Contextualism in epistemology is the view that on different occasions of utterance, the English verb *know* expresses different propositional attitudes—attitudes that vary in the required degree or kind of justification. For terminological convenience, I will distinguish between two contextualist theses. First, there is what I'll call *linguistic contextualism* (LC). By linguistic contextualism, I will mean the view that some theoretical implementation or other of the view described above is the correct semantic theory of the word *know*. Second, there is *philosophical contextualism* (PC) by which I'll mean the claim that LC can underwrite a response to cartesian skepticism. While the debate about the empirical merits of LC is lively and important, it is not the debate in which I will engage here. I will not, for example, contrast LC with MacFarlane’s relativist alternative to LC, nor with the subject-sensitive invariantisms of Hawthorne or Stanley. Rather, I will be concerned with a worry about PC. That worry is this:

Missing the Point: Epistemologists are concerned with the nature and extent of human knowledge. LC may or may not be an accurate claim about the word *know*. But it is not of interest to the epistemologist. To the extent that any theory is concerned with the specifically linguistic facts, it fails to address the object of study in epistemology. In particular, there is no reason to believe that a theory of the word *know*, however empirically adequate, could form the basis of a response to skepticism.

My goal in this paper will be to construct and critique three distinct arguments each of which aims to vindicate the worry I’ve described. Ultimately, I will not defend any thesis about what makes Missing the Point appear plausible any more than I will defend LC from alternative theories of the word *know*. What I do hope to show is that Missing the Point fails to underwrite a successful objection to PC. My real aim is thus to defend the

1 See Ludlow (2005) for a discussion of several options available to the linguistic contextualist.

2 I should note that when I speak in terms of responding to the skeptic, I do not mean that the contextualist can defeat the skeptic in argument. As Lewis (1996) and DeRose (1995) point out, contextualism, even if successful, cannot play that role. Rather, I mean that the contextualist, once safely outside of the skeptical context, can offer an account of the appeal of the skeptic’s argument—an account that does not commit us to the skeptic’s alarming conclusion. When it matters, I will use more careful locutions, like “providing a non-skeptical account of the skeptical predicament”. Elsewhere, I will speak more casually.

3 MacFarlane (2005).


view that the debate over the relative merits of LC and its empirical competitors is the most appropriate venue for determining the best response to cartesian skepticism.

If a speaker can truthfully utter a sentence \( p \), then the proposition expressed by that utterance of \( p \) is true\(^6\). However, care is required in making use of such an inference. If the sentence \( p \) contains context sensitive expressions, then seeming instances of the valid inference can in fact fail to instantiate it. Consider two clear cases: Suppose that we do not know whether six plus seven equals thirteen, but that we learn that a speaker of English can, in perfectly ordinary circumstances, truthfully utter sentence (1).

1. Six plus seven equals thirteen.

In this case it is quite clear that we have solved the mystery. Six plus seven equals thirteen. By contrast, suppose we do not know what the temperature is, but we learn that some speaker of English can truthfully utter sentence (2).

2. It is cold here.

That fact does not help determine the temperature *here*, because we do not know the relevant facts about the context of the utterance of (2).\(^7\) The fact that the word *here* appears in both the quoted utterance and in the description of the fact we aim to discover doesn’t help. It doesn’t help because the word *here* picks out different locations on different occasions of utterance.

Disquotation thus underwrites both a valid pattern of inference and a potential fallacy. If a sentence \( p \) contains no contextually variable expressions, then it is valid to infer that \( p \) is true from the truthfulness of an utterance of \( p \). However, if the sentence \( p \) does contain contextually variable expressions, then one can never infer that \( p \) from the truthfulness of an utterance of \( p \). Never—well, hardly ever.\(^8\) If the context of evaluation is the *same* as the context of utterance, then the disquotational inference is valid even if the sentence contains context sensitive expressions. If we know that sentence (2) can

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\(^6\) I will ignore here complications introduced by relativist theories. They will not affect the argument.

\(^7\) For convenience, I ignore the context sensitivity of the gradable adjective *cold*.

\(^8\) Apologies to Lewis. Extra apologies to Gilbert and Sullivan.
truthfully be uttered right here—*in this very context*—then we can indeed infer that it is cold here.

