Reliabilism and Context

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Reliabilism and Context

By

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For advising me through this process and teaching me that in order not to be Euthyphro, one must not consider herself Socrates.
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I. Introduction

Epistemology is a diverse and far-reaching discipline, centering on the study of knowledge. The question 'what is knowledge?' is foundational to the study. There are various types of knowledge; this thesis explores propositional knowledge.

One example of a propositional knowledge claim is 'Justine knows that it is raining'. In this case Justine is the subject (S) and 'it is raining' is the proposition (p). What does it take for S to know p? The answer is contested.

The traditional account\(^1\) of propositional knowledge holds that knowledge is justified, true belief. Thus, a belief is knowledge only if and if it is both justified and true. In this case, justification and truth are each necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for a belief to be knowledge. Consider our example: 'Justine knows that it is raining'. If (a) Justine believes that it is raining; (b) it is true that it is raining; and (c) Justine is justified in believing that it is raining because she is standing outside in the rain and as such can both see the rain and feel the rain, then Justine’s putative knowledge claim counts as knowledge according to the traditional account.

Edmund Gettier\(^2\) challenges this traditional account of knowledge. He utilizes thought-experiments to show that justified, true belief is insufficient for knowledge. Consider an example.

Francesca’s sister, Gabriella, is spending the semester studying abroad in Paris. Francesca has strong evidence for the proposition that (a) Gabriella is in Paris. Francesca’s evidence for this proposition is that she talked to Gabriella the night before and during the conversation, Gabriella told her that she would not be traveling outside of Paris again for a month because she has run out of money. Francesca also spoke to Gabriella’s best friend (Ana) today, who is spending the semester abroad in Paris with Gabriella. Ana confirmed that she and Gabriella would not be travelling for a while due to their financial situation. Francesca then proposes that (b) Either Gabriella is in Paris, or she won the lottery today. This proposition is entailed

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by (a). Francesca accepts this proposition as knowledge based on this entailment and is thus justified in believing (b). However, unbeknownst to Francesca and Ana, Gabriella is actually in London for a pre-paid class trip for the day. While in London, Gabriella plays the lottery and wins.

So, Francesca cannot be said to know that (b) is true despite the facts that (1) (b) is true; (2) Francesca is justified in believing that (b) is true; and (3) Francesca believes that (b) is true. There is no causal connection between Francesca’s warrant for (b) and the truth of (b); (b) is not true for the reason that she holds it to be true. That Francesca’s belief is justified and true is thus an instance of mere luck. Therefore, justified true belief is insufficient for knowledge.

The so-called Gettier problem is that there are counter-examples like this one to the traditional account of knowledge. It calls for a new account of the conditions of knowledge.

Many modifications to the traditional account have been attempted in pursuit of an adequate set of conditions for knowledge. One such attempt is reliabilism. This position holds onto the truth condition, but replaces the justification condition with a reliability condition. Roughly, S’s belief must be the result of a reliable process. There are two ways of interpreting that reliability condition. The first interpretation is that a way of forming beliefs is reliable if and only if it produces only beliefs that are true; it never produces false beliefs. This is a very high standard; it would rarely, if ever, allow an individual to have knowledge. Take perception as a way of forming beliefs as an example. When one places a straight stick in a glass of water, the stick appears bent. The perception of a straight stick in a glass of water is deceiving because it suggests that the straight stick is bent when in the glass of

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4 There are various ways of forming beliefs, including perception and reasoning. This topic is explored further in §2.
water. However, this is not the case. The straight stick remains straight; the perceptual illusion of a bent stick is explained by refraction. There are other examples of perceptual illusion like this one. Therefore, under this first interpretation, perception cannot count as a reliable mechanism. The second interpretation is that a mechanism for forming beliefs is reliable if and only if it produces beliefs that are true in some interesting fraction of cases—most of the time, 75% of the time, and so on. This means that reliability does not require perfection; reliability can be imperfect; a belief-forming mechanism can be reliable but imperfect or fallible. By limiting the scope of reliability, the second interpretation allows knowledge to be more easily attained. For this reason, the second interpretation is the more attractive of the two.

To fill out an account of knowledge based on this interpretation, the scope of reliability requires clarification. To what extent must one’s perceptual mechanism produce true beliefs in order to fulfill the reliability condition?

One way to answer this question is through a relevant alternatives (RA) theory. This theory determines reliability based on the subject’s capacity to distinguish between relevant alternatives. Roughly put, S need be reliable, meaning that her perceptual mechanism must produce true beliefs, only with respect to the relevant alternatives. But which alternatives are relevant and which are irrelevant? One response to this question is Relevant Alternatives (RA) Contextualism, which I will refer to simply as Contextualism from this point forward. By Contextualism I mean a position in which relevance is determined based on context. An alternative counts as relevant or irrelevant based on the context.

This appeal to relevant alternatives is particularly important when it comes to the topic of skepticism. Skepticism calls into question the very possibility of knowledge by
undermining one’s grounds for knowledge. In the case of perceptual knowledge, one’s perceptual mechanism is undermined via the introduction of a skeptical possibility. A skeptical possibility is a circumstance in which none of one’s perceptual experiences correspond with reality; one is generally mistaken about reality. Two common examples of this sort of possibility are the possibility that one is “in the matrix”, and the possibility that one is a brain-in-a-vat (BIV). Skeptical possibilities involve generalized illusion. These possibilities stand apart from cases of one-time or momentary illusion. Consider an example of one-time illusion. While at the farmer’s market, Sally might mistake a stranger who has similar features to her friend Annie for Annie herself. Because the stranger is sufficiently far away, Sally does not recognize her error. Sally might then remark, ‘Annie is standing over near the organic apples’. This utterance is not a piece of knowledge; Sally is deceived since the person whom she thinks is Annie is actually a stranger. However, it does not follow that Sally is also deceived that there is some person standing over near the organic apples or that she is at a farmer’s market, or that it is raining outside, etc. One-time illusion is not a general deception; it is an isolated instance of deception. Therefore, if Sally makes mention to a fellow-shopper that, ‘The apples are over near the asparagus,’ it is possible that this piece of putative knowledge is in fact knowledge. One-time illusion affects the possibility of a limited amount of knowledge; it does not wipe out any and every possibility of knowledge in the given context. Consider an example of generalized illusion. Unbeknownst to Sally, she is a brain in a vat that experiences a simulated virtual reality of a farmer’s market. In the case of skeptical possibility such as this one, Sally is systematically deceived. Any piece of putative knowledge drawn from perception is necessarily untrue. In the case of one-time illusion, the general possibility that an utterance of hers counts as knowledge in the scenario remains;
however, in the case of generalized illusion, this general possibility disappears. In this way, skeptical possibility, as generalized illusion, undermines the perceptual mechanism as grounds for knowledge.

Skeptical possibilities appear to threaten all of our knowledge. The skeptical argument⁵ is as follows:

(a) I don’t know that I am not a BIV
(b) If I don’t know that I am not a BIV, then I don’t know that I have hands.
(c) Therefore, I don’t know that I have hands.

This argument effectively reduces the possibility of knowledge to zero. Because we cannot rule out this particular skeptical possibility as false, we do not know that this skeptical possibility does not obtain. If we are unable to know whether or not we are a BIV, how can we know that we have hands, or that many other of the propositions that we take for granted count as knowledge? The skeptic asks, ‘Can we have knowledge?’ She replies: No.

