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CONTRASTIVISM, EVIDENCE, AND SCEPTICISM

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ABSTRACT. I offer a critical treatment of the contrastivist response to the problem of radical scepticism. In particular, I argue that if contrastivism is understood along externalist lines then it is unnecessary; while if it is understood along internalist lines then it is intellectually dissatisfying. Moreover, I claim that a closer examination of the conditions under which it is appropriate to claim knowledge reveals that we can accommodate many of the intuitions appealed to by contrastivists without having to opt for this particular brand of epistemological revisionism.

0. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Contrastivism—as defended most notably by Jonathan Schaffer (2004; 2005*b*)—is one of the most interesting theories to come out to the recent resurgent literature in epistemology. Although the view is a general thesis about knowledge (and possibly other epistemic terms like warrant and justification), perhaps its prime attraction derives from the seemingly neat and intuitive response that it offers to the sceptical problem. It is this aspect of the contrastivist view that I wish to take issue with here.¹

1. THE CONTRASTIVIST RESPONSE TO SCEPTICISM

In general, contrastivists about knowledge hold that we should treat knowledge not, in the usual way, as a two-place binary relation between a believer and a fact, but rather as a *three*-place ternary relation between a believer, a fact, and a contrast class. That is, the thought is that we should understand expressions such as ‘*S* knows that *p*’ as saying that *S* knows that *p* as opposed to some set of contrasts, *Q*. The motivation contrastivists offer for this form of epistemic revisionism is that it best captures our intuitions in this regard. If I say that I know where your car is parked then, intuitively, what I mean by this is that I know the location of your car relative to a restricted class of alternatives. For example, I know that your car is parked on the third-storey of the car park *rather than* on the first-storey, perhaps because I can see from the street below that it is parked there. Crucially, however, in making this claim I am not, it seems, representing myself as knowing the location of your car relative to *any* possible contrast, such as the contrast that it is has been stolen by aliens and replaced by a hologram car (I would not be able to tell by looking from the

street below that it was your car on the third storey if this were the case). An ascription of knowledge is thus always made relative to a specific contrast class, argues the contrastivist, and hence we should analyse knowledge in contrastivist terms.

Notice that this is quite a radical proposal, since while the thesis that knowledge ascription is *sometimes* contrastive in this way is hardly contentious—there may be all sorts of reasons why a specific claim to know would presuppose a concrete contrast—the idea that it is *of the essence* of knowledge that it be a contrastive notion—such that *all* knowledge ascriptions should be analysed this way—is far from obvious. In any case, an assessment of the general features of the contrastivist account is not my concern here, since I want to focus on the intellectual adequacy of the application of contrastivism to the sceptical problem, which is meant to be one of the chief motivations for the view.

As applied to the sceptical problem, contrastivism holds that there is a sense in which both the sceptic and the anti-sceptic is right. Recall that the standard version of the sceptical argument runs something like as follows, where ‘E’ is some ‘everyday’ proposition which we would all take ourselves to know in normal circumstances (such as that one has two hands), and ‘SH’ is a sceptical hypothesis which is inconsistent with the everyday proposition and which we would not normally take ourselves to know to be false (such as that one is presently a brain-in-a-vat—a BIV—who is being ‘fed’ deceptive experiences):

The Standard Sceptical Argument

- (S1) *S* does not know that not-SH.
- (S2) If *S* does not know that not-SH, then *S* does not know E.
- (SC) *S* does not know that E.

And given that E is meant to be a paradigm case of knowledge—and that this argument can in any case be repeated with just about any everyday proposition in place of E (one would just have to vary the sceptical hypothesis to suit)—it follows that we now have a sceptical conclusion in the offing. Moreover, since (S1) is highly intuitive (how could one come to know that, for example, one was not a BIV?), and since (S2) rests on the highly intuitive ‘closure’ principle for knowledge (roughly, that if one knows one proposition, and knows that it entails a second proposition, then one knows the second proposition), it follows that we have a sceptical conclusion validly inferred from highly intuitive premises.

Given the intuitive nature of the premises, it follows that any response to this argument is bound to be in some respect at least *prima facie* counterintuitive. Those, such as Fred Dretske (1970) and Robert Nozick (1981), who deny closure, and thus (S2), for example, or those, such as

Ernest Sosa (1999) and myself (e.g., Pritchard 2002*d*) who deny (S1), will each have to explain away the apparent truth of these two premises. The same applies to contextualist resolutions to the problem, as advanced by such figures as Keith DeRose (1995), David Lewis (1996), and Stewart Cohen (e.g., 2000), who treat ‘knows’ as a context-sensitive term and thus maintain that while there are contexts in which (SC) is true, there are also contexts—specifically, everyday contexts—in which the sceptical conclusion is false. Given that we do not naturally think of ‘knows’ as being a context-sensitive term, such semantic revisionism will also need to be motivated.

Contrastivism is also a revisionary proposal of course, though the claim is that this form of revisionism is to be preferred over its rivals. According to contrastivism, we should not take the premises of the argument at face value but ask instead what the implicit contrasts are in each case. That I do not know that I have two hands as opposed to being a BIV being ‘fed’ deceptive experiences *as if* I have two hands is one thing; that I do not know that I have two hands as opposed to having no hands at all, or only one of them, is quite another. The contrastivist diagnosis of the sceptical argument is thus that the sceptic illicitly changes the contrast class to one where one lacks knowledge of the target proposition. That one lacks knowledge of the target proposition relative to the contrast class cited by the sceptic does not mean, however, that one lacks knowledge of this proposition relative to ordinary non-sceptical contrast classes, and it is the latter knowledge that we are most interested in rescuing from the sceptic’s grasp.

