sup> What I hope to show in this paper is that the problems can be solved with minimal assumptions, that the assumptions needed are independently motivated by the relevant alternatives solution to the sceptical problem of the external world, and that the relevant alternatives framework can also express the Moorean and sceptical positions.

In section 1 I explain the relevant alternatives framework and argue that it can be accepted by almost everyone. In section 2 I use the relevant alternatives framework to explain a fallacious inference principle, which is then applied to give a response to scepticism about the external world. Then I show how the Moorean and sceptical positions can be expressed in the relevant alternatives framework. In section 3 I argue that the relevant alternatives framework can be used to resolve the bootstrapping problem and in section 4 I explain how the the relevant alternatives framework resolves the apparent conflict between semantic externalism and armchair self-knowledge.

### **1. Relevant alternatives**

In this section I will explain what I mean by ‘relevant alternatives’ and argue that a wide range of epistemologies can endorse a relevant alternatives framework. This suggests a new taxonomy that allows a wide range of epistemologists to use the analyses I offer.

Let’s start with the familiar sceptical problem of the external world. Consider the following argument.

1. Bob knows he has hands
2. Therefore Bob knows he’s a non-brain-in-a-vat.

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<sup>1</sup> Notably Brown (1995) ‘The Incompatibility of Anti-Individualism and Privileged Access’, *Analysis* 55:149-156, (2004) *Anti-Individualism and Knowledge*, MIT, Goldberg (2003) ‘What do you know when you know your own thoughts?’ in Nuccetelli, S. (2003), (2007) *Internalism and Externalism in Semantics and Epistemology* Oxford University Press, Neta (2005) "[A Contextualist Solution to the Problem of Easy Knowledge](#)", *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 69: 63 – 85 and Warfield (1992) ‘Privileged Self-Knowledge and Externalism are Compatible’ *Analysis* 52(4): 232-237.

The problem is that 1 looks true, but seems to entail 2, which looks false. We can usefully divide responses into three categories. First, some deny 1 and 2; call them sceptics.<sup>2</sup> Second, some accept 1 and 2; call them Mooreans.<sup>3</sup> Third, some accept 1 and deny 2; call them compatibilists.<sup>4</sup>

A plausible compatibilist strategy is to make use of relevant alternatives as follows:

*Relevant alternatives strategy*

The argument 1-2 fails because

- (a) knowledge requires the elimination of relevant alternatives
- (b) which expand between 1 and 2.

For example, the compatibilist could say that the brain-in-vat possibility is irrelevant to 1 but relevant to 2. We'll call (a) the relevant alternatives framework and the conjunction of (a) and (b) the relevant alternatives strategy. (We will only deal with necessary constraints on knowledge. We can remain neutral on what is sufficient for knowledge.)

Which epistemologies can be combined with both (a) and (b)? Early explicit proponents of relevant alternatives include Austin<sup>5</sup> and Dretske<sup>6</sup>, and the strategy has since been developed in various ways. For example, one choice-point on which we can remain neutral is the question of what determines which alternatives are relevant. Some hold that the relevant possibilities are determined by the physical circumstances of the subject<sup>7</sup>, others by what the stakes are for the subject<sup>8</sup>, and others by the speaker of sentences 1 and 2<sup>9,10</sup>.

But other theories, such as reliabilism, which aren't usually thought of as relevant alternatives theories, can be very naturally combined with relevant alternatives. Consider the following, from one of Goldman's<sup>11</sup> seminal papers on reliabilism:

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<sup>2</sup> E.g. Unger 1975 *Ignorance: The case for scepticism* Oxford University Press

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Moore (1959) "Proof of an External World" in *Philosophical Papers*, London: Allen and Unwin, Klein (1981) *Certainty, a Refutation of Scepticism*. University of Minnesota Press, Sosa (1999) 'How to Defeat Opposition to Moore'. *Philosophical Perspectives* 13: 141–53, Pryor (2000) 'The Skeptic and the Dogmatist' *Nous* 34:4 pp. 517–549.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Dretske 1971 'Conclusive Reasons' *Australian Journal of Philosophy* 49 (1): 1–22, Nozick 1981 *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), Cohen 1988 'How to be a fallibilist' *Philosophical Perspectives*, Vol. 2, pp. 91–123, Lewis 1996 'Elusive Knowledge' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74:549–67.

<sup>5</sup> Austin, J.L. (1946): 'Other Minds', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 20(suppl.), 149–187.

<sup>6</sup> Dretske, F. (1970): 'Epistemic Operators', *The Journal of Philosophy* 67, 1007–1023.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Safety based theoreis; Dretske 1981 'The Pragmatic Dimension of Knowledge' *Philosophical Studies* 40: 363–78, Pritchard 2009 'Safety-Based Epistemology: Whither Now?', *Journal of Philosophical Research* 34, 33–45.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Subject-sensitive invariantism; see Hawthorne 2004 *Knowledge and Lotteries* Oxford University Press, Stanley 2005 *Knowledge and Practical Interests* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Contextualists; see Lewis 1996 'Elusive Knowledge' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74:549–67., Schaffer 2004 'From Contextualism to Contrastivism', *Philosophical Studies* 119, 73–103.

