

# SCEPTICISM WITHOUT KNOWLEDGE-ATTRIBUTIONS

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ABSTRACT: The sceptic says things like “nobody knows anything at all,” “nobody knows that they have hands,” and “nobody knows that the table exists when they aren't looking at it.” According to many recent anti-sceptics, the sceptic means to deny ordinary knowledge attributions. Understood this way, the sceptic is open to the charge, made often by Contextualists and Externalists, that he doesn't understand the way that the word “knowledge” is ordinarily used. In this paper, I distinguish a form of Scepticism that is compatible with the truth of ordinary knowledge attributions and therefore avoids these criticisms. I also defend that kind of Scepticism against the suggestion that it is philosophically uninteresting or insignificant.

KEYWORDS: scepticism, epistemology, knowledge, meaning

## I. Introduction

The sceptic says things like “nobody knows anything at all,” “nobody knows that they have hands,” and “nobody knows that the table exists when they aren't looking at it.” According to many recent anti-sceptics, the sceptic means to deny ordinary knowledge attributions. Everyday people judge themselves and others as knowing things. You might take it that you know that it is Thursday. You might say that you know what time it is. You judge that I know some things about Philosophy. Most people take themselves to know established scientific theories to be true. Sceptics hold that these assertions are literally false, or so we are told by some anti-sceptics.

The sceptic, supposedly, makes a crucial mistake, however. The sceptic does not understand the way that the word “know” is ordinarily used.<sup>1</sup> If he did

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Hill, “Process Reliabilism and Cartesian Scepticism,” in *Skepticism*, eds. Keith DeRose and Ted Warfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), Keith DeRose, “Solving the Skeptical Problem,” *Philosophical Review* 104, 1 (1995): 1-52, Stewart Cohen, “Contextualism and Scepticism,” *Nous* 34, SUPPL. 1 (2000): 94-107, Mark Kaplan, “To What Must an Epistemology be True?” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 61, 2 (2000): 279, Mark Kaplan, “Austin's Way with Skepticism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Scepticism*, ed. John Greco (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), John Greco, “Virtue, Luck and the Pyrrhonian Problematic,” *Philosophical Studies* 130, 1 (2006): 9-34, Michael Bergmann, “Externalist

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understand it, he would see that he was wrong to deny ordinary knowledge attributions, and he would see that his arguments were unsound. So John Greco argues against a sceptical use of Agrippa's Trilemma in this way:

All knowledge, says the skeptic, must be grounded in good reasons. But not any reason is a good reason – one must have reasons for believing that one's reasons are true. But this, in turn, ensures that any attempt to ground knowledge in good reasons must be inadequate. For either (a) one's reasons will go on in an infinite regress, (b) they will come back in a circle, or (c) they will end arbitrarily. But none of these outcomes is satisfactory- none provides knowledge with grounding in good reasons. And therefore, the skeptic concludes, knowledge is impossible.... [however] knowledge is true belief resulting from a reliable process... put another way, the skeptic is just wrong to think that all knowledge producing processes are reasoning processes.<sup>2,3</sup>

In a discussion of Cartesian Scepticism, Greco first isolates the premises of a sceptical argument, and then criticizes the first one:

But in fact premise (1) of [the sceptical argument] is false... (1) requires that our evidence discriminate the truth of our belief from every alternative possibility whatsoever. But it is questionable whether our ordinary concept of knowledge in fact requires that our evidence do this.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, Kaplan writes:

it seemed that the point of the argument was (a) to display a set of claims about the extent and nature of our knowledge to which we recognize ourselves to be committed and (b) to show that these claims jointly lead to disaster... Austin's response shows that the argument, at least to this extent, fails to accomplish the first of its two objectives: a crucial premise of the argument [the one about the meaning of "knowledge"!]... does not seem to be among our commitments, if ordinary practice is any guide.<sup>5</sup>

And DeRose's "solution" to the "sceptical paradox" is one in which it turns out that the sceptic fails to refute ordinary knowledge attributions:

according to contextualists, the skeptic, in presenting her argument, manipulates

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Responses to Skepticism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Scepticism*, ed. John Greco (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 504-32, David Armstrong, *Belief, Truth and Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 157, Alvin Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Greco, "Virtue, Luck and the Pyrrhonian Problematic," 9-10.