That, in outline at least, is the contrastivist line on scepticism. Notice that the view is, as Schaffer (2004, 22) at one point describes it, an epistemically *modest* proposal as regards scepticism, in that it does not allow that we can know the denials of sceptical hypotheses, which is what those who reject (S1) claim (including contextualists, though in their case (S1) is only false in ‘low’ standards contexts where the epistemic standards are undemanding). In this sense, then, the contrastivist view is in the same spirit as the anti-sceptical proposal which rejects closure, since this is also epistemically modest in this way. Crucially, however, contrastivism is *not* held to be incompatible with closure—or, at least, it is held not to be incompatible with that principle once it is reformulated along contrastivist lines. If this is right (and I think there are grounds for doubt in this respect), then compared to the epistemically modest anti-sceptical proposal that rejects closure, contrastivism is at a distinct dialectical advantage.²

For my own part, I think that trying to meet the sceptical problem by rejecting closure is a lost cause, and thus in what follows I will grant the contrastivist anti-sceptical proposal a dialectical advantage over its rival epistemically modest views which deny this principle (moreover, I will just take it as given in what follows that closure holds). The interesting question for me is whether the

contrastivist response to scepticism enjoys a dialectical advantage over other epistemically *immodest* anti-sceptical theses. My claim is that it doesn't.³

2. SCEPTICISM AND THE EXTERNALISM/INTERNALISM DISTINCTION

I take the moral of the sceptical argument to be that one must either endorse an *ad hoc* version of epistemic internalism, or else one must advocate a rather hard-line version of epistemic externalism.⁴ Anything else will not work. Moreover, I hold that the sceptical problem is a problem that emerges out of our ordinary conception of our epistemic notions like knowledge, and so does not essentially depend upon an oddly restrictive or otherwise unduly austere understanding of these epistemic notions.⁵ I take these two claims as providing strong support for the contention that only an epistemically *immodest* anti-sceptical theory will serve our anti-sceptical needs, and if this is right then this will obviously be at odds with an epistemically modest view like contrastivism.⁶ Before I get on to the issue of how, exactly, this conception of the moral of scepticism relates to the contrastivist treatment of the sceptical problem, however, I need to canvass support for this account of the moral of scepticism.

By internalism here, I mean *access* internalism where what makes an epistemic condition an internal epistemic condition is that the agent concerned is able to know by reflection alone those facts which determine that this condition has been met. Meeting the justification condition, for example, at least as it is standardly conceived, involves the possession of grounds in support of the target belief, where these grounds—and the fact that they are supporting grounds—is reflectively accessible to the subject. Moreover, I understand internalism about knowledge as being the view that meeting a substantive internal epistemic condition is *necessary* for knowledge possession, with externalism about knowledge as the denial of this thesis.⁷

With this account of the contrast in mind, consider again what motivates the sceptical argument. The point at which the internalist constraint makes itself most immediately felt is with the first premise, since it is the denials of sceptical hypotheses which are precisely the kind of propositions that one could, it seems, never have internalist knowledge of. Given that one's experiences in the BIV case are, *ex hypothesi*, indistinguishable from one's experiences when one is being undeceived, how could one have adequate reflectively accessible grounds for thinking that one is not a BIV?⁸ On an internalist conception of knowledge, then, one is unable to know this proposition and thus, given closure, one is unable to have knowledge of everyday propositions

which are inconsistent with the sceptical hypothesis.

The upshot of this is that if one wishes to maintain internalism in the face of this closure-based sceptical challenge then the only alternative available is to allow that there are certain beliefs which have a special epistemic status such that one is epistemically entitled to hold these beliefs even though one lacks adequate reflectively accessible grounds for them and even though they are not self-justifying in any way (they do not concern self-evident propositions, for example). Just such a line has been pursued in the recent literature by, for example, Crispin Wright (2004), who has argued for a notion of ‘unearned’ warrant which means that we are able to have internalist knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses after all.

Since the key anti-sceptical component of this view is the claim that we can know the denials of sceptical hypotheses, one could regard it as a *neo-Moorean* thesis. Moreover, this aspect of the view also ensures that it is epistemically *immodest* in the sense described above. It is thus an example of an *internalist neo-Moorean immodest* anti-sceptical theory. The problems facing such an approach should be obvious, not least of which is that by the lights of an internalist epistemology to call a warrant ‘unearned’ is, one would naturally think at any rate, just to say that it is not a warrant at all.⁹

One could temper the neo-Moorean aspect of this thesis by allying it to a contextualist account, such that although one continued to maintain that we are able to have internalist knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses, this contention is qualified by the further contextualist claim that this only occurs in contexts where the epistemic standards are low, so that one lacks such knowledge in more epistemically demanding contexts. Such a view would thus be a form of *internalist contextualist immodest* anti-sceptical theory. One could regard Cohen (e.g., 2000) as proposing a position of this sort. The chief problem that internalist immodest anti-sceptical views face does not disappear, however, which is how to account for internalist anti-sceptical knowledge in a way that is not *ad hoc*, a point that is not lost on Cohen who recognises just how troublesome this problem is for his account.¹⁰ Moreover, one would also now have to deal with our invariantist (i.e., anti-contextualist) intuitions about ‘knowledge’.

By the lights of an externalist epistemology, in contrast, this aspect of the sceptical challenge is not nearly so straightforward. Now knowledge possession *can* be consistent with certain conditions needing to obtain which the agent lacks adequate reflectively accessible grounds for thinking have obtained, and thus with warrants that are ‘unearned’ in this sense. Accordingly, the fact that one is not in the possession of adequate reflectively accessible grounds which would indicate that one is not, say, a BIV does not suffice to indicate that one does not know this proposition.

Consider, for example, safety-based theories of knowledge which make meeting the safety condition an essential feature of knowledge possession, a view that has been expressed by Ernest Sosa (1999), amongst others (including myself—see Pritchard 2002*b*). On this view a key determinant of the epistemic status of a true belief is that the belief could not have easily been false—i.e., it is *safe*—such that in most near-by possible worlds in which one continues to believe the target proposition (and on the same basis), that proposition continues to be true. Provided that the actual world is much as we take it to be, then one’s belief that one is not a BIV will tend to be safe, since one believes it in most near-by possible worlds and it is true in those worlds as well. Of course, that the actual world is roughly as we take it to be is not something that is reflectively accessible to one, but the mere fact that the epistemic status of one’s belief essentially depends upon certain conditions obtaining which one is unable to know by reflection alone to have obtained need not be a reason, on the externalist account, for thinking that one lacks knowledge of what one believes. On this view, then, it is plausible to suppose that we can know the denials of sceptical hypotheses after all.