<sup>10</sup> Markie (2005) 'Easy Knowledge', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 70 argues that a particular (non-relevant alternatives) version of contextualism solves the bootstrapping problem. Cohen (2005) 'Why Basic Knowledge is Easy Knowledge' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LXX, 2, pp.417–430 gives a response I find convincing.

<sup>11</sup> Goldman, A. (1976): 'Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge', *Journal of Philosophy* 73, 771–791.

‘I suggest that a person is said to know that p just in case he distinguishes or discriminates the truth of p from relevant alternatives.’ p. 87

A reliabilist might also suggest that alternatives in which the same method is used are relevant, and alternatives where a different method is used are irrelevant (compare Nozick<sup>12</sup>).

And compare also the Wittgensteinian<sup>13</sup> inspired approach of Wright<sup>14</sup>:

All enquiry involves so far untested presuppositions...; and...the attempt to improve one’s epistemic position in this respect is doomed to failure, either because counterparts of the original presuppositions recur or because they themselves recur as presuppositions of the second investigation.

If presuppositions are ineliminable by enquiry then the denials of these presuppositions must be set aside in some other way. Wright suggests that we have an a priori entitlement to set them aside (compare Burge<sup>15</sup> and Peacocke<sup>16</sup>). But what explains this a priori entitlement? An explanation could be provided if the denials of these presuppositions were *irrelevant*. And if what’s relevant shifts from one enquiry to another, this is an instance of the relevant alternatives strategy.<sup>17</sup>

So a wide range of epistemologies are compatible with the relevant alternatives strategy.<sup>18</sup> Are any opposed? Philosophers vocally opposed to relevant alternatives tend to be sceptics or Mooreans; but one can accept (a) that knowledge requires the elimination of relevant alternatives, without accepting (b) that they expand between 1 and 2. I will shortly argue that Mooreans and sceptics can be understood as accepting (a) without (b), and that this is a useful way to frame the debate. To anticipate, sceptics hold that sceptical alternatives are always relevant, whereas Mooreans hold that sceptical alternatives are never relevant.

There is no neutral terminology for expressing the relevant alternatives. One way to express them is to say that A knows p *rather than* q; but this might be taken to imply the contrastive view that knowledge is a three-place relation, to which we need not be committed.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* p.179

<sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein, L. 1969: *On Certainty*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell

<sup>14</sup> Wright (2011) ‘Frictional coherentism? A comment on chapter 10 of Ernest Sosa’s *Reflective Knowledge*’ *Philosophical Studies* 153 (1):29-41. Earlier works where the similar ideas are developed include Wright, C. (2002) ‘(Anti-)Sceptics Simple and Subtle: G. E. Moore and John McDowell’ *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 65, No. 2 pp. 330-348, (2004) and ‘On epistemic entitlement: Warrant for nothing (and foundations for free?)’ *Aristotelian Society Supplementary* LXXVIII 167-212.

<sup>15</sup> Burge, T. (2003) ‘Perceptual Entitlement’ *Philosophical and Phenomenological Research* Vol. 67, No. 3 pp. 503-548

<sup>16</sup> Peacocke (2004) ‘Explaining Perceptual Entitlement’ In Richard Schantz (ed.), *The Externalist Challenge* De Gruyter. 441--80.

<sup>17</sup> Wright *ibid.* suggests that presuppositions may be the key to solving the bootstrapping problem, and I develop this suggestion.

<sup>18</sup> Schaffer (2004) ‘From Contextualism to Contrastivism’, *Philosophical Studies* 119, 73-103 suggests that ‘there is virtually a one-one function from major analyses of knowledge to contextualists, by the rule ‘has advocated a contextualized version’. This function maps the JTB analysis onto Cohen, the tracking analysis onto DeRose, the elimination analysis onto Lewis, and the reliability analysis onto Heller.’ p.95 fn. 6.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Rather than’ need not commit us to contrastivism though. Indeed, Dretske used ‘rather than’ when explaining his own relevant alternatives theory: ‘When I explain why Brenda did not order any desert by saying that she was full...I explain why she did not order any desert *rather than, as opposed to, or instead of* ordering some desert and

So instead, to indicate that q expresses the relevant alternatives, I will say that A knows p by *eliminating* q.<sup>20</sup>