By contrast, RA theories answer this question in the affirmative. Following RA theories, only the relevant alternatives need be attended to in order to achieve knowledge; the irrelevant alternatives can be dismissed. Contextualism responds to the skeptical threat to knowledge by making skeptical possibilities irrelevant alternatives in certain contexts. In these contexts, knowledge is possible. In other contexts, skeptical possibilities are relevant, and so knowledge is not possible. In this way, this account respects the skeptical pull. By this, I mean that the account concedes that the skeptical argument is compelling by considering skeptical possibilities relevant in some, though not all, contexts. This is a compromise that allows for knowledge while still acknowledging the persuasive skeptical argument. A plausible account of knowledge requires this delicate balance since the skeptical

argument, though not widely accepted, is not obviously unsound, and is even intuitively compelling.

A RA theory is the type of position Alvin Goldman develops in “Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge”. Goldman attempts to explain what it takes for one to have perceptual knowledge in a particular instance. The account is attractive in part because it purports to respect the skeptical pull without forfeiting all possibility of knowledge.

As I have mentioned, however, this sort of account requires clarification. In which contexts is a skeptical possibility relevant? In which contexts is one irrelevant?

Ernest Sosa takes up these difficult questions in “Relevant Alternatives, Contextualism Included,” discussing RA theories. In particular, I present Sosa’s criticism of Contextualism; it argues that Contextualism is deficient because it does not provide a satisfying response to these questions.

Sosa’s position constitutes a challenge to Goldman’s account of perceptual knowledge. This is the case because Goldman’s account is a type of Contextualism. One of the putative advantages of RA theories is that they respect the skeptical pull. If it cannot actually do this, it is less appealing. So, if Sosa’s right, we should find Goldman’s account less appealing.

I contend that Contextualism is alleviated of Sosa’s criticism by replacing the heightened epistemic standard of what Sosa will call sensitivity. This standard serves as an extra hurdle for knowledge and is required only in certain contexts. The question of which contexts should trigger this heightened standard is subject to discussion in §III-§VI. After several attempts to provide a modified account of sensitivity, I abandon it. Instead, I propose

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⁶Sosa rejects all RA theories; however, for the purposes of this paper, I only consider his criticism of Contextualism.
to replace the standard with what I will call epistemic vigilance. We will see more about sensitivity and epistemic vigilance in due course.

Here’s a short blueprint of the rest of this essay. In §II, I present Goldman’s position on perceptual knowledge with particular emphasis on relevance. In §III, I explain Sosa’s criticisms of Contextualism. In §IV, I explain how Goldman’s account of perceptual knowledge depends on Contextualism and thus how Sosa’s criticism extends to Goldman’s view. In §V, I defend the heightened standard of sensitivity in an effort to demonstrate that Goldman’s account is indeed plausible; in §VI, I explain how Sosa might rebut this defense. Given all of this, in §VII I propose the standard of epistemic vigilance as a replacement for the heightened standard of sensitivity. I make an initial case for epistemic vigilance as a more satisfying way of handling skeptical possibility. In §VIII, I demonstrate how epistemic vigilance might fit into Goldman’s contextualist account. Finally, in §IX I draw conclusions accordingly.

II. Goldman’s account of perceptual knowledge

In “Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge”, Goldman responds to the Gettier problem by proposing an account of perceptual knowledge that incorporates reliability into the true-belief conception of knowledge. In replacing the justification condition with the reliability condition, Goldman claims that the ‘luck’ involved in the traditional account of knowledge, demonstrated by the Gettier problem, disappears.

In this section, I summarize the condition that Goldman’s account hinges on and his argument in favor of it. His key claim is that a true belief is knowledge in the case that the subject is able to reliably discriminate situations in which \( p \) from the relevant \( p \)-precluding
alternatives. Goldman explains that in the case of perceptual knowledge, the reliable process is the perceptual mechanism. He defends his account of perceptual knowledge based on these claims.

Goldman defines what it is for a process to be reliable for a human being, explaining that it “...must enable a person to discriminate or differentiate between incompatible states of affairs” (771). Just as a working thermometer can be a reliable indicator of its environment’s temperature, in this sense, Goldman concentrates on reliability in human beings. For the process to be reliable, it must not only yield a true belief in the actual state of affairs, but must also be able to do so in counterfactual states of affairs. The chicken-sexer, a popular example, is a reliable indicator of the sex of chickens, which means that she can reliably discriminate between male and female chickens. Children show that they are reliable indicators of color when they demonstrate that they see pink when prompted, and can distinguish this from the experience of seeing a purple or red object; the work is done by the perceptual mechanism7 in this case.

Goldman’s account only requires that subjects are able to discriminate relevant incompatible states of affairs from the actual state of affairs. Once possibilities are restricted to relevant possibilities, the difficulty lies in defining exactly what is and is not relevant. Goldman assumes in this paper that “…radical or strange possibilities are not ordinarily

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7Though Goldman’s account deals exclusively with a reliable perceptual mechanism, there are other types of reliable mechanisms. For example, reasoning can be a reliable mechanism. Given certain true beliefs, the subject is capable of realizing a new true belief that follows from the original set. The subject can distinguish this situation from one involving a slightly different set of (false) beliefs being held, in which case a different (false) conclusion follows. This is an example of a true belief: Sheep come in various shades of white, black, cream and/or grey. Based on this true belief, it follows that some sheep are white, some sheep are black, some sheep are grey, some sheep are cream-colored and some sheep are a combination of these colors. I distinguish this set of true beliefs from the following set of false beliefs: All sheep are blue. Therefore, no sheep are black, grey, white, or cream-colored. The true premise produces true conclusions that a reliable reasoning mechanism distinguishes from the set of false beliefs that follow from the false premise. A reliable reasoning mechanism ensures that there are true beliefs, which are built upon more basic true beliefs.
entertained or taken seriously” (778). Therefore, they do not generally count as relevant. This is an important stipulation because if skeptical possibilities—which are “radical”—counted as relevant, skeptical possibilities would “ordinarily” count as relevant. This would open up the scope of what is relevant quite a bit. As explained in §I, if we had to discriminate skeptical possibility as a $p$-precluding situation from situations in which $p$ in order for $S$ to know $p$, no subject would have knowledge. The basic idea is that some (maybe even many) possibilities will be irrelevant, such as skeptical possibilities. Goldman here makes room for the possibility of knowledge in ordinary instances; by so doing, he averts the slide into skepticism.

Although skeptical possibilities do not normally count as relevant due to their being unordinary, other alternatives do count as relevant. Which alternatives might these be?

In order to answer this question, Goldman introduces perceptual equivalence. He explains that a “perceptual equivalent of an actual state of affairs is a possible state of affairs that would produce the same, or a sufficiently similar, perceptual experience” (779-80). Goldman asserts that, “an alternative that disqualifies a true perceptual belief from being perceptual knowledge must be a ‘perceptual equivalent’ of the actual state of affairs” (779). This means that an alternative that is not a perceptual equivalent does not pose a threat to the proper identification of the actual state of affairs; it is not relevant. Goldman provides a thought-experiment, elucidating the concept of perceptual equivalence:

Suppose that Sam spots Judy on the street and correctly identifies her as Judy, i.e., believes she is Judy. Suppose further that Judy has an identical twin, Trudy, and the possibility of the person’s being Trudy (rather than Judy) is a relevant alternative. Under what circumstances would we say that Sam knows it is Judy?

Goldman’s view requires that Sam knows it is Judy only if he is aware of the relevant alternative—that the girl he sees is instead Trudy—and would be able to distinguish Judy
from Trudy. If Sam knows that Judy frequents a tanning salon year-round, while Trudy prides herself on her naturally pale skin, then Sam knows it is Judy upon seeing her in the street; they are not perceptual equivalents in this case because Sam is able to distinguish between the two based on the difference in skin tone. But if Sam often mistakes one twin for the other, he apparently does not have a way of distinguishing the two; they are perceptual equivalents in this case. If Sam correctly identifies Judy on the street in the latter case, he does not know it is Judy; it is mere coincidence that he has correctly identified Judy.