This proposal would also be a form of *neo-Mooreanism*, just like Wright’s view, except that this time it is configured along *externalist* lines. Similarly, this Moorean aspect of the proposal means that it is an epistemically *immodest* proposal. It is thus an *externalist neo-Moorean immodest* anti-sceptical thesis.

Such a view is not without its problems, of course, since one still needs to explain away the intuition that we are unable to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses in *any* sense.¹¹ As with internalist neo-Mooreanism, one option here could be to ally this externalist view to a form of contextualism so that the Moorean aspect of the view is qualified by the further contextualist claim that such anti-sceptical knowledge is only available in contexts which employ undemanding epistemic standards. The resulting position would be an *externalist contextualist immodest* anti-sceptical theory. One could regard DeRose (1995) as offering a view of this sort. Nevertheless, one would still need to find a way to counter the intuition that we are unable to have anti-sceptical knowledge in *any* sense (and thus relative to *any* contextual standard). Moreover, one would also now have to accommodate our invariantist intuitions about epistemic terms like ‘knowledge’.

Granted closure, then, the choice thus seems to be between being an internalist and allowing that certain beliefs have a special epistemic status that exempts them from the usual demands for epistemic support (at least relative to certain contexts); or else opting for externalism and simply maintaining that one can (again, at least relative to certain contexts) know the denials of sceptical hypotheses. One thing that it is crucial to notice about this formulation of the moral of scepticism is

that the sceptical problem does not on this conception obviously trade on an unduly austere understanding of our epistemic notions like knowledge. Instead, the sceptical challenge falls out of epistemic principles, like closure, that we would all antecedently accept, even in quotidian contexts where, presumably, the epistemic standards we employ are *not* unduly austere. This is why contextualism is not an easy option in this regard, since it too has to face the problem of how to account for our anti-sceptical knowledge no less than neo-Moorean views.

Interestingly, one can express this point about the dilemma posed by scepticism independently of closure. Moreover, as we will see, it is useful for our purposes to make this alternative formulation of the challenge posed by scepticism explicit, in part because the alternative formulation highlights further essential features of the anti-sceptical views just described; and in part because the alternative formulation is more relevant to the contrastivist response to scepticism.

Consider the following ‘underdetermination’ principle:

(UP) For all S , φ , ψ , if S lacks adequate evidence which favours φ over ψ , and S knows that φ entails $\neg\psi$, then S does not know φ .

What motivates this principle is the plausible supposition that for one’s evidence to offer genuine epistemic support it is essential that it favours one’s beliefs over known to be incompatible alternatives. If, for example, one’s evidence for one’s belief that one is presently away from home at the office does not favour this belief over the known to be incompatible hypothesis that one is presently at home, then, intuitively, one lacks adequate evidence for believing that one is presently at the office. Of course, one might want to restrict this principle in various ways in order to accommodate the intuition that perhaps not all beliefs have to enjoy ‘favouring’ supporting evidence of this sort in order to count as an instance of knowledge—for example, some knowledge may not be evidentially grounded at all. Nevertheless, so long as this principle applies to a wide class of one’s beliefs—as presumably it does—then, as we will see, it will serve the sceptic’s bidding just as well.

For the internalist, the notion of evidence in play in (UP) will need to be interpreted along internalist lines. On this view, one’s evidence is the evidence that is reflectively accessible to one, and (UP) imposes a constraint on what would count as *adequate* reflectively accessible evidence, in the sense of *knowledge-supporting* evidence. In effect, the internalist rendering of (UP) will demand that an agent has reflectively accessible evidence which favours the target proposition over all known to be incompatible alternatives, such that if this demand is not met then the agent lacks knowledge of the target proposition.

Notice, however, that it is a failure to meet (UP), so construed, that lies at the heart of the

sceptical problem for internalists, since clearly one doesn't have adequate reflectively accessible grounds for one's everyday beliefs which favours those beliefs over sceptical alternatives. And note that employing this principle enables one to motivate the sceptical conclusion without recourse to the closure principle. After all, if one lacks supporting evidence of this sort then it directly follows that by internalist lights one is unable to know a wide class of everyday propositions, just as the sceptic contends.

Accordingly, if one wishes to retain internalism in the face of the sceptical challenge, it follows that one must be willing to allow that certain beliefs are exempt from the epistemic demand imposed by an internalist reading of (UP), such that they can be rightly held even though one lacks 'favouring' evidence for them (where perhaps this epistemic demand is only suspended in certain epistemically undemanding contexts). This would be the evidential aspect of the position we noted was advocated by Wright above (and Cohen, if the view is contextualised). Clearly, while a theoretical option here, this is not a comfortable view to defend.

Interestingly, the demands imposed by (UP) on externalists are altogether different, since they will have a different conception of evidence available to them, one that does not insist that one's evidence should be equated with the evidence that is reflectively available to one. Moreover, with one's evidence understood along these more liberal lines, it follows that accepting (UP) as a constraint on what counts as appropriate knowledge-supporting evidence need not directly lead to scepticism. After all, that there is no evidence reflectively available to one which would favour one's beliefs in everyday propositions over sceptical alternatives does not, on this view, entail that one's evidence in favour of one's everyday beliefs does not meet (UP).

Indeed, there are externalists—most notably Timothy Williamson (e.g., 2000)—who have explicitly argued that one's evidence *can* prefer one's everyday beliefs over sceptical alternatives. That is, if my evidential situation when I am not envatted is the same as when I am envatted and 'fed' subjectively indistinguishable experiences, then this principle will wreak the epistemic havoc advertised by the sceptic. Crucially, however, it is just such an equivalence claim that the externalist would be inclined to reject, since what could motivate such a thesis that would not already presuppose internalist epistemic claims—such as that one's evidence is determined by what is reflectively accessible to one—that the externalist has already rejected?¹²

It is thus open to the externalist to block the evidential formulation of the sceptical argument on a principled basis by maintaining that in undeceived cases one *can* possess evidence which favours one's everyday beliefs over sceptical alternatives. Moreover, if our evidence genuinely does favour our everyday beliefs over sceptical alternatives, then this should mean that

one is able to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses. Of course, the kind of evidence that one has will now be in part determined by facts obtaining which one is unable to know by reflection alone to have obtained, but there is no reason why an externalist should worry about this feature of the position. That's not to say that there is no price to pay for endorsing a view of this sort, of course, since one might feel a residual attraction to the internalist conception of evidence—the point is rather that this feature of the view is independently motivated.

