1. **Philosophical Skepticism**

- Scepticism remains central to epistemology, and without it we wouldn’t have a distinctively *philosophical* theory of knowledge. This is true only of a special form of scepticism – *philosophical scepticism*, coeval with systematic philosophy itself.
- Philosophical scepticism is to be distinguished from *practical scepticism*. The latter relates to action (a questioning attitude, suspension of judgement, doubt, uncertainty, discomfort) whereas the former may not be possible to act on. Theoretical scepticism holds, or finds irrefutable, the view that *knowledge is impossible*.
- The philosophical sceptic is driven by sceptical *arguments* with which much of epistemology is focused on coming to terms with – explaining where they go wrong, if they do, or otherwise where we are left.
- It’s not the mere *existence* of sceptical arguments that causes the problem, but their quality. The best sceptical arguments involve only the simplest considerations and have no obvious flaws, and are intuitive which explains scepticism’s intractability. It is not obviously a consequence of controversial or implausible theoretical ideas.
- Scepticism be no problem if we found its conclusions congenial. There is a congenial form of scepticism that confronts dogmatism and which is part of any rational outlook. This virtue is not philosophical scepticism.
- The *first* of two factors that distinguish philosophical scepticism is its *strength*. It is not specifically concerned with raising the standards of justification, but is *radical*. The radical sceptic doesn’t just suppose that our good reasons for believing don’t quite measure up to the standards required of genuine knowledge, but questions whether we have the slightest reason to believe one thing rather than another. This is a critical point. It is widely accepted that even strong justification can sometimes fail to yield *knowledge*, but the radical sceptic argues that we can’t even get to justified *belief*.
- We must also distinguish *fallibilism* – the view that knowledge need not involve certainty - from radical scepticism.
- The *second* key feature of radical scepticism is its *scope*. Its negative verdict is general, challenging the *possibility* of knowledge rather than pointing out that we know less than we think. It’s not that we don’t know but that we can’t, and we can’t fix the problem by trying harder.
- Radical scepticism is not simply different from ordinary scepticism, but *precludes* it by undermining the distinctions on which ordinary scepticism relies. We can believe anything or nothing. The man who believes he is a boiled egg differs from the rest of us only by being in a minority (said Bertrand Russell).
- Why waste time on such extravagant claims that “admit of no refutation, but produce no conviction (Hume)” ? We can ignore the problem for present practical purposes, but (says Williams) this is unsatisfying for someone of a reflective turn of mind. If theoretical scepticism is correct, our desire to believe exceeds rational justification and many things we cannot doubt are indefensible, and the distinctions we operate with vanish.
According to Chisholm, the task of epistemology is not to “refute the sceptic” but “to show how knowledge is possible, given that it is possible”. However, there do not have to be sceptics for sceptical arguments to be taken seriously. In fact, Chisholm pushes questions of justification much harder than normal, as though he were confronting a determined sceptic. Similarly, we understand the claim that knowledge is possible only by understanding the powerful arguments that say it’s impossible.

2. **Agrippa’s Trilemma**

- There are two families of sceptical arguments – the Cartesian and the Agrippan. We take the Agrippan first for theoretical reasons.
- Any assertion can be responded to with a question how I know. The response can either be that it’s an assumption or that it’s based on something I know. The former response is unsatisfactory, but in case of the latter, the question repeats.
- In practice, requests for justification come to a halt. I can respond in one of three ways – known as Agrippa’s Trilemma - , none of which is satisfactory: -
  1. I keep trying to think of a new response, embarking on infinite regress
  2. At some point I make a dogmatic assumption and refuse to answer further
  3. At some point I repeat something already said and argue in a circle.
- What’s wrong with these responses? Statements made in response to requests for justification must themselves be justified, so (2) is no good. Accepting (3) would be to embody pragmatic inconsistency, allowing a statement both to require support and to be able to give it (since it acts both as conclusion and premise). The problem with (1) is that the regress is *vicious*. The sceptic’s conclusion is that no claim is ever justified unless, per impossible, we run through an infinite series of prior justification. Given that all three responses fail, the conclusion is that justification is a complete illusion.
- While Agrippa’s Trilemma is often referred to as the problem of the regress of justification, Williams thinks this is to confuse an argumentative strategy with a problem. It has many variations, depending on the option that gets the emphasis. For example, we have the problem of the “criterion”, standard or method of distinguishing knowledge from opinion. If the question is of the justification of religious belief, the risk of infinite regress is remote, though the likelihood of dogmatism or circularity is very real.
- The Agrippan strategy is not totally presuppositionless, but depends on knowing being different from assuming and surmising and that this has something to do with justifying what can be said to be known. However, anyone taking the concept of knowledge seriously would seem to have to admit as much.
- Williams points out that the sceptic’s claim is not that we never *really* know anything with certainty, because the standards for knowledge are too high, but that we never have any reason to believe one thing rather than another. We cannot avoid the problem by adopting a fallibilist view of knowledge.
- The generality of scepticism is more questionable. We are often willing to acknowledge the Agrippan Trilemma when it comes to politics. However, Sextus Empiricus added two further *Modes of Suspension* to the three Agrippan, namely *Discrepancy* (where disagreement is involved) and *Relativity* (where a particular perspective is involved). It looks as though the ancient sceptics may therefore have had a restricted role for the Trilemma.
However, it is not necessary that we take it this way. The sceptical challenge does not have to involve public disagreement or any real sceptic. The challenge arises when we reflect on how we know.