Goldman provides a now-famous thought experiment to demonstrate the role that relevance plays in the acquisition of knowledge:

Henry is driving in the countryside with his son. For the boy’s edification Henry identifies various objects on the landscape as they come into view. “That’s a cow,” says Henry, “That’s a tractor,” “That’s a silo,” “That’s a barn,” etc. Henry has no doubt about the identity of these objects; in particular, he has no doubt that the last-mentioned object is a barn, which indeed it is. Each of the identified objects has features characteristic of its type. Moreover, each object is fully in view, Henry has excellent eyesight, and he has enough time to look at them reasonably carefully, since there is little traffic to distract him.

Given this information would we say that Henry knows that the object is a barn? Most of us would have little hesitation in saying this, so long as we were not in a certain philosophical frame of mind. Contrast our inclination here with the inclination we would have if we were given some additional information. Suppose we are told that, unknown to Henry, the district he has just entered is full of paper-mache facsimiles of barns. These facsimiles look from the road exactly like barns, but are really just facades, without back walls or interiors, quite incapable of being used as barns. They are so clearly constructed that travelers invariably mistake them for barns. Having just entered the district, Henry has not encountered any facsimiles; the object he sees is a genuine barn. But if the object on that site were a facsimile, Henry would mistake it for a barn. Given this new information, we would be strongly inclined to withdraw the claim that Henry knows the object is a barn. How is this change in our assessment to be explained? (Goldman, 772-3)

Goldman contends that the introduction of the new information about facsimiles essentially changes the epistemic scenario. In the initial case, when there has yet to be information about facsimiles introduced, we have no reason to think barn-facades are a possibility; we assume that they are not a possibility. Thus, we would not have a reason to think that Henry must be able to distinguish barn-facades and barns. Therefore, since he
discerns the possibility of the genuine barn from its relevant perceptual equivalents. Henry knows that the object is a barn in this first case.

Goldman’s proposal allows him to distinguish between the first case in which Henry has knowledge and the second case in which Henry does not due to the new information provided which introduces a now relevant (but previously irrelevant) alternative. The facsimile is a perceptual equivalent of the genuine barn. (That is to say, the barn facsimile and the genuine barn look the same to Henry in the sense that he is unable to perceptually distinguish one from the other.) In the first instance this fact does not affect the truth of his piece of putative knowledge because the facsimile is not a relevant alternative. However, the additional information provided about the facsimile in the second case, that this is a mixed district of genuine barns and facsimiles, makes the alternative a relevant one. Henry is not aware of this relevant alternative, and he is unable to distinguish the genuine barn from a relevant, incompatible alternative i.e. the barn facsimile. Though this facsimile alternative happens not to be the actual state of affairs, if it were, Henry would still believe the object to be a genuine barn. The fact that the barn he refers to is a genuine barn in this mixed district of genuine and facsimile barns is ultimately a matter of luck. For this reason, his piece of putative knowledge does not count as knowledge.

The Henry thought-experiment demonstrates that although knowledge is not easy to come by in Goldman’s view, it is possible. By managing not to count all logical possibilities as relevant possibilities, but only the relevant perceptual equivalents, Goldman makes knowledge affordable without cheapening it to mere belief.
Goldman’s analysis of perceptual knowledge only deals with non-inferential perceptual knowledge. He gives a complex set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. However, I’m not interested in those details. What matters for us is his relevance condition; it requires that there is no relevant perceptual equivalent for S at t and that the alternative state of affairs does not have the property which S relies on to distinguish her precept from this alternative.

Goldman’s analysis looks promising because it places the hurdle for knowledge high enough so that knowledge is a real achievement, but low enough for it to be attainable. However, as previously mentioned, this account avoids countenancing skeptical possibilities as relevant alternatives because they are stipulated to be generally irrelevant since they tend to be unordinary. Beyond this gesturing, Goldman does not provide a clear rule about the handling of skeptical possibility. This leaves open questions, such as in which contexts skeptical possibility is ordinary and thus relevant. As mentioned in §1, a plausible account of knowledge must respect the skeptical argument since, though not widely accepted, it is not obviously unsound, and is even intuitively compelling. As such, the success of Goldman’s account relies on his handling of skeptical possibility.

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8 Goldman mentions irregular cases such as ones in which the relevant alternative is a hallucination or caused by a malfunctioning electrode stimulating S’s optic nerve, or a situation in which S’s true belief is based on an inappropriate “genesis.” He explains that amendments can be made appropriately for these kinds of instances in order to demonstrate that these strange situations do not pose a threat to the analysis, but instead merely call for revision.

9 This does not cause a problem for the scope of the analysis because it has not been demonstrated that cognitive factors should be considered inferences; even if there is no noninferential perceptual belief, it remains epistemologically important to discuss whether or not this kind of knowledge is conceptually possible.
III. Sosa’s critique of Contextualism

We now turn to Ernest Sosa’s “Relevant Alternatives, Contextualism Included”. In this article, Sosa argues that Contextualism is flawed as an epistemic position. In this section, I summarize Sosa’s argument. In the next section, I explain how it extends to Goldman’s account.

Sosa begins his article by presenting a skeptical argument, which concludes that perceptual knowledge, and by extension knowledge of the external world, is impossible. The argument begins by claiming that perceptual knowledge is necessary for knowledge of the external world. It then asserts that a person A’s perceptual knowledge that \( p \) must be gained by a process which allows her to reliably discriminate “situations in which \( p \) from \( p \)-precluding alternative situations” (2). But, the situation in which \( p \) and its \( p \)-precluding alternative situation of skeptical possibility are perceptually indistinguishable. For instance, in the possible skeptical case that A is a brain in a vat, she would still experience the world as if she is not a brain in a vat and therefore has no way of reliably discriminating this skeptical possibility from a situation in which \( p \). The argument concludes that therefore, perceptual knowledge, and by extension knowledge of the external world, is blocked. Sosa explores the relevant-alternatives response to this skeptical problem, which contends that only relevant, alternative situations must be rejected in order to have knowledge.

Sosa considers Contextualism in particular as a response to this argument. This position is of particular interest as it is the one attributed to Goldman’s account of perceptual knowledge. Sosa focuses on attributor Contextualism in particular, specifically an account provided by Keith DeRose. Sosa describes attributor Contextualism as asking, “not what is

\[10\] Though Sosa focuses on attributor Contextualism, he contends that “what [he] says can be generalized to apply to Contextualism more generally, both externalist and internalist” (36).
required for someone $S$ to know that $p$, but what is required for an attributor to say with truth that $S$ ‘knows that $p$’" (36); the truth conditions are dependent on the context of the speaker who makes the attribution of knowledge to $S$. It does not depend on the context of $S$, unless that happens to be the same context as that of the knowledge attributor.

This position deals with the skeptic by making use of the sensitivity condition. The sensitivity condition claims that if $p$ were not true, the basis for believing that $p$ would also not hold; thus the belief would be deserted. $S$’s belief is sensitive in the case that if $p$ were not true, $S$ would not believe $p$. For example, Gabriella says, ‘I know that it is nighttime outside’; she makes this claim based on the fact that her bedroom is dark. Her belief would count as sensitive so long as if it weren’t nighttime, she would not believe that it was. Say her bedroom is dark because the sunlight-blocking shades are down. In this case, if it were daylight outside, Gabriella would still believe on her present basis that it is nighttime. Therefore, whether or not it is actually nighttime, her belief is not sensitive.