<sup>3</sup> Greco is not a straightforward Reliabilist, contra what this quotation might suggest. For his more detailed analysis, see Greco, "Putting Sceptics in their Place."

<sup>4</sup> Greco, "Putting Sceptics in their Place," 56.

<sup>5</sup> Kaplan, "Austin's Way with Skepticism," 353.

the semantic standards for knowledge, thereby creating a context in which she can truthfully say that we know nothing or very little. What we fail to realize, according to the contextualist solution, is that the skeptic's present denials that we know various things are perfectly compatible with our ordinary claims to know those very propositions.... Once we realize this, we can see how both the skeptic's denials of knowledge and our ordinary attributions of knowledge can be correct.<sup>6</sup>

For Externalist philosophers like Greco, the sceptic just flatly defines knowledge in a non-ordinary way. For Contextualists like DeRose, the sceptic fails to recognize that the standards for correctly saying "I know that P" change with context. On either view, the sceptic fails to show that ordinary assertions like "I know that P" are false, so Scepticism is undermined.<sup>7</sup>

The object of this paper is to present an alternative way of thinking about Scepticism against which this kind of criticism is of no force at all.<sup>8</sup> Let's say that the kind of Scepticism which denies ordinary knowledge attributions is "Semantic Scepticism." In this paper I distinguish an alternative conception of Scepticism to the semantic one. I call it Pessimistic Scepticism.<sup>9</sup>

Section 3 makes an analogy between the critics above and a similar critic of debates about the existence of God. Section 4 concerns the critic's argument that there is no philosophically significant alternative version of Scepticism to the knowledge-attribution conception of Scepticism. Sections 4-8 show that argument to be unconvincing, and develop my promised alternative conception of Scepticism. Section 9 canvasses a promising way in which debates about Scepticism may fruitfully proceed in my proposed direction.

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<sup>6</sup> DeRose, "Solving the Skeptical Problem," 4-5.

<sup>7</sup> For lucidity, I will continue to speak of this criticism as the idea that "the sceptic presupposes a non-ordinary definition of knowledge." That isn't quite an accurate characterization of Contextualist approaches to Scepticism, but those approaches do share the basic idea which I want to discuss.

<sup>8</sup> Have sceptics historically asserted anything like "when ordinary people say that they know things, what they are saying is false"? For my money, the answer to this question is plainly "no," but I won't defend that claim here.

<sup>9</sup> To be clear, I am not trying to criticize the work of the philosophers cited above. They might be right in their criticisms of Scepticism the way that they understand it. Here I try to see if there is any other way of understanding Scepticism which sidesteps the issues that these philosophers discuss.

## 2. An Analogy: Theism and The Problem of Evil

Suppose that Richard and Graham argue about whether or not there is a God.<sup>10</sup> They argue in the usual ways—Graham with the argument from evil; Richard with the fine-tuning argument. Now suppose I walk in and I tell Richard and Graham that the truth conditions of ordinary statements like “God exists” are just these: (i) religious practices and beliefs make a lot of people happy and (ii) lots of people believe very confidently that something created the universe. Suppose that I manage to convince Richard and Graham that that's what “God exists” *means*. I think if I interrupted the debate in this way, neither Richard nor Graham would have any idea what I was trying to do. They might come to agree with me that “God exists” means what I say that it does, for most ordinary English speakers, but they would surely insist that the point is of no significance at all for their debate. Moreover, Graham, even though he says things like “God does not exist” in his debate with Richard, would laugh at the suggestion that his view was false or his arguments unsound because of my quibbles about the *words* “God exists.” Graham and Richard would unite in explaining to me:

we have already agreed that we will mean by 'God exists' that there is some thing which is all good, all powerful, all knowing and created the universe. Never mind what other people mean. Don't get us wrong, its very interesting that other people mean something different, but it doesn't have anything to do with our debate.

Graham and Richard can properly lecture me in this way because their views are not about the *words* “God exists” as used in ordinary English. Richard is not saying that when ordinary people say “God exists,” what they are saying is true, and Graham is not saying that when ordinary people say “God exists,” what they are saying is false. Their views are about whether there is in reality a certain entity, defined in a specific way. Moreover, the interesting and philosophically significant positions that Graham and Richard could take are those about whether there is in reality an entity which meets their definitions. The parallel positions about whether ordinary people are speaking truly in saying “God exists” are just besides the point.