3. **Theoretical Responses**

- Responses to the Trilemma, that it is false that *all* knowledge is groundless, need to adopt one of the alternatives posed. The two “terminating” options each define a distinctive philosophical theory – the response defines the space in which epistemology works.
- The first escape from vicious regress is *foundationalism*. Different varieties of foundationalism differ as to what beliefs are taken as basic – as intrinsically credible. All foundationalists, however, share the view that some beliefs do not require, or even allow, further justification but are rationally credible without the support of further beliefs.
- Saying that for knowledge to be possible there must be basic beliefs does not prove there are any. One possibility is a priori knowledge, such as elementary arithmetic or else sensations such as pain. The former cannot be understood and doubted, and it makes no sense for a person feeling pain to question the latter.
- While not hopeless, foundationalism faces difficulties explaining how basic beliefs deserve their special status. Elementary arithmetical judgements are embedded in a complex system and the sensations of immediate experience don’t themselves constitute knowledge as they lack propositional content and so cannot support or falsify beliefs. If they are judgements involving description, then we have the possibility of misdescription. Reliance on the general credibility of judgements takes them away from the intrinsically credible back within range of Agrippa.
- In any case, no foundationalist believes that just any beliefs can be basic. He has to explain why his chosen restricted class of beliefs is adequate to the task of supporting a substantial body of knowledge. The narrower the class of basic beliefs, the more difficult this will be, but the wider it is the less claim it will have to be special.
- Abandoning foundationalism leaves us with *coherentism*, that arguing in a circle isn’t that bad. Coherentists point out that our beliefs form a system and mutually support one another.
- Clearly, not just any self-consistent set of beliefs will do. We require theoretical or explanatory coherence. Unlike the atomistic foundationalist theories of justification, coherentist theories are *radically holistic*. Williams agrees that beliefs are never justified singly, but thinks it more doubtful that the justification of a particular belief depends on how it fits into a whole system of beliefs.
- Coherence theory is really a modification of foundationalism. (1) The foundationalist appeal to epistemic privilege is relocated from particular beliefs to general criteria of coherence assumed to be conducive to determining the truth. (2) It presupposes a grasp on our whole system of beliefs and their logical interconnections. A sceptic will say that this *doxastic presumption* is an unjustified assumption. If such doxastic judgements are seen as intrinsically credible, we are back to foundationalism and its problems.
- Even if we grant the doxastic presumption that a person’s beliefs about his beliefs are prima facie justified, we are still positing an impossibly idealised view of
cognitive self-awareness. If the justification of a belief depends on our knowing precisely how it fits in to the logical labyrinth of our other beliefs, none of us knows whether any of our beliefs is justified and the sceptic triumphs.

- Focusing on Agrippa’s trilemma as “the regress problem” makes us think that one of the alternatives – foundationalism or coherentism – must be true, and contemporary philosophy seesaws between the two, with proponents of either side having devastating critical arguments against the other. Williams thinks neither comes close to solving the Agrippan problem of avoiding regress without lapsing into circularity or brute assumption, and that we need to get off the seesaw.