Contextualism asserts that sensitivity is required only sometimes in the case of skeptical possibility, depending on the context. The belief must be sensitive only when the epistemic standard is raised by a knowledge attribution or denial of skeptical possibility, as assertion of the form “some subject knows (or does not know) some skeptical proposition $P$” (41). Consider an example: Sally says, ‘Jack knows that we do not live in the matrix’. This is a putative knowledge attribution about a skeptical possibility. Thus, the heightened epistemic standard of sensitivity is required as a condition of knowledge. The sensitivity requirement in the case of skeptical possibility erases all possibility of true knowledge attribution because skeptical possibility is insensitive. This is the case since “even if you were a victim of such illusion, you might still believe (and in fact would still believe), still on your present basis,
that you were not a victim” (39-40). Even if Jack were living in the matrix, he might still believe that he was not living in the Matrix. A putative knowledge claim about skeptical possibility is insensitive, and thus incapable of knowledge status.

However, as long as the context is such that no one asserts that a given person does (or does not) know that she is free from skeptical possibility, the heightened epistemic standard of sensitivity is not required for a knowledge attribution to be made. The attributor can mention a skeptical possibility without thereby raising the epistemic standards to include sensitivity, as long as it is not in the form of a knowledge claim. For instance, Sally might say, 'Jack wonders if we live in the Matrix’ but as long as she or anyone else in her context does not say, 'Jack knows that we do not live in the Matrix’, sensitivity is not required. She might follow her statement that Jack wonders if we live in the Matrix with ‘Jack knows that it is raining right now’. Sally is in a position to attribute knowledge to Jack with respect to this latter claim; sensitivity has not been triggered. If Sally had instead said, 'Jack knows that we do not live in the Matrix', all of her putative knowledge claims to follow in that context require sensitivity. Thus, since skeptical possibility is insensitive, no true knowledge attribution is possible in this context.

Thus, this view allows for knowledge in certain contexts while also conceding to the skeptic in other contexts. Following the skeptic’s cue, true knowledge attribution is impossible in the previously stipulated context as the claim “ups the strength required in your belief, as well as that required in associated beliefs, if they are respectively to be knowledge” (41).

One worry Sosa has for this account is that its distinction between true knowledge attribution and failed knowledge attribution is arbitrary. In any given context, an attributor of
knowledge is unobstructed by the sensitivity requirement to say with truth that S knows p as long as commentary on skeptical possibility (if made) is made in a non-assertive manner. The implication is that ‘I wonder if I am a BIV’ does not require the heightened epistemic standard of sensitivity yet ‘I know that I am not a BIV’ does. The distinction seems arbitrary; there is no significant difference between mentioning and asserting in the two situations to warrant a change in epistemic standards that would allow for the possibility of true knowledge attribution on the one hand and obstruct it on the other.

On the whole, Contextualism is appealing but flawed. It is attractive because it purports to make true knowledge attribution accessible, while also properly acknowledging the plausibility of skepticism; this balance is crucial to a successful account of knowledge. However, Sosa demonstrates that the sensitivity requirement, which is the feature that allows for this attractive balance, suffers the charge of arbitrariness.

To avoid these problems, Sosa considers replacing sensitivity with safety. He characterizes safety as the claim that “one would believe as one does (e.g. on one’s present basis) only if one’s belief were true” (44). Consider this example: ‘Francesca knows that she is in pain’. Francesca’s belief that she is in pain is safe in the case that she would believe that she was in pain only if her belief were true. That is to say, only if she really were in pain. For this putative knowledge claim to be a true knowledge attribution, Francesca’s belief must be safe. As a condition on knowledge, safety is intuitive. However, the reason that sensitivity appears integral to Contextualism is that it does the work of demonstrating the plausibility of the skeptical position; safety needs to be able to do this in order to be an appropriate replacement for sensitivity. On its face though, it seems that safety cannot accomplish this, as “believing oneself illusion-free is, after all, extremely safe, and is generally believed to be
extremely safe” (44).

However, Contextualism does not have to worry about this problem with safety. The position can allow that safety is a matter of degree and the threshold for knowledge is based on “context-determined standards” (45). This avoids the issue of deeming the belief that oneself is illusion-free to be safe in general. Safety is instead determined by contextual elements. In the event that skeptical possibility is mentioned, the standard of safety is raised to “knowing for sure” (45). This is an example of the way in which the context determines the level of safety required.

This route allows one to acknowledge the plausibility of the skeptic’s argument, but it does so at the expense of sacrificing much more possibility for true knowledge attribution than do sensitivity-based accounts of Contextualism. This is the case because the former position utilizing sensitivity allows for true knowledge attribution unless a knowledge assertion in regard to skeptical possibility is made. In requiring the standard of safety to be raised to certainty in the context of all comments of skeptical possibility, it is not only knowledge assertions which cancel out the possibility of true knowledge attribution, but any form of mentioning of skeptical possibility. True knowledge attribution is therefore more difficult to attain following this version of safety.

This worry can be avoided with an additional distinction between two kinds of knowledge: lower-level knowledge and higher-level knowledge. Sosa explains, “despite the mention of the skeptic’s alternatives, [one] can insist that he means ordinary knowledge, and indeed ordinary certainty, thus resisting the pressure to interpret him as meaning knowledge for absolutely sure, or strict certainty” (45). This account avoids the arbitrary distinction
between when it is and is not appropriate to require sensitivity. A knowledge claim is a true knowledge attribution despite the mention of skeptical possibility as long as it is clear that it is lower-level knowledge, thus having a lesser epistemic standing than the higher-level knowledge, but still counting as knowledge nonetheless. This also accounts for the plausibility of the skeptical claim. It concedes that a true knowledge attribution of higher-level knowledge does require strict certainty (by way of extreme safety). However, the skeptic is mistaken when she insists on the standard of higher-level knowledge for a true knowledge attribution of mere lower-level knowledge. This is the case because she conflates the particular knowledge claim's standard for lower-level knowledge with higher-level knowledge.

This version of Contextualism utilizes safety as a truth condition of knowledge attribution with the threshold decided by “context-determined standards” (45). This, in conjunction with the low/high level knowledge distinction, appears to allow for a position that avoids the problems of the sensitivity requirement as well as those of previous versions of the safety requirement. As long as the purported lower-standard knowledge claims “all fall under a determinable category of ordinary epistemic standards, one free of the heightening that enables skeptics to prove our lack of knowledge by their very high standards” (47-8), this position is safe from the skeptical threat of wiping out all potential for true knowledge attribution.

One might object that in a philosophical context, raising the standard to absolute certainty is inevitable. It follows that although a lawyer at a dinner party can assert ‘I know that I see a hand’ truthfully, a student in a class on epistemic skepticism cannot. This implication is unsatisfactory. The contextualist might respond that this objection does not
hold because "in a philosophical context with high standards in place, we can still retain awareness of the fact that when one ordinarily takes oneself to know that [one sees a hand], one is often enough correct in that judgment" (48). This is sufficient to hold the individual in the philosophical context down to ordinary standards, despite her distinct awareness of skeptical alternatives.

Granting that this is true, there still remains the contention that the conclusion of the skeptical argument 'It is not the case that one knows that she sees a hand' is intuitively incorrect. However, this intuition is explained by a conflation of appropriate standards. The skeptic's premises are, roughly, these:

P1: It is not the case that one knows that she is illusion free.

P2: If it is not the case that one knows that she is illusion free, then it is not the case that one knows that she sees a hand

Stated that way, they suppress the qualification: by high standards. In doing so, they suppress the real conclusion:

C: It is not the case that one knows that she sees a hand, by high standards.