Such an externalism about evidence would naturally complement a safety-based theory of knowledge in accounting for our knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses. It could thus feature as part of the externalist neo-Moorean immodest anti-sceptical thesis we outlined above. Williamson (2000) clearly sees the view as being in this vein, and I offer an account along these lines as well (see Pritchard 2004; *forthcominga*). Alternatively, as before, one can temper this stance by contextualising it and therefore holding that it is only in certain contexts that our evidence is able to perform this 'favouring' role. Such a view—a form of externalist contextualist immodest anti-sceptical theory—has been put forward by Ram Neta (2002; 2003).

Either way, the moral of scepticism, this time stated without closure, is roughly the same as before, which is that the sceptical problem forces us into choosing between two options. On the one hand, we could opt to be externalists and allow that our beliefs in the denials of sceptical hypotheses do enjoy an adequate epistemic status after all (if only, perhaps, in a specific context). On the other, we can opt to be internalists and try to deal with the problem of accounting for how some beliefs (at least relative to certain contexts) are exempt from the epistemic demands that are usually applied by the internalist to one's beliefs. Moreover, note that (UP)—just like the closure principle that we saw earlier—does not seem to be a principle that reflects an unduly austere conception of our epistemic notions. Instead, it appears to be a normal feature of our everyday epistemic practices where, presumably, we do not employ unduly austere epistemic standards.

3. CONTRASTIVIST ANTI-SCEPTICISM RE-EVALUATED

It is never all that clear from the few published writings on contrastivism whether the view is meant to be understood as an internalist position or an externalist one, or whether it is indifferent to this debate.¹³ For example, when Schaffer (2002) discusses how one comes to know everyday propositions relative to everyday—as opposed to sceptical—contrasts, he puts the point in terms of “discrimination”. One can discriminate, he says, between having two hands and not having two hands, which is part of the reason why one can know this in normal contexts. In contrast, one cannot, he says, discriminate between having two hands and being a BIV who is being ‘fed’ the experiences as if one has two hands. Crucially, however, the term ‘discriminate’ is ambiguous when it comes to the internalist/externalist distinction.

One might naturally read this term internalistically as demanding that one has adequate reflectively accessible evidence which distinguishes between the target proposition and the specified contrast. Alternatively, however, one could just as well understand the term externalistically such that the agent is in some sense doxastically or evidentially responsive to the contrast even if that responsiveness is not fully recoverable in terms of the evidence that is reflectively accessible to the agent. Notice, however, that while it is plausible to suppose that one cannot discriminate between everyday scenarios and sceptical contrasts where ‘discriminate’ is given an internalist reading—this was, in effect, one of the conclusions canvassed in the discussion of the underdetermination principle in the previous section—it is not so clear that this is so when ‘discriminate’ is given an externalist reading.

Consider again the safety-based theory of knowledge we looked at above. On this view, what is important to knowledge possession is that one’s true belief in the target proposition is safe in the sense that in most near-by possible worlds in which one believes this proposition it continues to be true. As we noted above, provided that the actual world is roughly as we take it to be, then one’s belief in the denials of sceptical hypotheses will be safe in this way. Moreover, one could regard the safety of one’s beliefs as representing an ability to ‘discriminate’ in the relevant sense, since one’s beliefs match the truth across a wide range of counterfactual circumstances, and this is one way—though not of course a very *natural* way—of understanding what such discrimination might consist of. Furthermore, the externalism about evidence that we noted above in connection with our discussion of the underdetermination principle would also be one way of underpinning this conception of discrimination with a supporting account of evidence, since one’s evidence is also on this account responsive to the truth of the various possibilities—the evidence one has when

one is not being deceived can be different from what it would be were one to be deceived.

The point is that even despite the awkwardness of thinking of discrimination in this way, it is a way that is available to the externalist, and that the externalist can understand this notion without needing to make recourse to a contrastivist understanding of knowledge indicates that the move to contrastivism, if it is meant to be an externalist view, is premature. That is, given that there is an externalist notion of discrimination available which can account for how we are able to discriminate between everyday propositions and sceptical contrasts, there is no obvious need, on the externalist picture, to endorse the kind of revisionism demanded by the contrastivist if that view is also to be understood along externalist lines. This is especially so given that externalism, as we have seen, has the resources within it to accommodate an epistemically *immodest* response to the sceptic. If this is right, then it is hard to see the attraction of a *modest* externalist theory which endorses a further revisionary thesis in order to retain the modesty of the view.

Moreover, recall that the immodest externalist response to the sceptic is able, in principle at least, to retain (UP), which seem to be an essential feature of our everyday conception of our epistemic terms. The modest contrastivist proposal, in contrast, will presumably have to reject (UP) because it is essential to this view that one's knowledge-supporting evidence may only be able to favour one's belief over a specified contrast set, a contrast set which may be very narrow, narrower than the contrast set picked out by known to be incompatible alternatives to what one knows.¹⁴

Since (UP) is a central feature of our everyday conception of our epistemic terms, that contrastivists have to reject it is a major blow for the view. This highlights an important point about contrastivism, which is that like its 'sister' epistemically modest anti-sceptical view—the non-closure response—it is only able to meet the sceptical problem by offering a rather fundamental form of epistemic revisionism. Part of the diagnosis of why the contrastivist does not see the importance of this point is that she implicitly treats the sceptical problem as a problem which emerges out of an austere conception of the epistemic landscape, such that modesty in one's anti-sceptical view is the natural way to go. Moreover, as contrastivists can (they claim) retain closure—understood along contrastivist lines—the extent of the revisionism here is partly disguised. Nevertheless, since, as we have seen, (UP) is an entirely normal feature of our everyday conception of knowledge and evidence, it is far from clear that the move to modesty will achieve very much. After all, there is very little that is modest about rejecting key features of one's everyday conception of one's epistemic terms.