## 2. A Faulty Principle

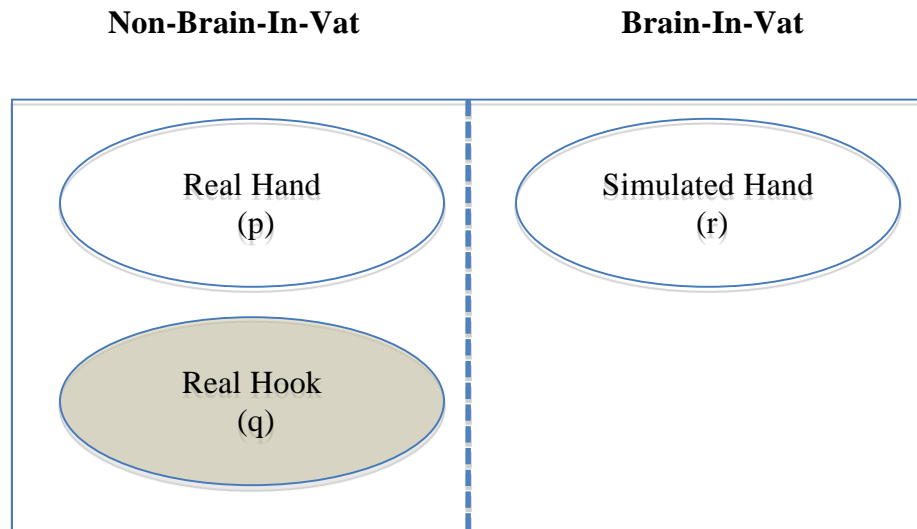
Which inference principles are valid for relevant alternatives theories? Schaffer<sup>21</sup> offers a systematic discussion, but for our purposes we just need the fact that knowledge does not survive an expansion of the relevant alternatives. The idea is very intuitive – the agent being able to eliminate one set of alternatives does not mean she can eliminate an expanded set of alternatives.

Let's apply this to the problem of the external world. Recall:

1. Bob knows he has hands.
2. Therefore Bob knows he's a non-brain-in-a-vat.

The familiar relevant alternatives strategy runs as follows. To know he has hands, Bob must eliminate the alternative where he has hooks; to know he's a non-brain-in-a-vat, he must eliminate the brain-in-vat alternative. Making these alternatives explicit, we have (false numbered statements will be accompanied by an F):

- 1'. Bob knows he has hands (p) by eliminating that he has hooks (q).
- 2F. Therefore, Bob knows he's a non-brain-in-a-vat (p or q) by eliminating that he's a brain-in-vat (r)



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*eating it.... Anyone who wants to know why Brenda did not order desert and throw it at the waiter will not be helped by being told that she was full or on a diet'. Italics original p.1021 (1970) 'Epistemic Operators' The Journal of Philosophy, 67(24): 1007-1023. 'Suppose Clyde gives me the tickets. In saying that he gave them to me by mistake we are saying something that has within it an element of ambiguity. If this was a mistake, wherein does the mistake lie? In giving me (rather than someone else) the tickets, or in giving the tickets (rather than something else) to me?' My italics. p.413 (1972) 'Contrastive Statements' Philosophical Review 81: 411-430.*

<sup>20</sup> This terminology is imperfect too. One clarification: My use of 'eliminate' above should not be understood as 'eliminate by experience'. There are numerous ways in which a proposition can be eliminated; for example, propositions in which the same method is used, but p is not believed, could be considered to be eliminated.

<sup>21</sup> Schaffer (2007) Closure, Contrast, and Answer," *Philosophical Studies* 133.2 p.233-55.

*Diagram 1*

The inference is invalid because the relevant alternatives have expanded to include r. And indeed 2F is false because Bob can't eliminate the possibility that he has a simulated hand (r). The inference is an instance of the following *faulty principle*:

***Faulty Principle***

*Expand the relevant alternatives.* If A knows p by eliminating q, then A knows<sup>22</sup> p by eliminating r.

(We're assuming that r contains possibilities not included in q. This ensures that the alternatives expand in the shift from q to r. And in the cases that follow q and r will be disjoint.<sup>23</sup>)

Notice that as well as the expansion of the alternatives, the fact known has expanded from p to p-or-q. The expansion of the fact known is valid because in general it is easier to know x-or-y than it is to know x.<sup>24</sup> In the cases that follow, the fact will expand, indeed it will expand all the way into the original set of relevant alternatives (q). This latter move is controversial,<sup>25</sup> but I will grant it because what's really problematic is the expansion of the relevant alternatives, not the expansion of the fact known. But to be precise, the more general version of *Expand the relevant alternatives* is:

***Faulty Principle***

*Expand the relevant alternatives.* If A knows p by eliminating q, then A knows p-or-q by eliminating r

We can also describe the Moorean and sceptical responses in the relevant alternatives framework.<sup>26</sup> Start with Mooreans, who hold that we *do* know we're not brains in vats. Here's a natural way to embed Mooreanism in a relevant alternatives framework. First assume that an agent can know something without eliminating any alternatives – the uneliminated alternatives just have to be irrelevant. We'll call this *Knowledge-by-irrelevance* and write it as 'A knows p rather than [empty set]'.<sup>27</sup> Now assume that the brain-in-vat possibility (r) is always irrelevant, and the Moorean position follows.