When the qualification is not explicit, the conclusion seems to be that it is not the case that one knows by ordinary standards that she sees a hand. This claim is intuitively incorrect. But the intuition is derived from the misinterpretation that the standard of knowledge for this argument is merely ordinary. If the two premises of the skeptical argument are relativized to retain a high standard for knowledge, in order for the conclusion to follow, the conclusion must do the same. The intuition is therefore correct, but is merely misplaced. As a result,
non-skeptics can accept the conclusion without forfeiting the possibility of true knowledge attribution of ordinary knowledge.

This reading makes sense of the pull toward denying the skeptical conclusion that 'It is not the case that one knows that she sees a hand'. The contextualist position allows for the relativizing of the argument in a way that protects the soundness of the skeptical argument without conceding that true knowledge attribution is impossible.

However, Sosa argues that just as uniformly qualifying the skeptical argument by high standards, one might uniformly qualify the skeptical argument by ordinary standards. In so doing the conclusion reads, "It is not the case that one knows that she sees a hand by ordinary standards". This is the intuitively incorrect conclusion that was explained away by a misreading in the high standards case, but there is no explaining away the conclusion in this case based on inconsistent relativizing. A large part of what makes this high/ordinary stance so attractive is its concession to the skeptic that the argument relative to high standards is sound. The skeptic’s argument in favor of P1 relative to high standards is the same as her argument in favor of P1 relative to ordinary standards. If the argument relative to high standards is sound, then the argument relative to ordinary standards must also be sound. By using Contextualism and its variations in order to defeat the skeptic, the non-skeptic finds herself where she began; as a response to the skeptic, this position fails.

Sosa concludes that Contextualism does not succeed in its goal of allowing for true knowledge attribution while demonstrating respect for the skeptical argument. If Goldman’s position is Contextualism, then his account of perceptual knowledge is in trouble.

Is Goldman’s view Contextualism?
IV. The effect of Sosa's argument on Goldman's view

In this section, I explain why Goldman's view is indeed an RA theory, particularly Contextualism. As such, Goldman's view is in the target area of Sosa's argument. I demonstrate how Sosa's criticism of Contextualism is also a criticism of Goldman's view. Goldman's view can be interpreted as a RA approach to knowledge. Indeed, in "Relevant Alternates, Contextualism Included", Sosa characterizes Goldman's view as Contextualism (Sosa, 60-1). Goldman's account of perceptual knowledge holds that a reliable perceptual mechanism is required for S to know p; this mechanism is reliable if it "enables a person to discriminate or differentiate between incompatible states of affairs" (Goldman, 771). A knower S has a reliable perceptual mechanism (RPM) if she is able generally to distinguish situations in which p from p-precluding alternative situations. For instance, S has a RPM when she tends to distinguish a blue baseball from a green, yellow, or orange baseball. Goldman elaborates, "A perceptual mechanism is reliable to the extent that contrary features of the environment... would produce contrary perceptual states of the organism, which would, in turn, produce suitably different beliefs about the environment" (Goldman, 771-2). This reliable perceptual mechanism is necessary for perceptual knowledge. S knows p only if she reliably distinguishes the actual situation (its being a baseball) from relevant alternative situations (such as its being a softball, bocce ball, etc.). The reliability of the mechanism generally allows S to do this. As long as there are no relevant perceptual equivalents, S knows p.

Although Goldman claims to remain neutral with regard to which particular type of RA theory he endorses, he is a contextualist since he holds that relevance depends on the context. He writes, "It is not only the circumstances of the putative knower's situation... that
influence the choice of alternatives... The speaker's own linguistic and psychological context are also important" (Goldman, 776). For Goldman, the context is key to relevance; this is Contextualism.

Goldman’s Contextualism is distinct from attributor Contextualism. He concentrates on what is required for S to know p; the relevant context is that of the subject. Attributor Contextualism concentrates on “what is required for an attributor to say with truth that S ‘knows that p’” (Sosa, 36); the truth of knowledge attribution relies on features of the attributor’s context. The attributor, the person who makes the knowledge claim, can be the subject.

Despite this distinction, Sosa’s criticism is one that undermines Contextualism generally; therefore, both Goldman’s Contextualism and attributor Contextualism are implicated. From this point forward, I discuss Contextualism in terms of attributor Contextualism. For purposes of simplicity, the attributor will also be the subject. The exception to this will occur when I discuss Goldman’s thought-experiments directly, in which case I will use language that reflects Goldman’s Contextualism.

Although Goldman does not use the word ‘sensitivity’ in his account, he provides his notion of perceptual equivalence to play essentially the same role that sensitivity plays in the contextualist account that Sosa discusses. Let’s review what it is for a belief to be sensitive: S’s belief that p is sensitive just in case if p were not true, S’s basis for believing that p would also not hold. In other words, S’s belief that p is sensitive in the case that if p were not true, S would not believe p. According to the contextualist, the assertion of a knowledge claim about skeptical possibility imposes sensitivity as a heightened epistemic standard of knowledge. We are unable to meet that standard; as a result, the potential for true knowledge attribution
is blocked in this context. Similarly, Goldman holds that once a perceptual equivalent is relevant, in order to have knowledge, the putative knower must be able to reliably distinguish the situation in which \( p \) from its relevant perceptual equivalent situations. Generally, we are unable to meet that standard; as a result, the potential for true knowledge attribution is blocked in this context. The key thing to see is that being able to reliably distinguish the situation in which \( p \) from its perceptual equivalent(s) is essentially the same as a belief’s being sensitive.

Recall the Henry thought experiment from §II. The barn façade is a perceptual equivalent of the genuine barn. That it is a perceptual equivalent alone does not reduce Henry’s piece of putative knowledge (‘That’s a barn’) to mere true belief. However, that the barn façade is a relevant perceptual equivalent does reduce Henry’s piece of putative knowledge to mere true belief. Henry cannot be said to have knowledge in the case that he does not discriminate the genuine barn from the relevant perceptual equivalent, the barn façade. It is untrue for Henry that if \( p \) were not true, Henry would not believe \( p \); therefore, Henry’s belief is insensitive. In requiring that there be no relevant perceptual equivalents for \( S \) to know \( p \), Goldman is in effect requiring that \( S \)’s belief that \( p \) be sensitive.

As explained in §II, a plausible account of knowledge should respect the skeptical argument since the skeptical argument, though not widely accepted, is not obviously unsound, and is even intuitively compelling. Sosa demonstrates that Contextualism respects the skeptical argument by triggering the heightened standard of sensitivity when a knowledge claim of skeptical possibility is made. Goldman’s view, though suggestive, does not fully account for the skeptical argument. Since Goldman’s account is a type of Contextualism, it might rectify this absence by helping itself to the point at which the heightened standard of
sensitivity is required. Goldman might adopt this as the point at which skeptical possibility is relevant. Accordingly, skeptical possibility would be a relevant perceptual equivalent in the case that a knowledge assertion of skeptical possibility is made.

However, Sosa objects to the point at which the heightened standard of sensitivity is triggered within Contextualism. He alleges that it is arbitrary. In his paper, he criticizes the arbitrary distinction between the mentioning of a skeptical possibility and the asserting of a skeptical possibility. He argues that it is inappropriate for sensitivity to be required in the second instance but not in the first, since the difference between the two cases is not substantial. In both instances the putative knower\(^\text{11}\) (1) has the capacity to be aware of the skeptical possibility and is (2) aware of the skeptical possibility and some individual present in the her context (3) mentions the skeptical possibility; in the second instance, it is merely taken a step further when some individual in her context (4) makes a knowledge claim about the skeptical possibility. It is not clear why the distinction is drawn between (3) and (4).