4. The External World

- The next family of sceptical arguments goes back to Descartes.
- We take it for granted that our senses teach us about our surroundings – they provide conscious awareness of the objects and events we encounter as a result of a complex chain of events. Williams describes this in the case of visual experience, but points out that the same experience could, in principle, be achieved by intervention at several points along the chain (by analogy with phantom limb cases). Descartes asks how we know that our awareness of the world is caused in one (normal) way rather than another (deviant) one.
- He provides two examples – dreaming and the evil deceiver. No conscious experience we have while awake could not be simulated by a vivid dream, so how do I know that I’m not dreaming now, or all the time? Any test could just be part of the dream.
- Descartes thinks the dreaming argument leaves our general conception of the world untouched, as dreams and the wildest fantasies of the imagination are only re-combinations of familiar elements. So, he imagines the Evil Deceiver artificially inducing in me experiences of an external world that may not even exist.
- The contemporary version of the Evil Deceiver argument is the brain in a vat problem. How do I know that I’m not a brain in a vat given that my experience does not discriminate against it? Indeed, Williams points out that I am a brain in a vat – my skull – so which vat am I a brain in?
- Why are these sceptical hypotheses, since no-one believes them? Because they show that there are endless ways the world might be and yet our experience remain the same. All I have to go on is my experience, but this does not provide an adequate basis for preferring my actual beliefs over others as logically coherent even though “far fetched”. But, this only means “different to my normal beliefs”, so my practically unshakeable beliefs about the world may theoretically be groundless; mere beliefs rather than knowledge.

5. Further Problems

- Williams refers to a pattern of sceptical arguments like the two above as Cartesian.
- Another is the essential privacy of experience. While we can make judgements about the thoughts and experiences of others, we cannot literally “feel their pain” – only be pained at their pain. We make inferences from people’s behaviour, including speech, but Williams suggests this has no rational basis. No claim about experience is logically implied by external behaviour. It is a logical possibility,
however remote, that others’ experience is qualitatively different from our own, or even absent altogether. Nor can we use induction, as the only evidence I have of your experience is your behaviour. Solipsism – the idea that I am the only real person because I am the only person with a conscious inner life – may be true after all.

- Similar problems arise with knowledge of the past. How do we know that the universe and our memories didn’t spring into existence 5 minutes ago with the appearance of age?
- Again, with respect to the future we have the problem of induction. Our expectations of the future are based on the regularities of the past. Hume first observed that there is no logical contradiction in supposing the course of Nature subject to change. We cannot appeal to inductive inference, as the practice of projecting known regularities into new situations – ie. induction – is the very thing in question.
- The point in all this is not that anyone should or would accept sceptical conclusions, but to ask whether there is any reason to ignore them. Hume and some recent writers suggest that the sceptic is correct and that what we think of as knowledge is just assumption, however psychologically natural it may be. Williams thinks this is giving up too soon.

6. More Theoretical Responses

- Cartesian sceptical arguments go through four stages that Williams illustrates using the problem of the external world. As for Agrippan scepticism, responses to the arguments defines the space of theoretical options.
  1. Our knowledge of the external world is inferential, requiring evidence, rather than immediate. The evidence is provided by perceptual experience.
  2. Our experiential evidence does not logically entail anything about the external world; there is a logical gap between evidence and conclusion.
  3. There is no defensible inductive inference to bridge the gap.
  4. Consequently, we cannot justify any belief about the external world, even its existence.
- (1) Direct realism denies the evidential gap, claiming that we just know about the external world, and that inference is not involved. The sceptic replies that a brain in a vat would have the same experience of just seeing, yet would be entirely deluded. The case is even clearer with respect to knowledge of the past and other minds, where we have no direct experience. Getting back to perception, we acknowledge that our reliability as observers is context-sensitive. This means that our unreflective confidence in our perceptions takes knowledge of the external world for granted rather than providing a justification of it.
- (2) According to phenomenalism, talk of the external world just is talk of the sensory experiences we do or might have and there is no logical gap between sensory experience and the world. The same goes for logical behaviourism and the problem of other minds, where talk of mental states just is talk about behaviour.
- The response to phenomenalism and logical behaviourism is two-fold (a) technical responses: no single statement about the world has any particular experiential consequences as how an object does or would appear depends on the circumstances in which it is perceived (b) common-sense realism: the view that the external world exists independently of observers, and would exist if we hadn’t.
The phenomenalist response to the sceptic is basically agreeing with him and denying our deepest realist intuitions.

- There are other ways of challenging (2) other than strict reductionism, namely criterial theories. These claim that part of the logic or meaning of physical-object statements is that certain experiential statements count for or against them; they are responsive to experiential criteria. This is rejected not only because contemporary philosophers are dubious about appeals to meaning but because sceptical thought-experiments show there is no a priori connection – even of this weaker sort – between appearance and reality.