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<sup>22</sup> The consequent might be put more weakly as 'A is in a position to know...', but these complications won't matter in this paper so I will ignore them (see Hawthorne 2004 *Knowledge and Lotteries* Oxford University Press, Luper, S. "The Epistemic Closure Principle", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2012/entries/closure-epistemic/>>.

<sup>23</sup> By contrast, if r is a sub-set of q then the inference is valid; the contraction of the alternatives is valid.

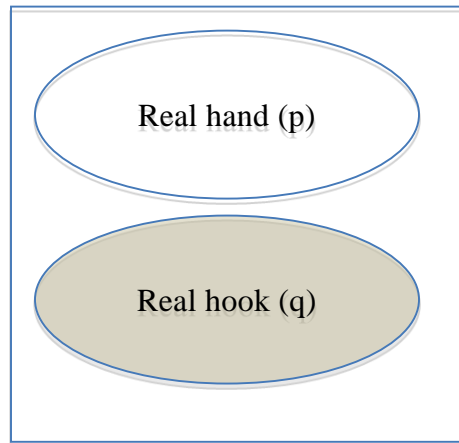
<sup>24</sup> See Schaffer *ibid*.

<sup>25</sup> Those who reject *Knowledge-by-Irrelevance* (see below) will deny that the fact can expand into the relevant alternatives e.g. Schaffer.

<sup>26</sup> Mooreans and sceptics may well resist the relevant alternatives framework for other reasons of course, as Jim Pryor emphasized to me.

<sup>27</sup> Stine (1976) 'Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives and Deductive Closure' *Philosophical Review* 29: 249-261 defends knowledge-by-irrelevance: 'One does know what one takes for granted in normal circumstances....If the negation of a proposition is not a relevant alternative, then I know it.' p.258. Schaffer (*op. cit.*) denies that the relevant alternatives can contract to the empty set, so he rejects Knowledge-by-irrelevance.

**Non-Brain-In-Vat**



*Diagram 2*

The Moorean might fill in the relevant alternatives as:

- (1') Bob knows he has hands (p) by eliminating that he has hooks (q)
- (2') Bob knows he's a non-brain-in-vat (p-or-q) by eliminating [Empty set].

Holding fixed that p and q are relevant, while r is irrelevant, 1' and 2' are both true. The change from 1' to 2' is that the fact known expands all the way into the set of relevant alternatives. Thus the Moorean can accept (a) (knowledge requires the elimination of relevant alternatives) and reject (b) (they expand between 1 and 2).

Moving on, the sceptical view can be embedded in a relevant alternatives framework by assuming that the brain-in-vat possibility (r) is always relevant.<sup>28</sup> Then 1 is false to begin with, as Bob cannot eliminate a relevant alternative.

- (1F) Bob knows he has hands (p) by eliminating that he's a brain-in-vat (r)

Like the Moorean, the sceptic can be represented as accepting (a) (knowledge requires the elimination of relevant alternatives) and rejecting (b) (they expand between 1 and 2).

The debate about relevant alternatives has taken place almost entirely in the context of traditional sceptical arguments. But as a general claim about knowledge, relevant alternatives should be applicable to other areas of epistemology. This fact allows us to test the relevant alternatives framework to see if it gives plausible results in those new areas<sup>29</sup>. I will argue that

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<sup>28</sup> Compare Dretske (1981) 'The Pragmatic Dimension of Knowledge' *Philosophical Studies* 40: 363-78 '...a skeptic could be represented as one who took [the relevant alternatives to equal the alternatives] in all cases.' p.372; Unger (*op. cit.*).

<sup>29</sup> Worrall, J. (1989). Fresnel, Poisson and the white spot: The role of successful prediction in the acceptance of scientific theories. In D. Gooding, T. Pinch, & S. Schaffer (Eds.), *The uses of experiment* (pp. 135–157). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

the relevant alternatives framework solves two seemingly unrelated problems – bootstrapping, and the apparent conflict between armchair self-knowledge and semantic externalism.<sup>30</sup>

### 3. Bootstrapping

The problem of the criterion is that for any potential source of knowledge, it seems reasonable to demand prior<sup>31</sup> justification for believing that the source is reliable. If this demand is granted, an infinite regress and scepticism threatens. A popular way to avoid the regress is to accept that we have Basic Knowledge.

#### *Basic Knowledge*

If A has basic knowledge of P then A knows P prior to knowing that the cognitive source of knowing P is accurate.<sup>32</sup>

But Basic Knowledge faces the bootstrapping problem, which runs as follows<sup>33</sup>. Suppose Cohen (C) doesn't know that his vision is accurate. He sees what appears to be a red object. According to Basic Knowledge theories, C can, in appropriate circumstances, come to know that the object is red. So once C makes the appropriate inferences, the following sentences become true:

- (1) C knows the object looks red
- (2) C knows the object is red.<sup>34</sup>
- (3) C knows the object is Red-And-Looks-Red
- (4) C knows his vision is accurate (on this occasion).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> In a paper similar in spirit to this one, Greco (2014) 'Could KK be OK? *Journal of Philosophy* 111 (4):169-197 argues that relevant alternatives solve the conflict between the widespread rejection of KK principles in philosophy and their widespread acceptance in the social sciences.