Despite Goldman's preference for Contextualism, the heightened epistemic standard seems to be arbitrary. Therefore, to defend Goldman's position as Contextualism, some reasonable distinction must be provided.

What might such a distinction be?

\section*{V. Defense of Contextualism}

In order to protect the plausibility of Contextualism, one must provide a point at which to raise the epistemic standard for skeptical alternatives that is not arbitrary. Here are our options so far:

\footnote{As stipulated, the putative knower is the subject as well as the attributor.}
(0) S is incapable of being aware of skeptical possibility
(1) S is capable of being aware of skeptical possibility
(2) S actually being aware of skeptical possibility
(3) S mentions a skeptical possibility
(4) S makes a knowledge claim about skeptical possibility

In this section, I demonstrate that though placing the heightened epistemic standard at (1) also proves to be problematic, holding the standard at (2) appears to be plausible.

One might move the point at which the sensitivity condition is triggered to (1). All human beings with a so-called normal mental life are capable of being aware of skeptical possibilities. My use of 'normal mental life' is certainly a contestable notion. By 'normal mental life' all I mean here is an individual who is not severely cognitively impaired or psychotic. Presumably, these individuals can contemplate an infinite number of possibilities, skeptical ones included. Some individuals with a normal mental life are oriented in a way that allows them to consider skeptical possibility on their own; others require that the possibility not only be introduced to them, but explained to them as well. Francesca, as an individual with a normal mental life is capable of being aware of some version of Descartes' evil demon possibility, for instance. This is the case whether or not she has been formally educated, whether she is an 11-year-old or a 72-year-old. However, simply because one has the capacity to be aware of skeptical possibility, it does not follow that one will actually be aware of skeptical possibility. This is an instance of the general truth that being able to X does not imply actually doing X. For example, Francesca is physically able to do jumping jacks but this does not imply that she actually does jumping jacks. Just as it is possible for individuals to consider a skeptical possibility, it is also possible for individuals to live long lives and never once consider even one. The 7-year-old might die prematurely without ever
actually considering a skeptical possibility. The capacity to consider such an alternative does not imply that the individual will consider the alternative. Being aware of the possibility requires the capacity to be aware, but the capacity to be aware does not require being aware. They are not the same, and should not be treated as the same. That is to say, there is clearly a distinction between having the capacity to be aware of a skeptical possibility and actually being aware of a skeptical possibility. Therefore, since the distinction between (1) and (2) is not arbitrary like the distinction between (3) and (4), the placement of the epistemic standard at (1) is plausible.

However, though the distinction between (1) and (2) is not arbitrary, it does not mean that the epistemic standard should be triggered at (1). Simply because one has the capacity to be aware of skeptical possibility, or any possibility at all, it does not follow that she is obligated to be aware of that possibility. On the other hand, when an individual is in the position of actually being aware of skeptical possibility—whether it is the result of the individual thinking on her own, reading Descartes, talking about it in a philosophy class, watching the Matrix, etc.—the possibility becomes, for her, one of a set of entertained possibilities. By contrast, one certainly can, and perhaps even should, make a decision about an entertained possibility.

The skeptical possibility was an unentertained possibility for the individual when she was merely capable of being aware of the possibility; in actually being aware of the skeptical possibility, she has graduated to a new epistemic context. Specifically, one cannot make a decision about the truth of an unentertained possibility. This is because making a decision about a possibility requires entertaining it i.e. being aware of it. Once an individual is aware of a skeptical possibility, she is in a position to make a decision about the truth of the
possibility; along with this comes a new level of responsibility. Consider an example of a non-epistemic form of responsibility. Jane has the capacity to steal a car. Sarah actually steals a car. We don’t hold Jane responsible; we don’t blame her, interrogate her, punish her, etc. However, we do hold Sarah responsible and treat her in these ways. In the same way, this elevation matters in an epistemic context. It is reasonable to impose demands on those who actually X that are unreasonable to impose on those who merely have the capacity to X. The shift from (1) to (2) is a graduation to a heightened epistemic context. As such, the heightened epistemic standard should be at (2). Unlike the other distinctions rehearsed, requiring the epistemic standard once an individual is actually aware of skeptical possibility is not arbitrary.

There is another reason that the placement of the epistemic standard at (1) is a bad option: (1) would be a non-contextual epistemic standard. The capacity to be aware of skeptical possibility is not based on one’s context, but instead on context-independent basic human characteristics. The majority of human beings have the capacity to be aware of skeptical possibility since they have a ‘normal mental life’. Therefore, skeptical possibility is a relevant alternative in the majority of situations; as a result, the possibility for true knowledge attribution largely disappears. The only cases in which the alternative would be irrelevant, would be those which involve individuals who do NOT qualify as having a normal mental life. For those individuals, there would presumably be other setbacks to gaining knowledge. Therefore, as an epistemic standard, (1) is non-contextual and rarely allows for true knowledge attribution. This is not a plausible option.

Thus, the epistemic standard should not be raised unless the context is such that the putative knower is actually aware of skeptical possibility. An implication of placing the
VI. Response to defense of Contextualism

Only raising the epistemic standard of sensitivity if an individual is actually aware of the skeptical possibility is flawed as it allows for unintuitive scenarios. The proposed position affords the uninformed more possibilities for knowledge than the informed. This is the case because the heightened epistemic standard of sensitivity is not triggered due to the former group's unawareness of skeptical possibility.

This result is unsatisfactory. Though individuals with the capacity to be aware of skeptical possibility might not have an epistemic obligation to be aware of this possibility, they should not be rewarded for not being aware. In order to illustrate this criticism more clearly, I provide the following example, Sally and Her Sisters.

Sally is one of three sisters. Sally's sister, Mary, is an esteemed actress, despite never having received formal education, in acting or otherwise beyond high school. Skeptical possibility has never crossed her mind. Sally on the other hand studies Philosophy as an undergraduate and in doing so skeptical possibility has come up multiple times both in social and academic settings; she finds this possibility and its potential implications compelling and considers it often. Sally's other sister, Courtney, is a philosophy professor who has been studying philosophy for the majority of her life; she first considered skeptical possibility at age ten, has researched it extensively and has just completed a book with the working title, The Possibility of Illusion: Are the ignorant better knowers?

According to the position at issue, of the three characters in our scenario, Mary would have the most potential for making true knowledge claims; Courtney the least; and Sally would be somewhere in the middle. This is because there are considerably more contexts in which Courtney is aware of skeptical possibility. This triggers the heightened epistemic standard,
which requires sensitivity. (Remember, Sensitivity requires that if $p$ were not true, $S$ would not believe $p$. It claims that if $p$ were not true, the basis for believing that $p$ would also not hold; thus the belief would be deserted.) Since this requirement is impossible to meet in the case of skeptical possibility, the professor cannot say with truth that she or another subject knows that $p$ in these cases. This is unintuitive because it seems wrong to attribute less potential for true knowledge claims to an educated, thoughtful professor who has considered so thoroughly skeptical possibility simply because this type of possibility is insensitive. The position is deeply flawed because of its unsatisfactory implications with regard to who counts as a knower.

**VII. Modified epistemic standard**

In this section, I put aside the heightened epistemic standard of sensitivity and present a new epistemic standard.

Attempts by Sosa and myself to improve Contextualism as an answer to the skeptic concentrated almost entirely on the point at which the heightened epistemic standard of sensitivity is triggered. What exactly should raise the epistemic standard to sensitivity? Here are our options so far:

- the *capacity* to be aware of skeptical possibility,
- *actually* being aware of skeptical possibility,
- the *mention* of skeptical possibility, or
- the knowledge *assertion* of skeptical possibility.