- (3) Can we refine the evidence from induction into inference to the best explanation? Can we justifiably accept our common-sense beliefs about the external world because the existence of such a world offers the best explanation of the constancy and coherence of our experience of a world of stable objects acting in predictable ways? Sceptical alternatives are thin and under-described and may justifiably dismissed as worse explanations.

- The problem with this response is that it assumes a solution to the traditional problem of induction, which would be exploded were the evil scientist to give me a shock and the future no longer resemble the past (not to mention its dependence on the accuracy of memory, itself dubious in the light of uncertainty about our knowledge of the past). We must presuppose purely experiential regularities, so as not to rely in our argument to best explanation on knowledge of the external world (ie. how things appear under different conditions). However, our raw experience is disrupted at every blink of the eye and if we don’t illicitly allow for changes in the observer or environment, our experience is not in the least stable or predictable.

- So, both Agrippan and Cartesian scepticism leave us with a range of unsatisfactory responses and a new approach is needed.

7. Diagnostic Approaches to Skepticism

- The responses to scepticism so far have been direct. Diagnostic responses treat sceptical arguments as deeply misleading and divide into the therapeutic and theoretical.

- Therapeutic responses treat sceptical arguments as pseudo-problems generated by a misunderstanding of language. However, philosophers impressed by sceptical arguments think it seems clearer that they understand such claims than that the views about meaning that purportedly show otherwise are true.

- The theoretical diagnosis has it that the sceptic trades on theoretical commitments that are either unacknowledged or passed off as common-sense platitudes and which give his arguments their apparent intuitiveness.

- If the theoretical diagnosis can be made good, it yields two sorts of gain. (1) a neutralisation of the sceptic’s dialectical advantage in having natural arguments in contrast to the arcane resistance of his opponent and (2) a deepening of our understanding of sceptical arguments by locating them in a common network of theoretical ideas. If we can argue that these ideas are optional, we will no longer have to choose between scepticism and one of the traditional epistemologies.

\[1\] Williams makes no reference to Wittgenstein here, which seems rather dismissive.
8. **Skeptical Commitments**

- Agrippa’s trilemma concludes that nothing we believe can ever be really justified, but epistemological concepts like justification are evaluative or normative rather than purely descriptive. There are two dimensions to justification – *personal* and *evidential*. The first has to do with epistemic responsibility, the second has to do with groundedness (whether the belief is likely to be true). Knowledge requires justification along both dimensions and the issue between the sceptic and his opponent turns on the relation between them.

- Epistemically responsible believing is always and everywhere believing on the basis of adequate evidence. Personal justification is subject to the *Prior Grounding Requirement* and this *evidentialist bias* has two aspects (1) the *dependence thesis*, where personal justification is uniformly subordinated to evidential justification and (2) *Internalism*, whereby a person’s evidence for a belief is further beliefs or cognitive states which he can cite on request and on the basis of which he holds the belief. The sceptic excludes *externalist* justification – where a person has formed a belief by a process that is in fact reliable and may even ensure that it is true but where the person is not aware of the factors that make his belief truth-reliable – as failing to satisfy the PGR.

- The Agrippan argument, if it is to amount to an argument for radical scepticism, must rely on the above concept of justification. The conclusion of his argument is that we are never justified in the slightest in believing one thing rather than another, ie. we are not *personally* justified in our beliefs. However, he also argues that there are limits to our capacity to give reasons or cite evidence, which is a point about *evidential* justification. So, the sceptic tacitly relies on the PGR to get to his conclusion. He presupposes both the dependence principle and internalism, and nothing less will do the sceptical job.

- The PGR also plays a key role in the sceptical argument itself. The sceptic assumes that the question “how do you know” can be reasonably asked of any claim. He implicitly denies that for a knowledge-claim to be reasonably challenged, the challenge itself need be motivated by reasons. He assumes, what is entirely reasonable given the PGR, that any claim to belief volunteers an unlimited commitment to demonstrate entitlement to it. Without the requirement that believing is always and everywhere believing on evidence, this procedure is unreasonable.

- The alternative is to treat the believer as innocent until proved guilty – the *default and challenge structure* of personal justification. One is personally justified in a belief or assertion in the absence of reasons to the contrary, known as *defeaters*, which cite reasonable error-possibilities. Non-epistemic defeaters cite evidence (whether purely negative, or by counter-example) that one’s assertion is false. Epistemic defeaters give evidence that one’s belief, even thought it might be true, was acquired in an unreliable or irresponsible way.