One way to put the point is this: If there are no linguistically relevant features of the context that vary between the context of the utterance of *p* and the context in which the truth of *p* is inferred, then *p* can be inferred from the truthfulness of an utterance of *p*. Given this statement of the relevant inference, it becomes clear that the condition is satisfied in the case of expressions that contain no context sensitive terminology—after all, there are no linguistically relevant features of the context, and so none that vary.

Likewise, it becomes equally clear that the antecedent is satisfied in the case of expressions that do contain context sensitive terminology, provided the inference is made in the same context as the utterance. If there are no context sensitive material, or if the contexts are the same, then the two propositions are identical, and the inference that *p* is true from a truthful utterance of the sentence *p* is valid. If there is context sensitive material, and if context of evaluation is distinct from the context of utterance, then the true proposition expressed by the utterance can differ from the proposition to be inferred. That inference pattern is therefore fallacious.

One very natural attempt to turn Missing the Point into an argument against Philosophical Contextualism makes reference to the fallacy described above. Sosa (2000) provides an argument along these lines. He correctly points out that, supposing Linguistic Contextualism to be correct, one cannot infer a positive answer to question (3)

3. Do people ever know they have hands?

from the contextualist claim in (4).

4. People often utter truths when they say ‘I know I have hands’.

He thus might have in mind an argument like this: Linguistic Contextualism produces claims about the truth of knowledge ascriptions in a context. In order to draw relevant results from those claims, the epistemologist must make a certain kind of inference: the inference of *p* from the truth of utterances of *p*, where the sentence *p* contains a contextually sensitive expression. But that inference is invalid. Linguistic Contextualism is therefore irrelevant to epistemological inquiry. In other words, even if LC is true, PC is not.

Such an argument fails for a simple reason. Even supposing the only relevant epistemological questions to be those stated in the epistemological context—I mean by that a context where skeptical hypotheses are salient—LC still yields results that are
relevant. According to the contextualist, the epistemological context is one where the epistemic standards are very high—higher than can be met by most beliefs. Thus, for example, sentence (5)

5. People sometime know they have hands.
is claimed to be false when uttered in the epistemological context. Since the knowledge claim being evaluated by the epistemologist is made in that very context, the inference to the disquoted conclusion (roughly, that people never know they have hands) is valid. That’s what the contextualist has to say about questions addressed in the epistemological context. It could be wrong. But on Sosa’s view of epistemology it is hardly irrelevant.

A much more plausible argument would give up on the more ambitious irrelevance claim. Rather than arguing that linguistic contextualism is irrelevant to epistemology tout court, one might argue—citing the same fallacy—that the non-skeptical conclusions of the contextualist are irrelevant. PC claims after all that linguistic contextualism underwrites a response to skepticism; yet contextualism’s verdict on knowledge claims in the epistemological context is nearly always negative. As we’ve seen, yielding verdicts about knowledge claims in the epistemological context is enough to make the theory relevant; nevertheless, it is not yet clear in what sense the theory is anti-skeptical. The anti-skeptical component of contextualism is supposed to be its results about knowledge ascriptions made outside of the epistemological context. Yet it is those very ascriptions that are barred from serving as premises in disquotation inferences. (Worse, it’s the supposition that contextualism is true that bars them!) Because the non-skeptical component of contextualism is unavailable as the basis for inferences in the epistemological context, it is reasonable to label the theory (conceived as an anti-skeptical theory) irrelevant.

However, this version of the argument also fails. It fails because the barred inferences are not in fact required for LC to play the anti-skeptical role that PC claims it does. The problem with the argument is its failure to distinguish between the context of philosophical inquiry, and the context of philosophical interest. It’s true that in the context of epistemological inquiry, knowledge claims are sometimes made and the truth