<sup>31</sup> 'Prior' is ambiguous between 'temporally-prior' and 'epistemically-prior'. For concreteness, I'll take it as 'temporally prior' when I need to choose. This threatens to make Basic Knowledge implausible, but we could again weaken the consequent to 'is in a position to know' (see fn.22). Thanks to Jim Pryor for helping me get this straight.

<sup>32</sup> This is based on Cohen 2002 'Basic Knowledge and the Problem of Easy Knowledge' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LXV, 2, pp. 309-329.

p.417. Cohen uses 'reliable' instead of 'accurate', which is a more natural locution. But I use 'accurate' as this is the place in the bootstrapping argument I want to focus on.

<sup>33</sup> The name is due to Vogel 2000 (2000) 'Reliabilism Levelled' *The Journal of Philosophy* 97:11. pp. 602-623, who acknowledges Fumerton 1995 *Metaepistemology and skepticism*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Vogel presents it as a problem for reliabilism. Cohen 2002 shows the problem applies to internalist epistemologies as well. This is one of the central problems of epistemology, but the clarity and sharpness of Vogel's presentation has invigorated the contemporary debate. See van Cleve 1979 'Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle,' *Philosophical Review* 88: 5 5-91 and Alston 1986 'Epistemic Circularity' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 47, No. 1 pp. 1-30 for presentations with a more historical perspective. The debate is even more urgent given the dominance of foundationalism, which is popular partly because it is widely agreed that foundationalism can be formulated to avoid many traditional problems (see e.g. Pryor *op. cit.*).

<sup>34</sup> On some Basic Knowledge views (e.g. Pryor *op. cit.*), (2) doesn't follow from (1), but from the *perceptual experience* as of a red object. If so, we could add: (0) C is having the perceptual experience as of a red object. Then (1) and (2) follow from (0).

<sup>35</sup> We could add: (5) C knows his vision is reliable (after repeated trials). But this step won't play any part in my analysis, so I omit it.

Although C does not initially know that his vision is accurate, when he sees that the object looks red (1), he can gain knowledge that the object is red (2), according to Basic Knowledge. He can then conjoin, (3), and infer that his vision is accurate (4).

But it is problematic that C gains knowledge in this way. Surely one cannot improve the epistemic status of a source merely by using it!<sup>36</sup> I will suggest that the mistake is due to implicitly replacing the alternatives in the course of the reasoning.<sup>37</sup>

### 3.1 Relevant Alternatives and Bootstrapping

Adopting the relevant alternatives strategy, we can argue that the 1-4 reasoning goes wrong because the relevant alternatives expand. We don't need to commit to a particular place where they expand, nor to a particular reason why they expand, but we can tell the following natural story in which they expand between 3 and 4.

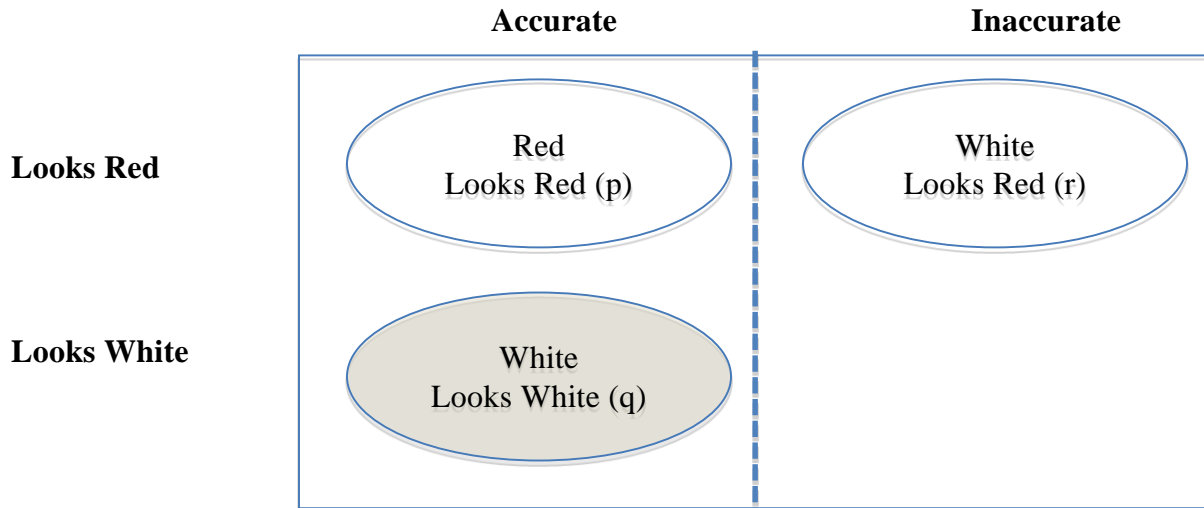


Diagram 3

To know it is Red-And-Looks-Red C must eliminate the alternative where it is White-And-Looks-White; but to know her vision is Accurate she must eliminate the Inaccurate alternative. Making these relevant alternatives explicit, we have:

(3') C knows the object is Red-And-Looks-Red (p) by eliminating White-And-Looks-White (q)

(4F) C knows her vision is Accurate (p-or-q) by eliminating Inaccurate (r).