Sensitivity is attractive as the heightened epistemic standard because it respects skeptical possibilities. When a skeptical possibility is brought up, the standard for true knowledge attribution is raised. By using sensitivity, Contextualism attempts the difficult
task of allowing for true knowledge attribution in certain contexts, while also acknowledging the pull of the skeptic. If another standard is able to demonstrate the pull of the skeptic and avoids the criticisms that the sensitivity condition faces, this standard should be adopted as the modified epistemic standard.

Let's consider a different approach to achieving this attractive balance. Up to this point, the focus has been on changing the point at which the heightened epistemic standard of sensitivity is required. Instead, I consider replacing the epistemic standard of sensitivity with a standard that does not require a triggering point at all. I propose to dispose of sensitivity in favor of a new epistemic standard, which I will call epistemic vigilance.

As knowers, it is plausible that we have an obligation to abide by certain standards, epistemic standards. This is plausible since there are better ways and worse ways to seek knowledge. (An attempt to garner knowledge about a presidential candidate purely based on the information gathered from incessant attack ads is an example of a worse way to arrive at knowledge. An attempt to garner knowledge about a presidential candidate based on engaging with multiple reputably unbiased sources is a better way to arrive at knowledge.) We are epistemically responsible when we respect this obligation. One plausible epistemic standard is that an individual be epistemically vigilant. To be epistemically vigilant is to be committed to the process of considering potential defeaters. This would seem to mean that one must be committed to exploring relevant alternatives as well as skeptical possibility more generally. To be committed to exploring is to think through and consider the epistemic effects of those alternatives that one is aware of; it is also to be receptive to considering those alternatives (either relevant or skeptical) which one is not yet aware of. Shortly, I provide examples of these through four process-oriented categories.
An important characteristic of epistemic vigilance is that it emphasizes epistemic process over epistemic result. The distinction between process and product is an intuitive one, but worth clarifying nevertheless. The process of making cookies is all that goes into the realization of the finished product, the cookies. This includes obtaining the ingredients and proper tools, following some form of a recipe that guides the individual in creating the dough and preparing the oven, and taking the cookies out of the oven when they are finished baking. Cookies are the product of this process. One eats cookies; she does not eat the activity of making cookies.

We can divide the main processes, which collectively serve as a scale of epistemic vigilance, into four groups.

Category 1 is a process in which the subject is unaware of skeptical possibility. Her process does not demonstrate commitment to considering the relevant perceptual equivalents, which displays that she is unreceptive to considering other perceptual equivalents that she is not yet aware i.e. skeptical possibility.

Category 2 is the process in which the subject, though unaware of the skeptical possibility, is committed to the epistemic obligation that requires one to consider relevant perceptual equivalents when making a knowledge claim and is also receptive to (though still unaware of) considering skeptical possibility.

Category 3 is the process in which the subject is aware of skeptical possibility and does not demonstrate commitment to considering the seriousness of skeptical possibility or even the relevant perceptual equivalents.
Category 4 is the process in which a subject is aware of skeptical possibility and demonstrates a commitment to considering and grappling with the potential responses to the skeptical threat as well as the relevant perceptual equivalents.

These first two are importantly distinct. When an individual follows Category 1 process, her potential to make a true knowledge claim in that context is lost. When she follows Category 2 process, her potential to make a true knowledge claim survives. With both Category 3 and Category 4, the individual is aware of the skeptical possibility. However, this does not necessarily mean that her potential to make a true knowledge claim in this context is lost as is the case with the epistemic standard of sensitivity. A putative knower who follows the process of Category 3 forfeits the potential to say with truth that she knows that $p$. However, those who follow Category 4 process sustain the potential for a true knowledge claim in the given context because their perspective is that of what I would call “the epistemically vigilant individual”. Though not necessarily disproving the skeptical possibility, individuals with this perspective seriously consider various ways of dealing with the skeptical threat. The Categories can be understood in terms of degrees of vigilance. In this way, Category 4 is the height of epistemic vigilance. Category 4 respects the skeptical pull but avoids falling into its infinite hole. In a lesser way, Category 2 respects the possibility of the skeptical pull; though the individual following this epistemic process is not yet aware of the skeptical possibility, her process is one which demonstrates her commitment to making true knowledge attribution. Instead of sensitivity, the epistemic standard is whether a potential knower is epistemically vigilant, which is to say, whether she takes up the process of either Category 2 or Category 4.
Under the standard of epistemic vigilance, the context still determines whether the subject’s relation to the given skeptical possibility disqualifies her from truly attributing knowledge to herself. However, the contextual factor does not revolve around relevant alternatives. Instead, the epistemic process of the putative knower is the relevant context.

Unlike the standard of sensitivity, the potential for true knowledge attribution is determined based on the subject’s epistemic process. That is to say, it depends upon the level of commitment the putative knower has to the process of entertaining potential defeaters, skeptical possibilities or relevant alternatives. In contrast, under the epistemic standard of sensitivity, whether the possibility of knowledge exists depends upon the result, which is the point at which the requirement is triggered; this point is the subject of much contention. It ranges from the capacity to be aware of skeptical possibility to the asserting of skeptical possibility. In any case, the potential for knowledge is determined based on the result— if and how the utterance of skeptical possibility is considered or made. With sensitivity, the epistemic standard can be raised on anyone no matter the individual’s level of epistemic vigilance.

Let’s revisit Sally and Her Sisters and consider how this new epistemic standard would handle this type of case. Based on this new epistemic standard of vigilance, Courtney would have a high potential for true knowledge attribution. By this, I mean that she would likely be a person who falls into Category 4 in the majority of contexts. Therefore, the possibility of true knowledge claims would likely not often disappear based on her handling of the skeptical possibility. As long as she takes on the process of Category 4 in a given context, her potential for true knowledge claims does not disappear simply based on her handling of the skeptical possibility. From the information provided about Sally, she would
probably fall into Category 4 generally, although it would likely be less often than Courtney. Mary is either a Category 1 or Category 2; there is not sufficient information in the example to know. But in either case, her potential for true knowledge attribution cannot far exceed that of Courtney or Sally, as was the case with the previous view. If Mary tends to be a Category 2, then her potential for making true knowledge claims is still alive in most contexts despite her unawareness of the skeptical possibility. The epistemic standard of vigilance avoids certain unintuitive scenarios that the sensitivity condition faces based on its emphasis of process over result. In addition, since there is no triggering point for epistemic vigilance, but instead it is a constant standard, it does not suffer the charge of arbitrariness that the sensitivity condition suffers.

The skeptic might object that the proposed epistemic standard is too weak. One example of this is that with the sensitivity condition, if the skeptical possibility is introduced, the possibility of knowledge attribution is lost. In contrast, under the epistemic standard of vigilance, an individual who follows the process of Category 4 can actually retain her potential for making knowledge claims in the context despite not necessarily defeating the skeptical possibility. Despite this, epistemic vigilance does take seriously the skeptical threat, though in a distinctive way since the epistemic standard of vigilance is not equivalent to sensitivity.

Epistemic vigilance honors the skeptical attitude, with which the skeptical argument in epistemology is developed. I make use of a comparison in order to demonstrate this. The heightened sensitivity requirement rewards those who are not aware of skeptical possibilities; this group includes those who are ignorant due to their refusal to think critically before making a knowledge claim. In contrast, epistemic vigilance punishes this group. The
heightened sensitivity requirement punishes those who take up a process that, among other things, encourages the consideration of skeptical possibilities; these are individuals such as those who spend their professional lives considering the topic of epistemic skepticism. In contrast, epistemic vigilance rewards this group. This comparison demonstrates just how well epistemic vigilance respects the skeptical attitude, particularly in comparison to the sensitivity condition. Though the skeptic might be widely considered overzealous, the basic attitude from which her position springs is one that appeals to the philosophically oriented individual. To call underlying assumptions into doubt, question one’s logic and consistently push oneself to anticipate potential counter-arguments is crucial to the practice of philosophy. The skeptical attitude is motivated by this method. The skeptical argument places emphasis on the epistemic result i.e. sensitivity as opposed to the epistemic process, which is grounded in the epistemic attitude; for this reason, epistemic vigilance might appear weak. But when compared with sensitivity, epistemic vigilance is truer to the skeptical attitude.