- The PGR gives way to a limited *Defence Commitment* to respond to appropriate challenges only. The entitlement to challenge belief has to be earned as much as the entitlement to hold belief.

- Rejecting the PGR takes the sting out of Agrippa’s trilemma. The sceptic’s requests for further justification are brought to an end by default entitlements. They are not mere assumptions (because they can reasonably be challenged) but because they are default entitlements they do not depend on any form of
grounding – in particular they are not immediately or indirectly self-grounding, so not only do we escape from regress, we also escape from circularity.

• The default and challenge concept of justification leads to fallibilism rather than radical scepticism. Beliefs remain anti-dogmatic since default entitlements are always provisional. Because a motivated challenge presupposes a large background of default entitlements, there is no way for our beliefs to be attacked collectively as the radical sceptic aspires to do.

• According to this analysis, the relationship between personal and evidential justification is multiply contextual. The existence of a properly motivated challenge is what determines whether evidential justification is required at all to secure personal justification. Contextual factors fix the adequacy conditions for evidential justification securing personal justification and exclude irrelevant defeaters.

• Leaving aside personal justification, for a person to be justified simpliciter, his beliefs do need to be adequately grounded, whether or not he’s aware of these grounds. Contextual factors enter in here also, not just in the context of arguing with the sceptic, but in the actual situations in which beliefs are held are crucial. Given that there is a default entitlement, an epistemically responsible claim need not always be backed up by awareness of the grounds for belief. But, the adequacy of the grounds partly depends on those real-world possibilities that the grounds need to exclude. The reference to partly is because standards of adequacy are fixed in the light of our interests. Consequently, we can’t forget questions of epistemic responsibility even when considering the objective adequacy of grounds for a belief.

• Contextualism must not be confused with relativism, as though “justified” means “justified in context C”. Beliefs are evidentially justified when the evidence is adequate, but the standards of adequacy depend on the environments both of the world and of the argument, and can change with either. Evidence that was once adequate may become inadequate in the light of new information or a changed situation, which fact may also have sceptical potential.

9. Justification and Truth

• Where did traditional epistemology’s evidentialist bias come from? Well, justifying just is grounding in the broad sense, ie. showing that one’s beliefs are likely to be true. However, being justified does not require one to have gone through a prior process of justification because the process of justification is only triggered by the context of a properly motivated challenge. Because we don’t state the obvious, claims worth making normally don’t have to wait to be challenged, so that articulated claims tend not to be justified by default. Forgetting that the usual situation does not trigger a defence commitment transforms fallibilism, the ever-present possibility of contextually appropriate demands for evidence, into radical scepticism – an unrestricted insistence on grounds.

• Both traditional foundationalism and coherence theory accept the PGR, which makes them direct responses to Agrippan scepticism. They take evidential justification as having priority over personal, whereas contextualism sees things in reverse, with responsibility taking explanatory responsibility over grounding.

2 It’s not clear to me quite what Williams is driving at here. Review later.
• Both traditional foundationalists and coherence theorists will admit that we allow that a person is justified in taking things for granted in practical situations where there’s not practical opportunity to investigate, but will deny that this provides epistemic justification. The essential feature of this is that a belief is only justified if the justification links to factors that increase the likelihood of the belief being true. If this is not absolutely essential, the supposed justification is either non-epistemic or such that makes epistemic justification purely dialectical. Either way, contextualism (they will say) fails to answer the sceptic.

• Williams replies by saying that a contextualist can allow that justification requires both epistemic responsibility and adequate grounding. Rejecting the PGR allows him to give an externalist reading to the grounding condition for knowledge. Beliefs are adequately grounded if formed by a method that is in fact reliable, with responsibility demanding that we be able to demonstrate reliability only when grounds for suspecting unreliability are present. Making a knowledge-claim commits us to reliability, and triggers the defence commitment so that a contextualist should insist that knowledge be grounded, not least as a source of self-correction.

• Traditional epistemology demands positive proof on the assumption that it is rational to believe only what can be shown to be correct. For the contextualist, rationality is a readiness to defend or modify your views as problems arise, emphasising an openness to correction. The plausibility of the contextualist approach has risen as the most successful scientific theories have been overthrown. Williams agrees with Peirce and Popper that traditional epistemology is rooted in a primitive picture of knowledge as issuing from some authoritative source, whether the Word of God, the senses, Reason or the criteria of global coherence. Philosophical scepticism has helped us to see this and move towards contextualism via fallibilism. Because fallibilism has won out, scepticism is only a philosophical problem in its radical guise of a general repudiation of justification – though we are not obliged to follow.