These same ideas are applicable in discussions of Scepticism. The sceptic gives an argument for the claim that nobody knows anything, or that nobody knows anything in a certain domain. The anti-sceptic replies that the sceptic is

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<sup>10</sup> Richard and Graham are of course Richard Swinburne and Graham Oppy. See Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) and Graham Oppy, *Arguing About Gods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

using the word “know” in a non-ordinary way, and so fails to refute ordinary knowledge attributions. The sceptic could surely reply:

What I mean by 'knowledge,' never-mind what anyone else means, is belief that meets such-and-such conditions. I am interested in convincing you that you do not know anything, in my sense of that word. Don't get me wrong, it's very interesting that other people mean something different, but it doesn't have anything to do with what I am trying to do.

### 3. Is Scepticism Significant?

If the sceptic responds to his critics in the way I paint him as responding in the last section, then he cannot be a Semantic Sceptic. He must agree that when people say things like “I know that P,” what they are saying is true. His only qualification will be that he wants to convince the anti-sceptic that he does not know anything, *in the sceptic's sense of “knows.”*

If the sceptic makes that move, there will be critics who will say that his sceptical conclusion is therefore of no significance whatsoever. They will say that if the sceptic isn't using the word “know” in an ordinary way, then his arguments are uninteresting, and his position not worth philosophical attention. Barry Stroud endorses this way of thinking. In discussing a Cartesian argument against knowing anything about the physical world, Stroud comments:

So it can easily look as if Descartes reaches his sceptical conclusion only by violating our ordinary standards and requirements for knowledge... the sceptical conclusion is... a misunderstanding or distortion of the meanings of the words in which it is expressed. It is at first astonishing to be told that no one can ever know anything about the world around us, but once we learn that the 'knowledge' in question is 'knowledge' that requires the fulfilment of a condition which is not in fact required for the everyday or scientific knowledge we are interested in, we will no longer be surprised or disturbed by that announcement. We do not insist that the dream-possibility must always be known not to obtain in order to know things in everyday or scientific life. When we find that Descartes's sceptical reasoning does insist on that requirement, we will find that his sceptical conclusion does not contradict anything we thought we knew at the outset. We might find it quite believable that there is no knowledge of the world fulfilling all the conditions of Descartes's special 're-definition' of knowledge. But properly understood, his conclusion would not deny what its peculiar linguistic form originally led us to suppose it denies, and it would pose no threat to our everyday knowledge and beliefs.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 40.

So far, all Stroud has done is point out that a sceptic who stipulates his own sense of “know” will not refute ordinary knowledge attributions. The sceptic can grant this, but he will insist that his view is not about ordinary knowledge attributions anyway. But, Stroud argues that if the sceptic makes this move, then:

Any exhilaration or disquiet we might have felt on first encountering [the sceptical argument] must therefore have been due to nothing but illusion...If there were nothing more behind Descartes's sceptical conclusion... it would indeed be profoundly uninteresting... Descartes's assessment of his own position is thought to deviate so radically and so obviously from our familiar assessments that it cannot be expected to reveal anything of deep or lasting significance about the human knowledge we are interested in.<sup>12,13</sup>

If the sceptic is not denying ordinary knowledge attributions then he is, according to Stroud, not doing anything interesting or of deep and lasting significance. We may sum this up as an argument against the sceptic of this sort:

#### The Significance Argument

- 1) Either the sceptic wants to deny ordinary knowledge attributions or he doesn't.
- 2) If he doesn't want to deny ordinary knowledge attributions, then his arguments are uninteresting and of no deep and lasting significance.
- 3) Therefore, either the sceptic denies ordinary knowledge attributions or his arguments are uninteresting and of no deep and lasting significance.