<sup>36</sup> Some suggest that we can improve the epistemic status of a source merely by using it e.g. van Cleve *op. cit.*, Alston *op. cit.*, Prior *op. cit.*, Bergman 'Epistemic Circularity: Malignant and Benign' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69 (3):709–727, Kornblith 2009 'A Reliabilist Solution to the Problem of Promiscuous Bootstrapping' *Analysis* 69 (2):263-267. We'll consider this in section 3.2.

<sup>37</sup> Vogel 2008 [Epistemic Bootstrapping](#). *Journal of Philosophy* 105 (9) and Weisberg (2010) 'Bootstrapping in General' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 81 (3):525 – 548 argue that all and only bootstrapping inferences violate some rule of correct inference. I think their positions are compatible with mine.



The principle connecting 3' and 4F is:

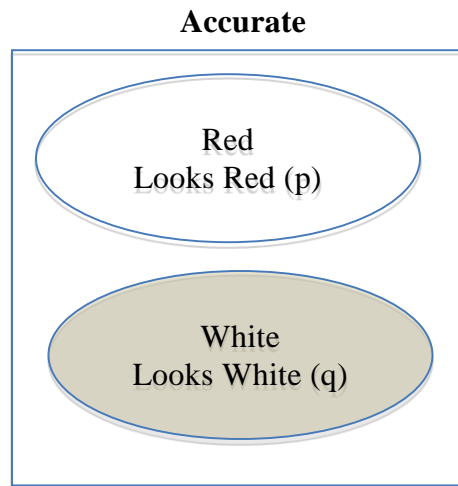
If C knows p by eliminating q then C knows p-or-q by eliminating r.

This an instance of the faulty principle *Expand the relevant alternatives*. And indeed it's plausible that 4F is false because C can't eliminate Looks-Red-But-Is-White (r). This tells a plausible story about why the bootstrapping inference is fallacious, and gives us the intuitive answer that 3 is true and 4 is false.

### 3.2 Mooreanism, scepticism and bootstrapping

Let's now consider how the relevant alternatives framework can be applied to Mooreans and sceptics. We saw above that a Moorean position follows from accepting *Knowledge-by-irrelevance* plus the irrelevance of the sceptical possibilities. We can make the same moves here to get the result that the bootstrapping inference is valid, though we'll see that we do not quite get a vindication of the intended argument.

Let's assume *Knowledge-by-irrelevance*; that is, suppose p *can* be known in virtue of the not-p alternatives being irrelevant. If the Inaccurate possibilities (r) are irrelevant, then it appears to follow immediately that C knows Accurate.



*Diagram 4*

The Moorean might fill in the relevant alternatives as:

- (3') C knows the object is Red-And-Looks-Red (p) by eliminating White-And-Looks-White (q)
- (4') C knows his vision is Accurate (p-or-q) by eliminating [Empty set].

The fact known has expanded and the set of relevant possibilities has remained the same (p-or-q). This could explain why accepting the bootstrapping inference is tempting.

But notice this doesn't give C *first-time* knowledge that her senses are accurate. Instead, according to *Knowledge-by-irrelevance*, she already knew her senses were accurate<sup>38</sup> – her senses are accurate in all relevant possibilities (p-or-q). Basic Knowledge requires that an agent can gain knowledge from a cognitive source *without* having prior knowledge that the source is accurate.<sup>39</sup> But on the current view the agent *has* prior knowledge-by-irrelevance that the source is accurate. So *Knowledge-by-irrelevance* is incompatible with Basic Knowledge.

Instead, the current view coheres with the position that we have *a priori* justification to believe that some sources are accurate. And this brings us back to Wright's view (*ibid.*) that we have an *a priori* entitlement to make certain presuppositions, such as the accuracy of our senses. So *Knowledge-by-irrelevance* is incompatible with *gaining* knowledge that our senses are accurate by the bootstrapping procedure, but *Knowledge-by-irrelevance* coheres nicely with the view that we have a *a priori* entitlement to assume that our senses are accurate.

Coming from the other side, sceptics would hold that the white object that looks red (r) is always relevant, and deny that the agent knows the table is red in the first place.

(2F) C knows the object is Red by eliminating White-And-Looks-Red (r)

So unsurprisingly there is no bootstrapping problem for the sceptic.