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9 I do not know which of these two arguments Sosa (2000) has in mind, but it will not be my concern here to figure it out. (In his reply to some objections similar to those I’ve raised here, Sosa fails to discuss the contextualist results about philosophical contexts. I’m afraid therefore that he may have the first argument in mind, but I will not press the interpretive point here.)
of those claims then evaluated. But there is no reason to thereby restrict the domain of epistemological inquiry to just those knowledge ascriptions. When we first encounter the skeptical argument after all, one reason it strikes us as alarming is that it calls into question all of our ordinary, seemingly blameless ascriptions of knowledge. If linguistic contextualism were false, then it would be quite clear that those ascriptions are very much of interest to the epistemologist. But if LC is true, nothing changes; those ascriptions and beliefs are of interest *pretheoretically*. If it turns out that they do not ascribe the same propositional attitude as ascriptions in the philosophy classroom, they do not thereby become irrelevant—to believe they do is to forget the force of the skeptical argument. For the contextualist, it is hardly surprising that one can cook up some context where the standards are so high that very few knowledge ascriptions are true. The important point is that in the rest of the contexts—the ones that constitute the bulk of our knowledge claims—the standards of justification are reasonable enough that ascriptions of knowledge are routinely true.¹⁰

II

Because Philosophical Contextualism itself does not rely on cross-context disquotation, any objection to it is bound to fail if it rests on the distinction between epistemological and ordinary contexts.¹¹ If Missing the Point is to be vindicated, the next step is to look for some novel argument that does not make such a mistake. The target of such an argument would be any semantically grounded reply to skepticism. This is a naturally result, given that the worry described in Missing the Point concerned the semantic focus of contextualism, not any theoretical feature that distinguishes it from its empirical competition. An improved argument vindicating Missing the Point will thus apply not only to Philosophical Contextualism, but to anti-

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¹⁰ Because of the prominent role played here by disquotation, it is worth distinguishing between the two failed arguments above and a very different anti-contextualist argument that also relies on disquotation. Hawthorne (2004) observes that many disquotational inferences of the kind I've discussed in fact seem to be valid, contrary to the predictions of LC. I will not go into the merits of Hawthorne’s argument here, except to note that what I have said has no bearing on the success or failure of it, and vice versa. Contextualism does indeed predict that the cross-context disquotational inference is invalid. The observation that such disquotational inferences are intuitively truth-preserving may therefore succeed in producing inductive evidence against LC. However, while contextualism’s claim that such inferences are not truth preserving may prove an empirical liability, it is not a philosophical liability. Such inferences, valid or not, play no role in the contextualist account of skepticism.

¹¹ That is, unless it is an empirical argument against LC, and only derivatively against PC.
skeptical applications of relativism and subject-sensitive invariantism as well. For that reason, in the discussion below I will use the more general phrase *semantically grounded anti-skeptical arguments*, and *the semantic anti-skeptic* rather than the more narrow *Philosophical Contextualism*.

I believe that an improved argument, one that doesn’t get caught up in the distinctive features of LC, is available. I will argue that the improved argument goes through, provided a common understanding of semantics is correct. However, I will also argue that the common understanding of semantics is not correct. The improved argument goes like this: The semantic anti-skeptic replies to the skeptic with an argument that draws on a theory of the natural language term *knows*. The semantic theory underwriting that argument is, in turn, constructed according to the usual methodology of empirical semantics. In a nutshell, that methodology dictates that the semanticist use, as her data, speaker intuitions about the truth of sentences in a context.\(^\text{12}\) The resulting theory can then explain how the meanings of subsentential linguistic items contribute to a sentence having the truth conditions it does. But the theory does not provide a theory *of* those truth conditions. As Davidson puts it in a well-known passage,

The theory reveals nothing new about the conditions under which an individual sentence is true; it does not make those conditions any clearer than the sentence itself does. The work of the theory is in relating the known truth conditions of each sentence to those aspects ("words") of the sentence that recur in other sentences, and can be assigned identical roles in other sentences.\(^\text{13}\)

That a given sentence has the truth conditions a semantic theory claims it does is thus not an empirical result. Rather, it is the inevitable consequence of adopting, as a methodological assumption, the principle that our intuitions about the truth of sentences in a context are accurate.