The difficulty with the argument is obviously (2). What reason is there to accept (2)? Stroud gives an analogy:

Suppose someone makes the quite startling announcement that there are no physicians in the city of New York. That certainly seems to go against something we all thought we knew to be true. It would really be astonishing if there were no physicians at all in a city that size. When we ask how the remarkable discovery was made, and how long this deplorable state of affairs has obtained, suppose we find that the bearer of the startling news says it is true because, as he explains, what he means by ‘physician’ is a person who has a medical degree and can cure any conceivable illness in less than two minutes.<sup>1</sup> We are no longer surprised by his announcement, nor do we find that it contradicts anything we all thought we knew to be true. We find it quite believable that there is no one in the whole city

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<sup>12</sup> Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*, 40.

<sup>13</sup> Stroud (*The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*, 40-82) defends the sceptical argument from this line of criticism in the end, by arguing that the sceptic does not use the word “know” in a non-ordinary way. Still, he does endorse (at least in this book) the idea that, if the sceptical conclusion is not at odds with ordinary knowledge attributions, then it is of no significance.

who fulfils all the conditions of that peculiar 're-definition' of 'physician.' Once we understand it as it was meant to be understood, there is nothing startling about the announcement except perhaps the form in which it was expressed. It does not deny what on first sight it might seem to deny, and it poses no threat to our original belief that there are thousands and thousands of physicians in New York.<sup>14</sup>

According to Stroud, a sceptical argument that is compatible with knowledge attributions is analogous to the argument about Physicians in New York. We find the sceptic's conclusion absurd, but then once he explains what he means to say, we find his conclusion boring because it does not contradict anything that we believe. That is why Stroud thinks that (2) is correct.

#### 4. Does the Sceptic Contradict What I Believe?

I find Stroud's line of thought here baffling. There are two problems; one small and one serious. I begin with the smaller one and consider the serious one in the next section.

Stroud depicts the physician argument as being insignificant because it does not contradict our belief that there are physicians in New York, and he takes the sceptic's arguments to be much the same; insignificant because they fail to contradict anything that we believe. But, it is far from clear that the usual sceptical arguments do not contradict anything that I ordinarily believe. Stroud's argument hinges crucially on the claim that if the sceptic does not contradict our belief that we have knowledge of the world, then he does not contradict *anything* that we believe. This is a non-sequitur. It does not follow from the fact that the sceptic does not contradict one belief of mine, that he does not contradict any belief of mine.

Consider the sceptic who says that nobody knows anything about the physical world. It is logically possible that the sceptic's conclusion, although it does not contradict our belief that we know about the world, nevertheless contradicts *something else* that we ordinarily believe. Let X stand for the stipulated meaning of the sceptic's word "know," whatever that meaning is. When the sceptic says we cannot know about the world around us, he says:

4) We cannot X about the world around us.

Now, it is logically possible that I possess both of these distinct beliefs:

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<sup>14</sup> Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, 40.

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5) I do know about the world around me.

6) I do X about the world around me.

We may suppose that the sense of “know” in (5) is the ordinary sense and that the sceptic's X is not that ordinary meaning. Then, although my belief which I would express by (5) does not contradict (4), I might have a different belief, (6), which *does* contradict (4). Furthermore, my belief that contradicts (5) need not be so explicit as (6). Suppose that I have another concept, “schnowledge” which is such that X is a necessary condition for “schnowing” something. Then I might hold both (5) and:

7) I do schnow about the world around me.

And (7) does contradict (4). Thus it is not true that if the sceptic's definition of “knowledge” is not the ordinary one, then his conclusion does not contradict anything that we ordinarily believe.

This is how the matter stands with respect to logic. An anonymous referee responded to this point claiming that, while it is correct, it makes no difference. Sure, the reply goes, we might have all sorts of beliefs which contradict (4), but the only relevant point is that (4) does not contradict our belief that we have knowledge.

I do not see why this must be the only relevant point at all. If the sceptic has a sound argument for a conclusion which contradicts something that we believe, I do not see why the fact that the contradicting belief is not the belief that we have knowledge should somehow undercut the significance of the sceptic's conclusion. After all, he would still refute something which we believe.

Certainly, if we are thinking of the sceptic as someone who aims solely to refute our belief that we have knowledge, the fact that his conclusion does not contradict that belief would be the only relevant point, but in this paper I am exploring whether there is any *other way* for the sceptic to develop his views, and so to insist that the only relevant point is whether the sceptic contradicts my belief that I have knowledge is to beg the question.