#### 4. Armchair Self-Knowledge and Semantic Externalism

Let's now move on to the problem of self-knowledge. To know some fact about the external world, we must do some work. We must get out of the armchair and have experiences. To know what we are thinking, however, requires no such exertions. We can sit in the armchair and come to know what we are thinking. Call this kind of knowledge *armchair self-knowledge*. The special nature of armchair self-knowledge can be filled out in different ways, but what matters for our purposes is what armchair self-knowledge *doesn't* involve. It doesn't involve making any observations, or having any experiences of the external world. It is this point that puts armchair self-knowledge in conflict with semantic externalism.

Semantic externalism says that concepts are individuated in part by the environment of the speaker. Consider Oscar, who doesn't know the chemical composition of water. Nevertheless, when he thinks about water he thinks about H<sub>2</sub>O. On Twin Earth the stuff that plays the water-role is XYZ. Call this stuff 'twinwater'. When Twin Oscar thinks about what he calls 'water', he thinks about twinwater. Yet there is no internal functional difference between Oscar and his twin. So the difference in the concepts must be due to the differences in the environment. This kind of externalism has become the received view since the arguments of Putnam and Burge<sup>40</sup>. But there is a problem combining externalism with armchair self-knowledge of our thoughts.

Suppose Oscar is thinking about water, but cannot discriminate water from twinwater. It appears we can run the following argument.

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<sup>38</sup> Better: She was already in a position to know her senses were accurate.

<sup>39</sup> Better: Without being in a position to have prior knowledge that the source is accurate.

<sup>40</sup> Putnam (1975) 'The Meaning of Meaning'. In his *Philosophical Papers* vol. 2: *Mind, Language and Reality*, 215-271; Burge, T. (1979) 'Individualism and the Mental'. In *Studies in Metaphysics*, eds. French, Uehling and Wettstein, Midwest Studies in Philosophy, no. 4, 73-121.

1. Oscar has armchair knowledge that he is thinking about water.
2. Therefore Oscar has armchair knowledge that water exists.

Thus, externalists seem to have implausible armchair knowledge that water exists.<sup>41</sup>

I will argue that the relevant alternatives strategy can be applied – the inference is faulty because the relevant alternatives expand.<sup>42</sup> Then I'll argue that analogues of the Moorean and sceptical positions can be embedded in the relevant alternatives framework.

#### 4.1 Relevant Alternatives and Self-Knowledge

To analyze the argument we need three possibilities. *p* is the possibility in which Oscar is on Earth thinking about water; *q* is a possibility in which Oscar is on Earth thinking about wine and *r* is a possibility in which Oscar is on Twin Earth thinking about twinwater.

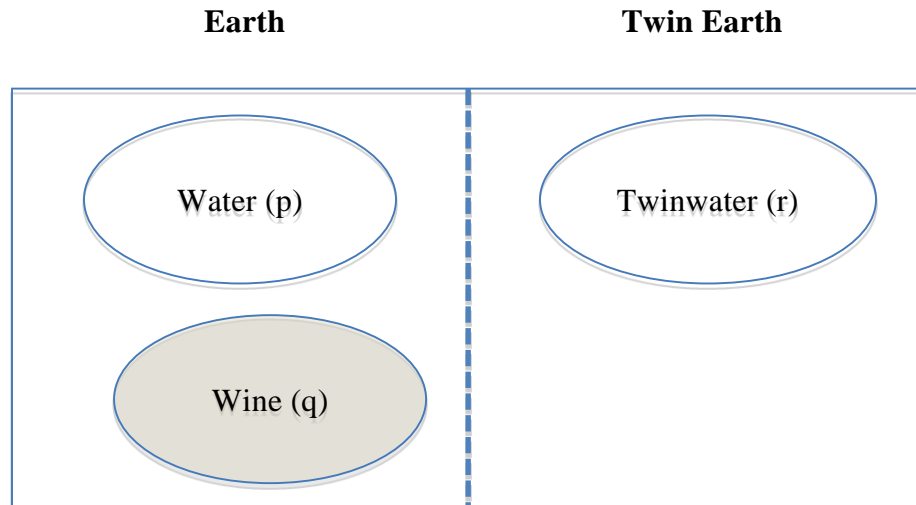


Diagram 5

Let's first tell a story in which the relevant alternatives expand.

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<sup>41</sup> My presentation of the argument is adapted from Boghossian (1997) 'What the Externalist Can Know *A Priori*', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 97: 161-175. A complicating feature of Boghossian's presentation is that he puts the argument in the first person, and in terms of concepts. I have simplified his argument, but in a way I think retains its essence. Woodfield (1982) *Thought and Object*. Clarendon Press, Ludlow, P. & Martin, N. (1988) *Externalism and Self-Knowledge* Stanford: CSLI., Nuccetelli, S. (2003) *New Essays on Semantic Externalism and Self-Knowledge* MIT Press and Goldberg (2007) *Internalism and Externalism in Semantics and Epistemology*. Oxford University Press contain collections of papers on this topic.