So here’s the rub. The semanticist exploring our uses of the word *knows* adopts, as a methodological assumption, the view that our intuitions about the truth knowledge ascriptions are accurate. But it is *those very intuitions* that are challenged by the skeptic. So the philosophical contextualist, or the relativist, or the subject-sensitive invariantist, etc. replies to the skeptic with a theory the construction of which

\(^{12}\) Other data, entailment relations and syntactic facts for example, are also available to the semanticist but they will not be relevant here.

presupposes the negation of the skeptical conclusion. Put schematically, the skeptic argues that our intuitions about the truth of knowledge ascriptions are massively mistaken. Call that conclusion S. The semantic anti-skeptic’s reply, if Davidson’s description is correct, is of the form: “Assume ~S. Working from that assumption, I can construct a theory according to which ~S.” The problem is thus not that the semantic anti-skeptic misses the point of epistemology. Rather, it would seem that she begs the question.14

I think that this problem may well underlie the vaguer intuition described in Missing the Point. Whether or not that is the case, the improved argument is, I believe, valid, and the contextualist (or the subject sensitive invariantist, or the relativist) therefore owes a response. As compelling as the improved argument may be, however, I will argue that a closer look at the nature of semantic data will reveal that a response is available. The crux of the response is that intuitions about truth in a context do not serve as the data of semantics. Rather, it is intuitions of acceptability in a context that serve as the semanticist’s data, where perceived acceptability arises from the interaction between semantics and pragmatics. If this is right, it follows that the conclusions the semanticist reaches with respect to truth conditions are in fact empirical consequences of the theory, not methodological assumptions. If that is right, then there is nothing question begging in a semantically grounded, anti-skeptical account of the skeptical argument.

In constructing a theory of the compositional meaning of elements of a language, the semanticist does indeed consult intuitions about sentences in a context. But those intuitions are not about truth. Consider sentences 6-8:

6. John has three children.
7. The man drinking the martini is Robert Loggia.
8. I attended a movie with the King of France last night.

For each of these sentences, it is possible to construct a context in which seemingly clear intuitions about truth are at odds with the predictions of some semantic theory on offer in the literature. Sentence (6), when said of a man who has five children, seems to

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14 As I’ve stated it, the argument concerns the goal of replying to the skeptic. But the problem is pressing even when care is taken to describe the goal of the contextualist more modestly. The semantic anti-skeptic hopes to explain the appeal of the skeptical argument in a way that makes transparent why, outside of the skeptical context, we need not accept the skeptic’s conclusion. If such an explanation is forthcoming simply because the anti-skeptic assumes from the outset that the skeptic’s conclusion is false, then the anti-skeptical result, even outside of the skeptical context, is totally undermined.
most speakers to be false. Yet any semantic theory incorporating a pragmatic account of scalar implicature will claim that it is true, though infelicitous. Sentence (7), when said of a man drinking water out of a martini glass, seems to many speakers to be true, so long as the man drinking from the glass is indeed Robert Loggia. Yet sentences like (7) are famously argued to be false, though perfectly usable in context.\(^\text{15}\) In sentence (8), a well known existence presupposition goes unmet, but to most speakers’ ears the sentence does not sound merely strange or infelicitous, but rather straight-forwardly false. Nevertheless, von Fintel (2003) argues that despite those intuitions of falsity, the sentence is indeed truth-valueless.\(^\text{16}\) (6)-(8) thus demonstrate three kinds of divergence between seeming intuitions about truth and theoretical claims about truth values.

The lesson to be taken from these examples is that intuitions about appropriateness—even if they seem to be about truth—do not translate directly into intuitions about truth as that notion is deployed in semantics.\(^\text{17}\) The intuitions that serve as the semanticist’s data result from complex interactions between truth-conditional meaning and pragmatic factors. Any semantic theory of a given expression must therefore be judged as a package dividing up those influences.\(^\text{18}\) The claims about the truth conditional meaning of the expression in question are thus empirical after all, for they must in principle be defendable against an alternative theory on which the same meaning effects are ascribed to pragmatics.

The details of the semantically grounded anti-skeptical arguments vary. But each account offers a theory of the word \textit{know} that involves both semantic and pragmatic factors. In each theory, the semantic component of the theory has as a consequence that many of our knowledge ascriptions are true—not just acceptable or felicitous, but literally true. The pragmatic component then explains in one way or another how it is that different factors appear relevant to the truth of knowledge ascriptions under different circumstances. The claims about truth conditions staked out by these theories are empirical results, not methodological inevitabilities. Those claims must in principle be

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\(^{15}\) Kripke (1977). See also Reimer (1998) for a view on which (2) fails to express a proposition at all, true or false.

\(^{16}\) von Fintel (2003).

\(^{17}\) This view—the consensus view among linguists in my experience—is defended at length in Ludlow (forthcoming), ch. 2.