The sceptic might, for example, aim to refute our belief that our evidence favours ordinary beliefs about the world over the dream hypothesis, and if we really do have that belief, he will succeed in contradicting something that we believe. If the critique is to provide a solution to the problem of Scepticism, it must really be a solution to the problem. It won't do for the critique to show merely that Scepticism is not in conflict with beliefs about knowledge while conceding that it is in conflict with various other beliefs of ours. Such a “solution” is so in name only. It must be claimed that Scepticism does not contradict *any* belief of ours.



It might be countered, however, that we simply do not have the belief that our evidence favours ordinary beliefs about the world over the dream hypothesis. It might even be added that once I realize that my belief, (5), does not involve a sense of “know” a necessary condition for which is X, I will be able to see that I never really believed that I could do what the sceptic says I cannot. Once we clear aside the confusions which arise when we frame the issue in terms of “knowledge,” perhaps it is just obvious that I never did believe that I could tell whether or not I was dreaming.

This last argument is incredibly presumptuous about what I do and do not believe. It presumes that nobody really ever believed that their evidence favoured that they are sitting at their desks over the hypothesis that they are dreaming, and that they were only tempted to suppose that they believed it because they got confused by the sceptic's use of the concept of “knowledge.” I can only speak for myself in saying that I really think that I did believe, prior to considering the sceptic's argument, that my evidence favoured the view that I was not dreaming. This is why when I considered what Descartes had to say about there being no marks by which to tell whether or not one was awake or asleep, I was every bit as astonished as he was. If this is right, then the sceptic's conclusion does contradict something that I believe, and in such a case, the argument will be significant, *pace* Stroud, exactly because it does contradict something that I believe. I leave the reader to determine whether they too have this belief.

## 5. Pessimistic Scepticism

On to the serious problem with Stroud's line of thought. Even setting aside all of the sociological questions about what we already believe, the sceptic's conclusions might well be interesting and significant even if they are compatible with ordinary knowledge attributions and *even if they do not contradict something that we believe*. It isn't as though a necessary condition for an idea being interesting is that it contradicts something I already believe.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the ordinary meaning of “knowledge” turned out to be merely “belief held very confidently.” The sceptic will not deny that there are such beliefs. If that were the meaning of “knowledge,” would it follow that there is no interesting way for the sceptic to develop his position? Surely not. Surely he could argue that although ordinary knowledge attributions are true (because many people believe things confidently), it is still the case that nobody knows anything *in his sense of the word*, and, that what is ordinarily called “knowledge” is really quite pathetic. It is a mere charade of little to no value. Meeting ordinary standards of knowledge is not something which we

should be happy with, because it is a pretty low bar to begin with. This, at any rate, would be sceptic's pessimistic assessment of human cognitive achievements.

That, I suggest, is how the sceptic should develop his views against his critics. He should allow that perhaps ordinary knowledge attributions are all true, whatever they mean, but insist that the ideas that pass for “knowledge” ordinarily are a miserable achievement not worth taking authoritatively over alternative beliefs. He should insist this even if the ordinary meaning of “knowledge” is best understood in terms of, for example, reliability or if the standards for “knowledge” vary with context.

Call this pessimistic assessment, “Pessimistic Scepticism.” It is important to note that Pessimistic Scepticism is not the denial of ordinary knowledge attributions at all. It is first and foremost a negative and dismissive attitude towards human cognitive achievements. The pessimistic sceptic is someone who thinks that nothing that we normally call “knowledge” is worthy of any respect or appellation. He thinks we haven't really achieved anything particularly valuable with any of our efforts to discover the truth. Maybe—just maybe—we have actually got the truth about some things, but even still, our methods of arriving at our views are feeble, full of doubts, fragility and insecurity, and the resulting views are not worthy of respect or authority over the alternatives. Equally, maybe—just maybe—we “know,” in the ordinary sense of “know” various things, but the sceptic will insist that “knowing” in that sense is pretty thin soup. He will say that there isn't anything valuable or noteworthy about our “knowing” in the ordinary sense, because meeting those standards is meeting pitifully low standards.<sup>15</sup>

Pessimistic Scepticism would be an interesting and significant sceptical position, even if the sceptic conceded that ordinary knowledge attributions are true. Moreover, it would be interesting and significant even if it did not contradict something that we already believe—perhaps we have just never given much thought to how valuable our standards for knowledge are.