Epistemic vigilance appears to protect the integrity of the epistemic process by maintaining the possibility to make true knowledge claims for those in the intuitively correct instances. It also respects the skeptical attitude. Therefore, epistemic vigilance should be considered to replace the heightened sensitivity condition in handling skeptical possibility.

VIII. Goldman’s Account and the Modified Standard

In this section I demonstrate how the standard of epistemic vigilance fits into Goldman’s contextualist account of perceptual knowledge.
In “Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge”, Goldman explains that, “A person knows that \( p \) ... only if the actual state of affairs in which \( p \) is true is distinguishable or discriminable by him from a relevant possible state of affairs in which \( p \) is false (774)”. Given this condition, one way to allow for the possibility of true knowledge attribution is to hold that skeptical possibility is not a relevant possible state of affairs at all. Another way is to hold that it is relevant **only** under special conditions. The former is problematic as a response to the skeptic because it ignores the skeptical pull completely. The latter is problematic because identifying the “special conditions” produces unintuitive scenarios and is marred with accusations of arbitrariness; this has been demonstrated throughout this paper.

Instead, I propose that skeptical possibility is accounted for by the standard of epistemic vigilance. This standard is not a replacement of Goldman’s original relevance condition; it is an additional condition. Consider the result of its addition. The relevant alternatives, being the non-skeptical perceptual equivalents, would still be handled by Goldman’s original relevance condition. However, skeptical possibility would be handled as a special type of perceptual equivalent based on the putative knower’s epistemic process; this condition would be a constant requirement for a putative knower to say truly that she knows that \( p \). That is to say, if the subject is epistemically vigilant in a given context, her potential for true knowledge attribution survives. This means that skeptical possibility is not handled in the way that non-skeptical perceptual equivalents are by Goldman’s original relevance condition.

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12 The handling of skeptical possibility as separate from all other possibilities is not vulnerable to the charge of arbitrariness because the skeptical possibility is radical in a way that other perceptual equivalents are not. It is unique in its generalized illusion since its being true not only falsifies a particular knowledge claim, but all perceptual knowledge claims. The falsity of this type of large-scale illusion is nearly if not impossible to demonstrate. Therefore, a special condition can best cater to the particular circumstances that embody the skeptical possibility. Goldman separates the skeptical possibility by deeming it ‘unordinary’ and thus counting it as irrelevant. This condition of epistemic vigilance instead caters to the skeptic by responding to the threat (based on process) in every instance of a knowledge claim instead of applying the sensitivity requirement only when the skeptical threat is explicitly mentioned, asserted, etc.
condition; skeptical possibility, though a perceptual equivalent, need not be discriminated from the situation in which \( p \) in order for \( S \) to say truly that she knows \( p \).

The standard that I have just articulated is consonant with Contextualism; epistemic vigilance is contextualist and relevantist. It is contextualist in that the knower’s epistemic process is the context that determines whether true knowledge attribution is possible. The standard of epistemic vigilance departs from the typical Contextualism explored in this paper in an important way since this particular condition does not rely on context to determine when skeptical possibility is a relevant alternative. RA theories tend to focus on ruling out the relevant alternatives in order for true knowledge attribution to be possible; they favor result. However, the motivation behind these kinds of theories is that the significance of relevance is sustained. Though the proposed condition of epistemic vigilance focuses on process, it preserves the significance of relevance. This is because only cases in which the individual has the policies of someone who thinks she ought to consider relevant alternatives meets the epistemic standard. The epistemically vigilant process is one in which the individual, among other requirements, cares about considering relevant alternatives and is committed to doing so.

In order for Goldman’s account to be plausible, it needs to demonstrate respect for the skeptical position. Contextualism achieves this through the heightened standard of sensitivity. However, this heightened standard grapples with problems of arbitrariness and unintuitive scenarios. Epistemic vigilance also respects the skeptical argument. Additionally, it appears to avoid the issues that the heightened standard of sensitivity encounters. Therefore, the suggestion of epistemic vigilance as a replacement for the handling of skeptical possibility seems to be a step in the right direction.
This is not to say that this condition of epistemic vigilance is entirely without problems. For instance, a person might make the claim, "I know the grass that I am touching is green" following the process of Category 4. What if she makes this same claim every day for 401 days following the process of Category 4, but on the 402nd day, she makes the claim based on a Category 3 process? Does her possibility of true knowledge attribution disappear on the last day? Or is there some kind of cumulative situation in which one need not apply the same level of vigilance to the same claim each time so long as she has thoroughly rehearsed the potential defeaters beforehand? Can she be said to retain her epistemic vigilance on the 402nd day, as long as she is aware of those potential defeaters, even though she does not explicitly entertain them? These are important questions, which demonstrate that this condition needs further fleshing out.

Despite worries such as this one, there is something so appealing about an epistemic approach that prioritizes both reliabilism and vigilance, placing emphasis partially on process.

IX: Conclusion

This thesis centers on two big questions:

(i) What is knowledge?

(ii) Is it possible?

I have explored Contextualism as a type of reliabilist response to this first question. Goldman’s analysis of perceptual knowledge relies on some version of a RA theory; in particular, Goldman implicitly endorses Contextualism.
The second question is introduced in the form of an argument by the skeptic. Once again, the skeptical argument is:

(a) I don't know that I am not a BIV
(b) If I don't know that I am not a BIV, then I don't know that I have hands.
(c) Therefore, I don't know that I have hands.

The skeptical argument seems compelling, and so the ideal epistemic position should respect that appearance. Sosa effectively demonstrates that Contextualism does not accomplish this. This is problematic for Goldman's account of perceptual knowledge as a version of Contextualism. Sosa first explains that Contextualism uses sensitivity as a way to handle skeptical possibility. The triggering point for the heightened standard of sensitivity ranges from the mentioning of skeptical possibility to the asserting of skeptical possibility. When the standard is triggered, sensitive becomes a requirement for a belief to count as knowledge; when sensitivity is required in the case of skeptical possibility, knowledge is not possible. By abiding by this strict standard, Contextualism demonstrates respect for the skeptical argument. However, Sosa argues that this epistemic standard relies on an arbitrary distinction since the mentioning of a skeptical possibility is not sufficiently distinct from the asserting of it to mark the difference between the possibility and impossibility of knowledge. Though one might attempt to modify the distinction in order to avoid this criticism by changing the point at which the epistemic standard is triggered, the distinction remains flawed i.e. allows for unintuitive scenarios. As such, the position does not appear to respond to the skeptic in a satisfying way and thus does not serve as a plausible epistemic position.

For this reason, the prospects of Contextualism do not appear favorable. However, epistemic vigilance, though not without worries, seems plausible as a way of handling skeptical possibility. Thus, I suggest this epistemic standard as a prospective replacement for
the heightened standard of sensitivity. Epistemic vigilance respects the skeptical pull and allows for knowledge, a balance that is crucial for a satisfying epistemic position. If it can do this without encountering the setbacks of the heightened standard of sensitivity, and it seems on its face that it can, there is good reason to believe that Goldman's account would be enriched by its addition.
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