10. Skepticism and Epistemic Priority

• Williams asks whether the diagnostic strategy outlined in §§7-9 work for Cartesian scepticism. Williams focuses on knowledge of the external world to uncover further theoretical presuppositions underwriting the apparently intuitive sceptical arguments.

• Prima facie, contextualism offers a way for Cartesian scepticism to exploit the default and challenge structure by offering sceptical challenges as defeaters of ordinary knowledge-claims. Once we’re aware of the possibility of brains in vats, ordinary knowledge-claims cease to have the status of default justification; nor can they be given evidential grounding since the sceptical defeaters cannot be convincingly ruled out.

• Williams’ response is that all the sceptic can show is that his scenarios cannot be ruled out on the basis of experiential evidence alone. This only carries weight if I’ve committed to providing experiential grounding for my every belief about the world. If I’m justified in believing I’m sitting at my desk, then I’m justified in believing I’m not a brain in a vat. It’s less clear if I’m only justified in believing it seems to me I’m sitting at my desk, but given the contextualist approach it cannot be taken for granted that need any basis, let alone the restricted one offered by scepticism.
• Williams thinks we’re not at risk from the Cartesian sceptic unless we make ourselves vulnerable by adopting foundationalism, though this is still usually seen as a response to, rather than the cause of, scepticism.

• It is usually taken that the epistemological priority of experiential knowledge over knowledge of the world is too obvious to need arguing. The former is more modest in content and therefore less open to doubt than the latter. However contextualism may lead us to question this as there are many contexts where claims about the world are scarcely dubitable and would be no more certain even if experientially grounded. That there are some situations where this is not so does not establish the general epistemological priority of experiential knowledge. This could only be done by some equally general considerations, but we cannot appeal to a sceptical problem about the external world without parallel in the experiential case since the very problem arises¹ when we assume the priority of experiential over worldly knowledge, so we cannot use the sceptical problem to argue for this priority.

• Another common view is that the undeniable fact that knowledge of the world depends on the senses leads to the dependence of worldly on experiential knowledge. Why should we assume that all the senses tell us is how things appear rather than how they are? Again, saying that beliefs about the world are especially vulnerable to sceptical challenge takes us again round the same circle.

• Some philosophers argue that the priority of experiential knowledge over knowledge of the world is established by the intuitive appeal of the sceptical challenge. This is because my experiential knowledge would be unaffected by my total ignorance of the world, because my experience would be as it is even though the world were radically different. Williams, however, while admitting at least the possibility of a logical gap between experiential and worldly knowledge, and that experience alone is neutral with respect to the character or existence of the external world, will not admit that this implies an epistemological asymmetry.

• Williams favours the suggestion that what makes sceptical hypotheses into serious challenges is the raising of very general questions about kinds of knowledge. In ordinary situations it is appropriate to bring up world-involving facts by way of justification. The sceptic, however, steps back from all this to ask questions about our worldly knowledge as a whole, asking how we know anything at all about an external world, since sceptical hypotheses show that there doesn’t even need to be one of the kind we imagine ourselves to inhabit. Answering the sceptic in ways that take knowledge of the world for granted beg the question. If the sceptic is allowed to ask his question we will be compelled to respond with some more primitive basis for our knowledge of the world, which can be nothing but experiential knowledge. Consequently, the priority of experiential over worldly knowledge is not a presupposition but a consequence of an encounter with scepticism.

• We’ve seen that once we’ve admitted experiential knowledge as the only route to knowledge of the world, the sceptics weapons show this basis for knowledge to be hopelessly inadequate. So, to avoid this we must find fault with the intelligibility of the sceptic’s question in a therapeutic manner. Unfortunately, the sceptic’s question doesn’t appear to be defective since we all understand it enough to see the difficulty in answering it. Consequently, if the sceptic is allowed to ask his question, how do you know, we will be forced to answer that we don’t.