## 6. Jackson and Ordinary Concepts

Despite my insistence that Pessimistic Scepticism is a philosophically significant view, some philosophers will demur. Frank Jackson, discussing conceptual analysis, writes:

If I say that what I mean—never mind what others mean—by a free action is one

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<sup>15</sup> We might disagree with the sceptic that the ordinary standards for knowledge are pitifully low, but this will be a further matter to be debated with the sceptic, not something which is self-evident or otherwise painfully obvious.

such that the agent would have done otherwise if he or she had chosen to, then the existence of free actions so conceived will be secured, and so will the compatibility of free action with determinism. If I say that what I mean—never mind what others mean—by ‘belief’ is any information-carrying state that causes subjects to utter sentences like ‘I believe that snow is white,’ the existence of beliefs so conceived will be safe from the eliminativists’ arguments. But in neither case will I have much of an audience. I have turned interesting philosophical debates into easy exercises in deductions from stipulative definitions together with accepted facts. What then are the interesting philosophical questions that we are seeking to address when we debate the existence of free action and its compatibility with determinism, or about eliminativism concerning intentional psychology? What we are seeking to address is whether free action according to our ordinary conception, or something suitably close to our ordinary conception, exists and is compatible with determinism, and whether intentional states according to our ordinary conception, or something suitably close to it, will survive what cognitive science reveals about the operations of our brains.<sup>16</sup>

According to Jackson, the interesting philosophical questions are questions couched in terms of our ordinary concepts. Presumably what he says about “free action” and “belief” is the same sort of thing he would say about “knowledge.” So, Jackson would argue that the interesting question about knowledge is whether or not we have “knowledge” in our ordinary sense of “knowledge.” Thus, if the sceptic has an argument that we do not know anything, but his concept of knowledge is non-ordinary, his conclusion will not be that interesting. Why not? Jackson makes two points. The first is that using non-ordinary concepts in philosophical discussion turns interesting philosophical debates into ‘easy exercises in deductions from stipulative definitions together with accepted facts.’ The second is that if I frame my discussions using non-ordinary concepts I will not have much of an audience.

Consider Jackson’s first point. A lot depends on whether the sceptic’s argument is an “easy deduction,” and that obviously depends on which argument is at stake. Consider a Cartesian sceptical argument for the conclusion that we do not know anything about the world around us. Such arguments typically depend on something like the assumption that I cannot tell—just by looking—that I am sitting at my desk and not deceived by an evil demon or having a grand hallucination. At least some philosophers have thought that I really can tell, or that if I can’t, I can at least argue the claim that I am sitting at my desk from some more secure starting point. Now, I am not saying that these philosophers are right, but to take it that none of these accounts is viable and assume that if we grant the sceptic

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<sup>16</sup> Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics: A Defence of Conceptual Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 31.

his definition of “knowledge,” his Scepticism follows as an “easy deduction,” is to take quite a controversial position without much argument.

Yet, let us grant that the sceptic's argument is an easy deduction from stipulated definitions. I am not sure what relevance this has to the question of whether or not the sceptic's argument is interesting, since there is no reason to suppose that an interesting argument must be very complex. I am inclined to think that a simple argument for an independently interesting conclusion is more interesting than a complex argument for the same, because a simpler argument seems less likely to contain a mistake.

Turn now to Jackson's second point that a sceptical argument would not have much of an audience if it deploys non-ordinary concepts. Is it true that people are generally not interested in concepts which are different to their own? Many people are interested in scientific theories, even though the concepts used in science are very different to the concepts used in everyday life. What strikes at least some people as interesting about philosophy is precisely that it gives one the opportunity to consider radically different ways of viewing the world. There is no reason to suppose that using non-ordinary concepts makes people less likely to take an interest in sceptical arguments.