In any case, I think it is highly unlikely that contrastivism is meant to be conceived of in externalist terms, so we can set this aspect of our critique to one side. Instead, I take it that the

guiding thought behind the view is that it can accommodate our anti-sceptical intuitions *without* requiring the move to externalism, and thus that it has advantages over externalist anti-sceptical views (immodest or otherwise) while also being preferable to the kind of internalist non-contrastivist sceptical views (again, immodest or otherwise) that we noted above and which we saw faced some formidable problems. That is, the externalist approach to the problem of scepticism can be thought of as allowing that sceptical contrasts are at least sometimes relevant to our everyday beliefs, and thus that it is important that we sacrifice a certain degree of subjective cognitive authority over the epistemic status of our everyday beliefs in order to allow them to enjoy an adequate epistemic standing even despite this fact. The epistemic status of our beliefs on the externalist model are thus hostage, in a certain sense, to the inaccessible facts of the situation, with such epistemic contingency a price worth paying if it enables one to resolve the sceptical problematic. Contrastivism, in contrast, enables us to avoid making such a concession since it shows us why sceptical contrasts are not always relevant to our everyday knowledge.

Moreover, I take it that the idea is that if such contrasts aren't always relevant to our everyday knowledge, then in cases where they aren't relevant the standard problem with internalist anti-sceptical approaches will also be dealt with. This is because the problems we saw facing such approaches arose out of the acceptance that sceptical contrasts were *always* relevant to knowledge of everyday propositions, something which is not accepted on the contrastivist view. We thus have a rationale for retaining internalism in the face of scepticism.

The problem is, however, that it is far from clear that the problems we saw facing the internalist response to scepticism above *are* met by the move to contrastivism, since closer examination of the contrastivist conception of scepticism indicates that the problems simply shift their location rather than being resolved. This point is clearest if one considers the formulation of the sceptical argument that turns on (UP). Here the point was that since we are unable to have evidence which favours our everyday beliefs over sceptical alternatives—where 'evidence' is understood along internalist lines—then it follows that we do not have adequate evidence in favour of our everyday beliefs. The contrastivist response to this is that we only require evidence which favours our everyday beliefs over a specific set of (non-sceptical) contrasts in order to have knowledge in this case, and so the mere fact that we lack evidence which favours our everyday beliefs over sceptical alternatives is neither here nor there in contexts in which sceptical contrasts aren't at issue. It is thus central to the contrastivist view as we are now reading it that one can have genuine internalist evidential support for one's everyday beliefs even despite the fact that such support does not favour one's everyday beliefs over sceptical alternatives. As with the externalist

rendering of contrastivism, then, internalist contrastivists have to reject (the contrastivist formulation of) (UP).

It isn't at all obvious, however, that the rejection of (UP) is even consistent with the spirit of internalism. What does it mean, by internalist lights, for one to have reflectively accessible evidence which genuinely supports one's belief and yet which does favour one's belief over known to be incompatible alternatives? On the externalist view, while, as we saw, the rejection of this principle was unmotivated, it was at least *coherent* that one could reject it within an externalist epistemology (perhaps knowledge possession has very little to do with the possession of evidence, for example, and everything to do with a counterfactual sensitivity to the facts). In contrast, rejecting this principle from within an internalist epistemology does not even appear to be coherent.

Let us bracket the sceptical contrasts for a moment and consider a concrete case of what is held to be knowledge possession on the contrastivist account. On the internalist contrastivist view it ought to be possible to have reflectively accessible evidence which favours one's belief that there is a zebra before one rather than a giraffe—and thus which supports knowledge of this proposition given that contrast—and yet fail to have reflectively accessible evidence that favours one's belief that there is a zebra before one rather than a cleverly disguised mule—and thus which fails to support knowledge of this proposition given this contrast. The key question to ask first is how could it be that one has adequate reflectively accessible evidence for believing that there is a zebra before one rather than a giraffe which wasn't also adequate reflectively accessible evidence for believing that there is a zebra before one rather than a cleverly disguised mule.

Suppose, for example, that one's available evidence includes: (i) that one can see what seems to be a zebra-like object before one (and one knows what zebras look like); (ii) that one has good reason to think that one's perceptual faculties are working reliably; and (iii) that one has good reason to think that there are no (undefeated) defeaters present which one should take account of (such as an authoritative-looking sign which says 'Warning: This is not a real zebra'). Here is the problem: if one does have reflectively accessible evidence of this (i)-(iii) form, then why is this not evidence which also excludes the 'cleverly disguised mule' contrast? Of course, the agent here could not, *ex hypothesi*, tell the difference between a zebra and a cleverly disguised mule were the two presented to him, but even so, would this fact prevent us as internalists—and, recall, internalists who have momentarily bracketed the sceptical contrasts—from ascribing knowledge to the agent in this case? It is not as if, for example, the agent has good reason to think that there is any deception taking place right now.

In general, sceptical hypotheses aside, it seems that adequate reflectively accessible

evidence in favour of a proposition will thereby be adequate reflectively accessible evidence in favour of any known to be entailed proposition. That is, the problem does not lie in non-sceptical contrasts at all, but in sceptical ones. If this is right, then the motivation for internalist contrastivism can only emerge in the context of a consideration of sceptical contrasts, and thus contrastivism will not be—better: *need not* be—an essential feature of everyday knowledge.

In order to see this point, one needs only to note that one's reflectively accessible evidence for thinking that one is faced with a zebra does *not* prefer this proposition over the sceptical hypothesis that one is a BIV being 'fed' deceptive experiences as if one were looking at a zebra—this is the familiar point about internalism and (UP) that we noted above. The trouble is that what the consideration of the sceptical contrast highlights is that we only have the putatively adequate reflectively accessible grounds for our everyday beliefs in everyday contexts where the sceptical contrasts are bracketed *because* we are groundlessly ignoring sceptical contrasts. With the sceptical contrasts in mind, for example, I have *no* good reflectively accessible grounds for thinking that, say, my perceptual faculties are functioning correctly. (This highlights an important difference between non-sceptical contrasts like the 'cleverly disguised mule' contrast and sceptical contrasts, which is that the former, unlike the latter, do not raise a *general* problem at all about one's ability to possess adequate reflectively accessible grounds in favour of one's beliefs).