<sup>42</sup> Warfield (1992) 'Privileged Self-Knowledge and Externalism are Compatible' *Analysis* 52(4): 232-237 and Brown (2004) *Anti-Individualism and Knowledge*, MIT give similar responses, but consider only the version of relevant alternatives in which nearby alternatives are relevant i.e. safety-based theories. I hope to show that a logically weaker view is sufficient to solve the problem. Goldberg, S. (2003) 'What do you know when you know your own thoughts?' in Nuccetelli, S. (*op. cit.*) argues that there is an equivocation on 'knows'. He doesn't offer independent motivation for the distinction, but I think his view is compatible with mine.

To know he's thinking about water, Oscar just has to eliminate typical cases, such as those where he's thinking about wine;<sup>43</sup> but to know water exists he must eliminate the possibility where twinwater exists. Making these alternatives explicit:

- 1'. Oscar has armchair knowledge that he is thinking about water (p) by eliminating the possibility that he is thinking about wine (q).
- 2F. Therefore Oscar has armchair knowledge that water exists (p-or-q) by eliminating the possibility that twinwater exists (r).

This uses the faulty principle *Expand the relevant alternatives*. And indeed Oscar can't eliminate the possibility that he is on Twin Earth thinking about twinwater (r). This gives us the intuitive result that 1 is true and 2F false.

#### 4.2 Mooreanism, scepticism and self-knowledge

The analogue of the Moorean position allows *Knowledge-by-Irrelevance* and holds r irrelevant:

- 1'. Oscar has armchair knowledge that he is thinking about water (p) by eliminating the possibility that he is thinking about wine (q).
- 2'. Therefore Oscar has armchair knowledge that water exists (p-or-q) by eliminating [empty set].

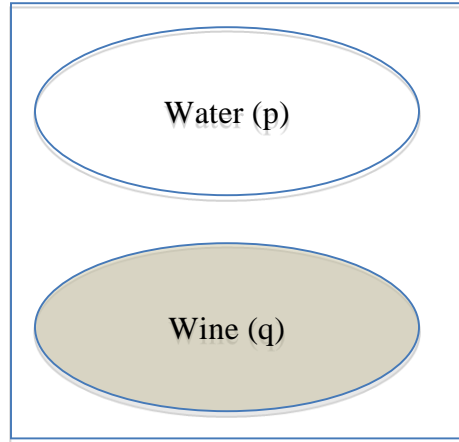
So Oscar has armchair knowledge that water exists in virtue of the irrelevance of Twin Earth possibilities (r).<sup>44</sup>

### Earth

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<sup>43</sup> The 'slow switching' thought experiments in which the agent is stealthily transported to Twin Earth can be understood as making the twinwater possibility relevant, especially if we assume that nearby possibilities are relevant e.g. Safety.

<sup>44</sup> I think most proponents of armchair self-knowledge tell a story which is compatible with mine. For example, Burge's (1988) 'Individualism and Self-Knowledge' *Journal of Philosophy* 11: 649-663 claim, roughly that [the (higher level) thought that one is thinking about water presupposes no more than the (lower level) thought about water] can be understood as the claim that both thoughts require the elimination of the same alternatives (to be knowledge). See also Sawyer 1998 'Privileged Access to the World' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 76 (4):523-533, Wright 2000 'Cogency and Question Begging: Some Reflections on McKinsey's Paradox and Putnam's Proof', *Philosophical Issues* 10: 140-163 and Davies 2003 'The Problem of Armchair Knowledge' In Susana Nuccetelli (ed.), (*op.cit.*).



*Diagram 6*

And the analogue of the sceptical position is that Oscar does not have armchair knowledge that he's thinking about water because the twinwater possibility (r) is relevant. Oscar can't eliminate r, so 1 is false to begin with:

1F. Oscar has armchair knowledge that he is thinking about water (p) by eliminating the possibility that he is thinking about twinwater (r).

As always, the relevant alternatives framework allows us to acknowledge the force of the sceptic's argument without having to be sceptics. The sceptic shows that given semantic externalism, even when it comes to our own thoughts, there is some knowledge we do not have – knowledge that would require the elimination of r.

So when it comes to self-knowledge, as well as knowledge of the external world, it may be useful to conceptualize the debate as between those who think sceptical scenarios are always relevant (sceptics), those who think they are never relevant (Mooreans) and those who think it varies (contextualists, safety-based theorists, subject-sensitive invariantists...).

I hope to have shown that the standard relevant alternatives response to external world scepticism also gives a natural resolution of the bootstrapping and self-knowledge problems. Furthermore, I have argued that the relevant alternatives framework allows us to express the sceptical and the Moorean positions. And I have tried to show that a useful divide in epistemology is between those who hold that relevant alternatives vary across sceptical arguments and those who deny this.<sup>45</sup>

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