## 7. Too High Standards

I suspect that behind all of the insistence that Pessimistic Scepticism is not philosophically significant and the insistence that Semantic Scepticism is the only kind worth discussing is the old thought that the sceptic presupposes absurdly high standards for knowledge. The idea is, not merely that the standards of the sceptic are non-ordinary, but that they are just unnecessarily high; so high that it doesn't really matter if we can't meet them. The sceptic, according to the critic, is just whining that our beliefs don't meet some very intense set of standards that only a philosopher like Descartes would fantasize about. That this does lie in the background is at least suggested by Stroud's comparison with the physician argument and by the DeRose quote from earlier:

For skeptical arguments... threaten to show, not only that we fail to meet *very high requirements for knowledge of interest only to misguided philosophers seeking absolute certainty*, but that we don't meet even the truth conditions of ordinary, out-on-the-street knowledge attributions. They thus threaten to establish the startling result that we never, or almost never, truthfully ascribe knowledge to ourselves or to other mere mortals.<sup>17,18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> DeRose, “Solving the Skeptical Problem,” 4.

DeRose writes here as though there are only two options for the sceptic. Either he whines about our inability to reach absolute certainty, or he denies “out-on-the-street” knowledge attributions. If he takes the former line, we can object that absolute certainty is a ludicrously high demand of interest “only to misguided philosophers” and settle for lower standards. If he takes the latter line, he must use the word “knowledge” in its “out-on-the-street” sense and show that knowledge attributions are false. Yet, there are surely other options. The sceptic could set fairly modest standards for “knowledge,” far short of absolute certainty, and yet take no interest at all in “out-on-the-street” knowledge attributions. That option is made quite attractive by the fact that contemporary arguments for Scepticism don't presuppose absolutely certain standards for knowledge. Their requirements are in fact fairly modest. Here is a brief overview of some of them.

A number of sceptical arguments work given the empiricist assumption that the only ways that humans have of knowing things about the world are sense perception and inferences from things learnt by sense perception.

There is the contemporary Cartesian Sceptical argument.<sup>19</sup> Say that two things, *x* and *y*, are perceptually indistinguishable to you only if *x* and *y* effect your visual system (they produces the same retinal image, or the same pattern of activity in the optic nerve), in the same way.<sup>20</sup> For example, Homer will be perceptually indistinguishable from a molecule for molecule replica of Homer just when the two would have the same effect on your visual system. The sceptic will maintain that if Homer is perceptually indistinguishable to you from his replica, then you do not know just by looking that who you are looking at is Homer, and the same for any *x* and *y*. Of course, my sitting at my desk (or any similar proposition about the physical world) is perceptually indistinguishable from classic sceptical hypotheses, like that I am a brain-in-a-vat having a massive hallucination. So I cannot know by perception that I am sitting at my desk. Or plainly, since I cannot tell just by looking that I am not in a sceptical scenario, I cannot know just by looking that I am sitting at my desk.<sup>21</sup> Combine that thought with the thought that, there is no good argument from anything I can know by sense perception to the claim that I am sitting at my desk, and we arrive at the conclusion that I cannot know that I am sitting there at all. The requirement for knowledge here isn't that, for any *P*, to know that *P*, *S* must be absolutely certain that *P*, but just that *P* can only be known

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<sup>18</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Vogel. “Skeptical Arguments,” *Philosophical Issues* 14, 1 (2004): 426–455.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Vogel, “Skepticism and Foundationalism: A Reply to Michael Williams,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 22 (1997): 16

<sup>21</sup> Vogel, “Skepticism and Foundationalism,” 11–28.

either by perceptually distinguishing it from alternatives or by inferring it from things known by perception. The sceptic is free to say that any such inference could be merely probabilistic in character, so that his standards are a long way from a general requirement of certainty.

The idea that being able to perceptually distinguish *x* from *y* is a necessary condition for knowing by perception that *x*, will allow for the same sort of argument against our knowing that anyone else has feelings, emotions or thoughts. After all, a person with a mind has the same effect on my visual system as a mindless zombie who looks just like a person, and most philosophers think the usual arguments for the existence of other minds are painfully weak. Note again the requirement for “knowledge” here is not a general requirement of absolute certainty. The sceptic would be happy with either your being able to tell by perception that other people have minds, or with your giving an argument for it, and the argument need not be iron-clad; a good argument from analogy or inference to the best explanation would do the trick. Are there any other ways that humans can know things about the world beyond their own minds than by sense-perception and inferences from what we learn by perception? The dominant empiricist tradition in philosophy says otherwise, and no-one has yet defended any other source.<sup>22</sup>