The epistemic modesty of the internalist contrastivist position now starts to simply look *ad hoc* because it is only applicable to the sceptical problem and so lacks independent motivation. Moreover, it also seems to be an example of bad epistemic faith. Rather than discovering a general contrastive feature of our knowledge, contrastivists have merely highlighted the need to ignore sceptical contrasts if we want to have adequate supporting evidence for our everyday beliefs. But we knew *that* already. The problem remains that such evidential support only counts as evidential support because we have groundlessly bracketed the sceptical contrasts, and this is just to say that although we loosely speak in everyday contexts as if we have adequate reflectively accessible grounds for our beliefs, the truth of the matter is, alas, rather different.

4. KNOWING AND SAYING THAT ONE KNOWS

I think that one can diagnose part of the underlying motivation for contrastivist treatments of knowledge by looking at the conditions under which one can properly say that one knows, since I think that it is here that we find contrastivism-friendly epistemic conditions in operation. To begin

with, note that one typically conveys one's knowledge of a proposition simply by asserting the proposition in question. Adding the further phrase 'I know' is rare, and standardly reflects not just emphasis but also an ability to resolve a particular challenge that has been raised. For example, one might initially convey one's knowledge of what the time is by simply asserting, say, 'It's 10.22am', but then be prompted into the further explicit claim to know this proposition by a challenge to one's original assertion.

There are a number of ways in which these challenges could be issued, but the type of challenge that I want to focus on is one that involves the presentation of an error-possibility which is held to be salient. Notice that in responding to a challenge of this sort with an explicit knowledge claim one is representing oneself as being in possession of stronger reflectively accessible grounds in support of one's assertion than would be implied simply by making the assertion itself. That is, it is a general rule of assertion that in making an assertion one is representing oneself as being in a position to offer grounds to back-up what is asserted, and that must mean that the grounds in question are reflectively accessible to one. Adding the phrase 'I know' to an assertion raises the stakes in this respect. Interestingly, however, the kinds of additional grounds required in each case can be very different. In particular, when it comes to challenges that involve the presentation of error-possibilities the additional grounds have to speak specifically to the error-possibilities raised. More specifically still—and this is a point which, I think, has often been overlooked in this regard, despite its epistemic importance—the grounds one needs available to one in making a claim to know in response to a challenge of this sort must be such as to *discriminate* between what is asserted and the relevant error-possibility. This claim is important because, intuitively, the kind of evidential support one needs in order to have knowledge is weaker than this. All that is required here is the sort of 'favouring' evidence that we saw above in our discussion of the underdetermination principle (which is still a strong requirement on knowledge, as we also saw).

In order to make this point clear, consider again the 'zebra' example we looked at above. Here we are asked to imagine someone who is at the zoo in normal circumstances and sees what looks like a zebra in the zebra enclosure. Clearly, such an agent would normally be attributed knowledge that the creature before him is a zebra, and we would be perfectly happy with any assertion he might make to the effect that there is a zebra before him—which would represent him as having knowledge of this proposition—since he has adequate reflectively accessible grounds to back-up that assertion. Similarly, an explicit claim to know that he sees a zebra would also be deemed appropriate in this context, if the circumstances were right. For example, if the original claim that the creature before him is a zebra is challenged in some mundane fashion—perhaps by

someone short-sighted who wonders out loud why, since they were expecting to be near the gorilla enclosure, there should be zebras here—then it would be unproblematic for our agent to respond to this challenge by saying that he knows that this creature is a zebra.

It is important to recognise why such an assertion would be entirely appropriate, given how we have described the situation. The reason for this is not just that the agent is in a position to offer very good reflectively accessible grounds in favour of what he asserts, nor even that he has good reflectively accessible grounds in favour of what he asserts which prefer what he asserts over the target error-possibility (that it is a gorilla rather than a zebra), but more specifically that he has good reflectively accessible grounds which discriminate between the target proposition and the target error-possibility—i.e., between creatures that are zebras and (non-zebra) creatures that are gorillas. That is, explicitly claiming knowledge in this context will generate the conversational implicature that one is able to offer grounds in support of the proposition claimed as known which would suffice to distinguish the scenario described by this proposition from the specified error-possibility. In this case, however, the agent does have the required grounds. After all, our agent is aware, presumably, that zebras and gorillas have very different shapes and gaits, and this will suffice to enable such discrimination to take place. That such a discriminative ability is required in order to claim knowledge in this case should not, however, lead one into thinking that it is thereby required for knowledge possession, since, intuitively, mere favouring evidence will suffice in this regard. This, I suggest, is the mistake made by the contrastivist.

This last point is important because there are cases where one has the required favouring evidence but where one lacks the relevant discriminative capacity. Accordingly, if one fails to pay due attention to this point then one will be led into denying knowledge to the agent even though there are good grounds for thinking that it is possessed. Imagine, for example, that the error-possibility that the zebra may in fact be a cleverly disguised mule is raised and taken seriously in that conversational context. Since the original assertion that the creature is a zebra has been challenged, it would ordinarily be appropriate for the agent, if he knows this proposition, to explicitly say so, just as he did in the case just described where the objector wonders why he isn't presently looking at a gorilla. If the agent now claims to know that there is a zebra before him in the light of this error-possibility being raised, however, then this will generate the implicature not just that the agent has reflectively accessible grounds which prefer the proposition claimed as known over the target error-possibility, but also that the agent has reflectively accessible grounds which could serve to discriminate between the proposition claimed as known and the target error possibility. That is, the agent is representing himself as having grounds which would suffice to

enable him to tell the difference between these two creatures (i.e., a zebra and a cleverly disguised mule). Such grounds might be, for example, that he has examined the creature at close range and been able to determine that it is not painted. Typically, of course, the agent will not have grounds of this sort available to him, and so his claim to know will be inappropriate because it generates a false conversational implicature.

Notice, however, that this fact alone does not suffice to indicate that the agent lacks knowledge of the target proposition. After all, in the standard case at least, the agent will have evidence which favours the hypothesis that the animal before him is a zebra over the alternative hypothesis that it is a cleverly disguised mule. Think, for example, of the grounds he has regarding the implausibility of a zookeeper going to such lengths to deceive patrons, and the penalties that would be imposed were such a deception to come to light, as presumably it would eventually. Moreover, this evidence will typically be reflectively accessible to the subject, and so this point stands alone from any general considerations regarding the relevance of the internalism/externalism distinction in epistemology here. Thus, by both externalist and internalist lights, the agent has evidentially grounded knowledge that there is a zebra before him. The issue is solely whether or not he can properly claim to possess that knowledge in these circumstances; not whether it is possessed.