1 Does it really? Check this out.
11. Epistemological Realism

- The sceptic imposes a *totality condition* on a properly philosophical understanding of knowledge when he asks how we can know anything whatsoever about the external world. Hence, the detachment of philosophical reflection from practical concerns which take so much for granted.
- Williams points out that we don’t normally expect a blanket explanation of a random assemblage of things. What the sceptic asks may not be intelligible – an explanation of how we come to know all of physics, biology, history and every casual thought about the world around us.
- The one way of escaping this conclusion is to suppose the sceptics kinds are epistemological kinds. Beliefs about the world have a common epistemological status, so are a theoretically coherent kind that we can sensibly judge as a whole. *External* means *outside the mind* (rather than *in the environment*). Knowledge of the external world contrasts with that of the internal world – experiential knowledge, with its epistemic privilege.
- This returns us to substantive foundationalism that is committed to the notion that every belief has an *intrinsic* epistemological status, and out beliefs fall into natural epistemological kinds reflecting epistemological priority. *Natural*, because the foundationalist’s epistemological hierarchy ignores all contextual factors and divisions of subject matter. The epistemological realism arising from substantive foundationalism is not the view that the world is objective but that the typical objects of epistemological theorising are real.
- Foundationalism is inextricably linked with Cartesian scepticism because (1) it sets the success-criteria for explaining how knowledge of the external world is possible and (2) it is presupposed if we think there is such a kind$^4$ of knowledge to examine. Our beliefs about the world are an epistemic kind, but supposing such kinds exist means that there are immutable epistemological constraints on the variable standards of everyday justification, in particular the universal dependence of beliefs about the world on experiential evidence. This implies that context-sensitivity only applies at the upper levels, because there is an underlying structure of justificational relations exposed by philosophical enquiry and allowing us to determine generally whether we are able to claim knowledge of the world. Contextualism shows this not to be necessary and that Cartesian questions can be side-stepped.
- In response, some philosophers deny that the Cartesian sceptic starts with a general question but argue that he can reach a general conclusion by examining a single case if it is carefully chosen. If knowledge fails in this case (eg. because I may be a brain in a vat, I don’t know I’m sitting at my desk), it fails everywhere.
- Williams denies the distinction, because if my default entitlements include beliefs about the world, they already rule out sceptical hypotheses (I can’t be a brain in a vat because I’m sitting at my desk), it fails everywhere.

$^4$I’m lost!

$^5$Still lost!!
12. Skepticism in Context

- Does contextualism itself invite Cartesian challenges to everyday knowledge by the externalist dimension to its concept of adequate grounding? It allows beliefs to rest on grounds of which we are ignorant as well as making these grounds rest in part on the real-world environment.

- Sceptical scenarios defeat ordinary knowledge in both non-epistemic and epistemic ways. If I’m a brain in a vat, most of my beliefs about the world will be false, but even if true they will be improperly grounded. By the standards of contextualism, my beliefs about the world will be adequately grounded only if formed in a normal, rather than vat, environment. Sceptical scenarios are extreme illustrations of a general feature of all justification – that grounds only rule out error factors that are contextually determined to be relevant. Even so, we rely on epistemic luck – that certain possibilities are not realised. A belief that is wholly accidental cannot count as knowledge, but, for a contextualist, getting things right is never wholly non-accidental either.

- The Cartesian sceptic can argue that the contextualist is begging the question by assuming himself to be epistemically lucky. However, contextualism isn’t trying to find a direct response to Cartesian scepticism, but a theoretical diagnosis. It is acceptable because its diagnosis – denying the PGR and epistemological realism – has allowed it to circumvent sceptical problems.

- No epistemology with important externalist elements can respond satisfactorily to the sceptic’s demand that we explain how we know anything at all about the external world because it will explain our knowledge of the world only on the assumption that it is more or less normal. However, this objection doesn’t bite against contextualism because it assumes that “our knowledge of the world” is a suitable object of wholesale assessment, which it has previously diagnosed.

- Can the sceptic make use of the default and challenge account of epistemic responsibility by continually raising the level of scrutiny and calling attention to overlooked error-possibilities, thereby defeating all ordinary knowledge-claims?

- The contextualist’s response is that the sceptical scenarios can be disregarded because contextually irrelevant. Williams thinks that the sceptic’s counter-argument – that while sceptical possibilities can be ignored for practical purposes, they are never strictly irrelevant – is quite wrong.

- In any context, the direction of inquiry defines the propositions that are not called in question and contextual factors determine both the level and angle of scrutiny. We can raise the level indefinitely in scientific experimentation, but if we start worrying whether we’re a brain in a vat, we don’t raise the level but change the subject from physics to general epistemology. There’s no coherent idea of a maximal level of scrutiny because there’s no simple relation between level and angle.