There is a sceptical argument against knowing that anything ever exists when we aren't looking (or otherwise perceiving).<sup>23</sup> I suspect that the argument can be run on most of the definitions of “knowledge” which contemporary philosophers favour, but it works given the currently popular sort of definition where knowledge means something like “true belief produced by a reliable process.” The basic idea is this. I can know that something about the physical world is the case only by perception or inference from things I know by sense perception. But I cannot know that anything exists when I'm not perceiving it *by perception*, because that is a contradiction. On the assumption that I cannot know by inference that things exist when I'm not looking—and no one has ever made the argument—then I cannot know it at all. The belief seems to be completely groundless in any sense you might care about. Lest you think that the belief that things exist when you aren't perceiving them is of little consequence, if I do not know such things, then I don't know that any of my friends or family exist when

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<sup>22</sup> Anil Gomes, “Skepticism about Other Minds,” in *Skepticism: From Antiquity to the Present*, eds. Diego Machuca and Baron Reed (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Aaran Burns, “Can I Know that Anything Exists Unperceived?” *Logos and Episteme* 9, 3 (2018): 245-260.

I'm not around, nor that my kitchen exists when I'm not in it, nor even that the wall behind me exists when I'm not looking at it!

The point of Scepticism, as I am here thinking of it, is not that ordinary knowledge claims are false. It is, rather, that ordinary knowledge is *just not that impressive*. It might be that, in the ordinary sense of “knows,” we know all sorts of things. But the sceptic, on the position I am here offering him, thinks that our system of beliefs or “knowledge” is depressingly doubtful. Ordinary human knowledge is in this sense a charade of little to no value.<sup>24</sup> The sceptic's assertion, “nobody knows anything” should be qualified to read, “nobody knows anything except, maybe, in a meagre, unimportant sense.”

In the face of the sceptic's pessimism, its always open to the anti-sceptic to make the too high-standards objection whenever he feels under pressure. When the standards are set at certainty and the sceptic argues that nothing can meet them, the anti-sceptic complains of the sceptic's fantastically high standards, and lowers the standards to good but inconclusive reasons. When the sceptic argues that nothing can meet them either, the anti-sceptic complains again that the standards are pointlessly demanding, and abandons the demand for reasons all together, saying that it is enough when a belief is just caused in a reliable way. When the sceptic argues that a lot of the anti-sceptic's beliefs don't meet that standard either, the anti-sceptic might complain yet again, and retreat even further. How many of these moves are acceptable? When should we just admit that the sceptic's pessimistic attitude towards our belief system is a sensible one?

That is what the issue comes down to. Is the sceptic right to despair that we cannot meet his standards, or is he foolishly whining about our inability to meet fantastically high standards? The critic might say the latter, but if that is what is wrong with Scepticism, the problem *isn't* that his standards aren't the ordinary ones.

## 8. Conclusions

The pessimistic sceptic is defined by his pessimistic attitude towards human cognitive achievements, not by the denial of ordinary knowledge attributions. We need to argue with the sceptic on wholly different grounds when he is understood this way. The debate we must have is over whether his standards for knowledge are valuable, and whether there is any value in alternative standards. The question

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<sup>24</sup> Greco writes in this context that “even if there is some sense in which one does not really know without [meeting the sceptic's standards for knowledge], it does not follow... that knowledge in any ordinary sense requires that” (Greco, “Virtue, Luck and the Pyrrhonian Problematic,” 31). That is indisputably true, but the pessimistic sceptic is not claiming otherwise.

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is entirely evaluative, and there is no need to worry about which standards are “ordinary.”

The sceptic will hold, of course, that his standards are important and that alternatives don't amount to very much, and that is why the sceptic will say that “nobody knows anything except maybe in a meagre, unimportant sense.” The anti-sceptic will hold the contrary view. I haven't here given any arguments for thinking that the sceptic is right. I have only tried to distinguish it clearly from the currently more widely discussed Semantic Scepticism and to dispel the thought that anything other than Semantic Scepticism is insignificant. The arguments for pessimism await another occasion.