What is different about these cases and the sceptical case is that we can make sense of an agent having evidence—even reflectively accessible evidence—which favours the believed hypothesis over the alternative hypothesis. Moreover, we can also make sense of there being agents who are in better epistemic positions relative to the believed proposition—such as, in the zebra example, zoologists—who are able to possess the reflectively accessible discriminating grounds required for an appropriate knowledge claim. In sceptical cases, in contrast, matters are very different. This is because we have difficulty comprehending evidence that can play the required favouring role (it is essential that the evidence not be understood along internalist lines if it is to play this role); and we can make no sense at all of the idea that one has adequate reflectively accessible grounds which could serve to discriminate the target hypothesis from the sceptical alternative.

For example, the claim to know that one is not a BIV will generate the false conversational implicature that one has reflectively accessible grounds which would suffice to indicate that one can distinguish between the scenario in which one is not a BIV from the alternative scenario in which one is a BIV. It is little wonder then, on this view, why such knowledge can never be properly claimed even in cases when it is possessed. Moreover, what applies in the case of claims

to know anti-sceptical propositions will also apply as regards claims to know everyday propositions in sceptical contexts in which sceptical error-possibilities are at issue. If in such a context one claims that, for example, one knows one has two hands, this will generate the false conversational implicature that one has reflectively accessible grounds which would suffice to distinguish between the scenario in which one has hands and the alternative sceptical scenario in which one is, say, a BIV who merely seems to have hands.¹⁵

Appropriate claims to know thus reflect the salient contrast class at issue in that context. This means that we cannot, for example, properly claim to know anti-sceptical propositions. Do this mean that we do not know them, as the contrastivist claims? This is surely moot. Indeed, given that there is a plausible neo-Moorean epistemology available which can account for our anti-sceptical knowledge—and given that this view is clearly consistent with the fact that we are unable to properly claim such knowledge—the natural conclusion to draw seems not to be the contrastivist conclusion that knowledge is an inherently contrastive notion, but rather the neo-Moorean conclusion that the contrastivist—and with him, the sceptic and those who deny closure—have simply confused the conditions under which it is appropriate to claim knowledge with the conditions under which one knows.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS—THE LESSON OF WITTGENSTEIN’S *ON CERTAINTY*

I want to close by introducing one of the key themes in Wittgenstein’s (1969) *On Certainty*—that of the ultimate groundlessness of our beliefs.

A recurrent *motif* in *On Certainty* is how our everyday practice of offering grounds in favour of our beliefs disguises the true nature of how our beliefs are grounded. Central to this idea is the notion of a “hinge proposition”. Here is Wittgenstein:

[...] the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend upon the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.

But it isn’t that the situation is like this: We just *can’t* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (Wittgenstein 1969, §§341-3)¹⁶

The point of this metaphor is that the practice of epistemically evaluating beliefs—of offering grounds for belief or doubt, for example—always takes place relative to a backdrop of claims which are in this context immune to epistemic evaluation. The reason for this immunity is that they

determine the framework against which such epistemic evaluation is to take place.

Consider the famous remarks Wittgenstein makes concerning the limits of what can be concluded from historical investigations. At one point, for example, Wittgenstein notes the following inference that one might be tempted to make:

“It is certain that after the battle of Austerlitz Napoleon ... Well, in that case it’s surely also certain that the earth existed then.” (Wittgenstein 1969, §183)

It is just such an inference which Wittgenstein thinks is problematic, since our practice of offering grounds in favour of the former proposition already presupposes certain claims about how the earth has existed for a long time, such that to infer from the former to the latter would be a kind of bootstrapping. In order to make this point absolutely clear, consider a more extreme instance of an inference of this sort, where the inferred proposition is the falsity of ‘Russell’s Hypothesis’—the hypothesis that the universe came into existence moments ago replete with the apparent traces of a distant ancestry. Could one legitimately cite the historical grounds one has for believing that Napoleon did such-and-such after the battle of Austerlitz (in 1805) as grounds for thinking that the universe has been in existence for more than five minutes? Intuitively, and this is Wittgenstein’s point, such an inference would be absurd, and this reveals to us something important about our practices of offering grounds in favour of our beliefs.

In particular, it highlights that the acceptability of certain grounds in a particular context will reflect the shared background certainties on the part of the participants in that context. That the historical grounds one can cite in favour of the claim that Napoleon did such-and-such after the battle of Austerlitz are acceptable to one’s audience is in part due to the fact that certain other claims—concerning, for example, the reality of the past—are held to be entirely beyond doubt in that context because of their ‘hinge’ role. But since these propositions perform this framework role, it follows that they cannot be properly thought of as being grounded in that context, since they are part of what determines what counts as an adequate ground in that context. In this sense, then, they are of their nature groundlessly held.

Now one might see in this Wittgensteinian treatment of grounds a certain approach to the sceptical problem that is congenial to contrastivism—Schaffer (e.g., 2005*b*, 3) certainly does—since one could gloss the view by saying that the point of all this is that we should not treat an instance of knowledge as being simply knowledge of a certain proposition, but rather knowledge of a certain proposition relative to a certain framework, where for ‘framework’ read ‘contrast class’. This sort of reading is certainly not what Wittgenstein had in mind, however. Instead, he saw the moral of this to be, as he put it in a famous remark, that the “difficulty is to realise the

groundlessness of our believing” (Wittgenstein 1969, §166), the point being that our practices of offering grounds *disguises* this groundlessness, rather than revealing an underlying contrastivism in our treatment of knowledge. To recognise that one’s grounds are only supporting grounds relative to a framework of ungrounded certainties (/a specific contrast class) is to recognise that one’s beliefs are not really grounded at all.¹⁷

With Wittgenstein’s remarks on hinge propositions in mind, one can see how the dilemma forced upon us by the sceptical challenge which we noted earlier comes about. On the one hand, one can argue that one’s beliefs in hinge propositions have a special epistemic status such that they are rightly held even despite the absence of adequate reflectively accessible supporting grounds. Alternatively, on the other hand, one can break the link between knowledge possession and the possession of adequate reflectively accessible grounds, such that the moral of scepticism is the externalist moral that knowledge is sometimes possessed without meeting such an internalist constraint at all. Either way, one is hooked on one of the horns of the dilemma imposed by the sceptic. Contrastivism does not offer a principled ‘third way’ through this problem.¹⁸

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NOTES

¹ In any case, most of the recent developments of the contrastivist view have explicitly tried to characterise the position in such a way that it can give a satisfactory response to the sceptical problem. See, for example, Schaffer (2004; 2005*b*) and Blaauw (2004). For a contrastive account of knowledge that is not focussed on the sceptical problem, see Karjalainen & Morton (2003).