\(^{18}\) Thanks to Kai von Fintel for stressing this point to me.
defendable against the claims of an alternative, skeptical account of the facts. Such an alternative theory would have to present a description of the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions—one on which those conditions are rarely or never satisfied—as well as some pragmatic explanation for the now bizarre intuition of felicity in ordinary knowledge ascriptions. To my knowledge, no such account has been offered in any detail at all.

To the call for some skeptical alternative to LC and its competitors, the skeptic (or the stubborn defender of Missing the Point) may reply in one of two ways. On the one hand, such a person could renew the charge of question-begging. To respond to the skeptic with an empirical theory requires confidence that we have justified belief in our evidence, and that our evidence in fact justifies our conclusions. The skeptic would not grant any such premises. To this it can only be responded that the goal of convincing the skeptic himself—the goal of deriving anti-skeptical conclusions by agreed upon forms of inference from shared premises—was never in the picture. As for the more modest goal—that of giving a non-skeptical account of the skeptical predicament—the semanticist need not be worried. The skeptical hypotheses undermine the arguments for such an explanation only if we have already been convinced by the skeptic.

It is worth noting at this point that the skeptic's own premises are no more innocent than the semanticist's. Consider the first premise of the argument from ignorance:

9. I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat.

How is such a premise supported? The skeptic provides no independent argument that we do not know that we are not brains in vats. On the contrary, he relies on our intuition that the claim is true. If the skeptic can rely on our intuition that (9) is true, then it can hardly be question begging for the semanticist to rely on that same intuition. In fact, the semanticist's assumptions are more innocent than the skeptic's. The semanticist assumes only that our intuitions about (9) are a reliable guides to its meaning: some

19 The account would presumably be some form of what's known as skeptical invariantism.

20 Such an account would only be owed by a skeptic who was concerned with the truth of ordinary knowledge ascriptions. A skeptic satisfied with the result that knowledge ascriptions in skeptical contexts are false has no such obligation—such a skeptic would be happy enough with contextualism. I've argued independently that the skeptic, like any other epistemologist, should be concerned with ordinary knowledge ascriptions, whatever their relation to ascriptions in the skeptical context.

21 This won't sway the skeptic himself, who is perfectly happy to have his own argument undermined along with everything else. The point merits consideration for non-skeptics outside of the skeptical context.
combination of truth-conditional and pragmatic factors. The skeptic, by contrast, must assume that our intuition of the acceptability of (9) is a reliable indicator of (9)’s truth. On the basis of strong assumptions about a small set of intuitions, the skeptic concludes that a massively larger set of intuitions are misleading. On the basis of more innocent assumptions about the same body of facts, the semanticist accounts for the skeptic’s intuition as well as the many intuitions that on the skeptical view remain entirely mysterious.

Such an analysis of the skeptic’s situation will make salient the other possible reply to the call for a skeptical alternative to contextualism. The skeptic (or the stubborn defender of Missing the Point) may simply reply at this point that the skeptic is not engaged in semantics. To demand a defensible semantic theory from the skeptic is to misunderstand the skeptical challenge. To put it in a different but rather familiar way, the skeptic isn’t interested in the meaning of knows; he’s interested in knowledge. However, by now—having clarified the relevance of semantic theories to the epistemological issue—the burden has shifted. If the defender of Missing the Point denies that the skeptic is engaged in the construction of a semantic theory, the best reply is simply an invitation to describe what it is that the skeptic is up to.

One way to put the point is this: The skeptic claims that there are certain norms—epistemic norms—that we almost universally fail to satisfy. Just what kind of norms are these? The contextualist adopts the position that the norms are of a familiar kind: they are the norms that are determined by our concepts. For the contextualist then, epistemic norms are like the norms determining what it takes for an object to fall under the predicate chair, or for a number to be the correct answer to a plus question. There are familiar philosophical problems—not to mention difficult empirical ones—regarding the status of the linguistic norms the contextualist describes. Nevertheless linguists and philosophers have had substantial success in exploring the empirical facts about such norms and the ways in which they guide our behavior and intuitions. If the skeptic is not concerned with the norms associated with the concept picked out by the word knowledge, then the defender of MP owes some account of what the skeptic is concerned with. In the absence of such an account, there is little reason to be troubled by our failure to live up to the standard he describes.
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