- Why does the fact that sceptical scenarios have the power to change the angle but not the level of enquiry prevent them undermining ordinary knowledge? Why can’t the sceptic choose the angle that says that the privileged status of experiential knowledge is fixed by his project of understanding the world as a whole.

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6 I.e. contextualism’s anti-realism in denying this natural epistemic kind?

7 Angle of scrutiny?
• Williams allows, for the sake of the argument, that simply calling attention to sceptical possibilities shifts the angle of scrutiny. The contextualist has already conceded the instability of knowledge\(^8\), but to get from instability to impossibility requires the sceptic to show that the context he creates is privileged and reveals ultimate constraints on justification that were always there, only ignored. Williams thinks, however, that his distinction between levels and angles of scrutiny blocks this argument. He agrees with Hume that scepticism belongs to the study, not the street, but thinks this a logical rather than psychological point.

• Williams claims that the sceptic’s totality condition – treating experiential knowledge as epistemologically prior to knowledge of the world – determines what it would be to understand worldly knowledge in a distinctively philosophical way. The admission that no such knowledge is possible amounts at most to the discovery that this is impossible under the self-imposed conditions of philosophical reflection, but not that no such beliefs are ever justified\(^9\). That would require epistemological realism, that philosophical reflection reveals the final context-independent constraints on the justification of our beliefs about the world. Rejecting epistemological realism means there are no such constraints for philosophical reflection to reveal.

• Evaluative practices are human inventions that we are allowed to change if we encounter problems. If our picture of knowledge and justification results in radical scepticism – erasing every epistemological distinction – we have reason to change this picture. However, both philosophical scepticism and traditional anti-scepticism don’t see things this way but wish to ground epistemological evaluations in epistemological fact, a kind of epistemological naturalism and a natural order of reasons to which our reason-giving practices are ultimately answerable. Epistemic norms arise from a hidden structure of epistemic fact.

• Williams thinks we have come full circle. The PGR, the first sceptical principle identified, prioritises grounding over responsibility, the reverse of the order of dependence as seen by contextualism. The PGR follows from epistemological realism for if there is a structure of justificational constraints existing independently of us and our interests and contexts, then clearly we must respect it. While we may be excused from living up to the constraints because of the exigencies of practical life, from a purely epistemic standpoint the sceptic is correct in evaluating our performance negatively. Williams thinks that his argument shows that scepticism is inextricably linked to this metaphysics of knowledge\(^10\) that he finds extraordinary. We should drop this picture and move on.

13. **Epistemology after Skepticism**

• Diagnostic responses to scepticism suggest they can be set aside, so, given that epistemology has been centrally concerned with sceptical problems, can it be set aside as well? So says Rorty, but Quine only thinks it can continue in a naturalised form as part of empirical psychology and that if it tries to form a foundation for science, we should avoid it.

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\(^8\) Fallibilism ?
\(^9\) I don’t understand this argument.
\(^10\) Epistemological realism ?
Scepticism has never been the only problem in epistemology and philosophers have usually been concerned with it only as a help to solving other problems. The ancient sceptics adopted it to combat dogmatic epistemologies and lead to a way of life without theoretical convictions and definite claims to knowledge, including philosophical theories of knowledge.

Philosophers have been interested in scepticism for other than epistemological motives. Descartes’ motivation was metaphysical as much as epistemological. Additionally, epistemological concerns are wider than the attainment of a general understanding of the nature of knowledge and justification. There are problems of demarcation concerning the scope and limits of human knowledge, and of method – determining the best way of acquiring knowledge in different fields. Both of these have often been linked to sceptical questions because we fix the boundaries of knowledge by exploring the limits of scepticism. This is Kant’s strategy – to limit Reason in order to make room for Faith. However, we also have Locke’s strategy of examining the reasonableness of our cognitive aspirations in the light of our best scientific picture of the world and of our place in it. While Descartes thought that confronting scepticism was essential for the reconstruction of human knowledge, Bacon advanced scientific method without worrying about scepticism. These thoughts suggest that an epistemology centred on scepticism is but one form of epistemology.

Williams recalls his distinction between therapeutic and theoretical diagnosis. The former, treating sceptical problems as pseudo-problems hopes that they, and the subject that attempted to treat them theoretically, should disappear. However, a theoretical diagnosis denies the intuitiveness of the sceptical challenge by linking the problems with unacknowledged theoretical ideas. A specific diagnostic hypothesis, in Williams’ case contextualism, will lead to a new picture of knowledge and its justification, to new problems and no escape from epistemological concerns.