² See Schaffer (2005*a*) for the contrastivist defence of closure, where he puts forward a number of ‘contrastivized’ principles which, he claims, model the closure principle as we normally understand it. Given the complex nature of this account of closure, however, the natural question to ask is why this should be regarded as a contrastivist treatment of closure rather than an account of a different principle entirely (or at least a qualified, and thus logically weaker, version of the closure principle). This is especially so once one remembers that while there is a contrast set relative to which one can know everyday propositions and the entailment to anti-sceptical propositions, there is no contrast set relative to which one knows anti-sceptical propositions.

³ I explicitly consider the arguments for non-closure in Pritchard (2002*a*; 2002*b*). For the latest state-of-play in the debate about closure, see the exchange between Dretske (2005*a*; 2005*b*) and Hawthorne (2005). For an overview of the recent literature on scepticism in general, see Pritchard (2002*c*).

⁴ In Pritchard (2005*a*, *passim*; 2005*b*), I take a more nuanced line on scepticism, claiming that while the sceptical problem as regards knowledge can be dealt with by adopting an externalist epistemology, there is a distinct sceptical problem which is focussed on a certain type of knowledge that remains and which cannot be dealt with by adopting *any* sort of epistemological theory. There is thus a truth in scepticism after all, though it is not the truth that the sceptic advertises.

⁵ One can find such a view of scepticism in the work of a number of authors. See, for example, Stroud (1984, *passim*) and Wright (2005).

⁶ I think this conception of the moral of scepticism also creates problems for contextualist treatments of the problem—especially non-evidentialist versions of contextualism—though my focus here will be on contrastivism. I critically discuss contextualist responses to scepticism in a number of places. See Pritchard (2001; 2004; 2005*a*; 2005*b*; chapters 2-3: 2005*c*).

⁷ There are other ways of drawing the internalism/externalism distinction of course. One could put the point in terms of supervenience rather than access, for example, as Conee & Feldman (2000) do; or one might weaken the internalist requirement by saying that one only needs reflective access to the supporting grounds for one’s belief and not also to the fact that they are supporting grounds, as Alston (1988) suggests (though note that he doesn’t regard this view as an internalist thesis as such). The account of the distinction offered here is fairly standard, however, and, I believe, it also gets to the heart of what is at issue in this debate. For more on this distinction, see Kornblith (2001).

⁸ A complicating factor here is the view advanced by McDowell (e.g., 1982), which appears to allow that one can have adequate reflectively accessible grounds for believing in the denials of sceptical hypotheses. This highly unusual view raises issues that extend beyond the remit of this paper, however, and so I will set it to one side in what follows. I discuss the McDowellian response to scepticism at length in Pritchard (2003).

⁹ I offer an extended discussion of Wright’s proposal in Pritchard (2005*f*).

¹⁰ See Cohen (2000) for a frank discussion of this problem for his view. Wright (2005) takes issue with *all* contextualist anti-sceptical theories and thus, *a fortiori*, thereby takes issue with *internalist* contextualist anti-sceptical theories.

¹¹ Moreover, one needs to motivate the safety-based view and deal with a range of problems that have been posed for such positions. I do just this in Pritchard (2005*a*, *passim*).

¹² There are also considerations relating to the content externalism/internalism debate here, since content externalists—such as disjunctivists—typically hold that the content of one’s experiences in deceived and undeceived cases, even where subjectively indistinguishable, are different. Given the further claim that one’s experiences are part of one’s evidence, it would thus follow that one’s evidence is also different in the two cases. Content externalism alone might thus suffice to block this ‘equivalence’ thesis. For the sake of simplicity, however, I will not pursue this matter here. Perhaps the most famous exponent of disjunctivism in the recent literature is McDowell. See, for example, McDowell (1994).

¹³ That said, Jonathan Schaffer has told me in conversation that he is an internalist, and my understanding is that Martijn Blaauw—another contrastivist—is also an internalist.

¹⁴ Of course, as with closure, the contrastivist will no doubt argue for a ‘contrastivized’ version of this principle which they wish to retain. The problem is, however, it is going to be difficult to see why such a modified formulation of underdetermination should not be regarded as simply a different principle entirely, such that the contrastivist is actually rejecting underdetermination, strictly speaking.

¹⁵ This consideration also explains, at least in part, why such claims to know what is (taken to be) plainly obvious *always* seem problematic. This is because it is hard to imagine a non-sceptical context in which such an assertion would be entered.

¹⁶ Although the “hinge” metaphor is the dominant symbolism in the book, it is accompanied by various other metaphors such as the following: that these propositions constitute the “scaffolding” of our thoughts (Wittgenstein 1969, §211); that they form the “foundations of our language-games” (Wittgenstein 1969, §§401-3); and also that they represent the implicit “world-picture” from within which we inquire, the “inherited background against which [we] distinguish between true and false” (Wittgenstein 1969, §§94-5).

¹⁷ I discuss Wittgenstein’s treatment of scepticism, along with the supposedly ‘Wittgensteinian’ proposal advocated by Wright in this regard, in more detail in Pritchard (2005*d*; *forthcomingb*).

¹⁸ Thanks to Martijn Blaauw, Lars Bo Gundersen, Jacob Busck, Adrian Haddock, Jacob Hohwy, Jesper Kallestrup, Alan Millar, Ram Neta, Jonathan Schaffer, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, René van Woudenberg, and to the participants at a conference on *Contrastivism* that was held at Århus University in February 2005 at which an earlier version of this paper was presented.