

Williams' contextualism as a critique of epistemological realism

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ABSTRACT: Although Williams' contextual thesis is above all a critique of one way of interpreting contextualism in epistemology, viz. simple conversational contextualism, I will argue that this thesis has also been a very successful means for criticism of the view on which that interpretation, and the entire traditional epistemology rests – epistemological realism. Accordingly, in spite of certain weaknesses in Williams' position pointed out by his critics, in this paper I will try to show that, by interpreting the problem of scepticism as first and foremost the methodological necessity of epistemological realism, Williams succeeds in offering an enlightening diagnosis of the problem of sceptical paradoxes, which is at the centre of epistemology traditionally construed.

KEYWORDS: Contextualism, epistemological realism, scepticism, invariantism, methodological necessities

Introduction

Version of the view that knowledge is context-dependent, recently developed by the British philosopher Michael Williams, is no doubt a novel approach compared to most other interpretations of contextualism in contemporary epistemology. In short, what sets Williams apart from other theorists is a specific way of interpretation and approach to the central epistemological problem – the problem of knowledge – which, in his case, largely loses its traditional character of justified true belief. While, on the one hand, this would suffice to doubt that Williams' version of contextualism is in fact epistemological (supported, among other things, by the fact that his theory is based on the pragmatic philosophical tradition that greatly differs from traditional epistemology and approaches inspired by it), on the other, however, it can be understood as a *bona fide* appeal for its reform by pointing to the limitations and misdirection of epistemology traditionally construed.

Basics of contextualism: scepticism, the principle of epistemic closure of knowledge and the conflict of intuitions

Before getting into a more detailed account of Williams' contextualism – with the intention of pointing out why we think that his solutions are superior or at least, more

appropriate than most others – we should say a bit more about the problems that are addressed, as well as about contextualism in general.

The main thesis of contextualism in epistemology, which all “epistemological contextualists” draw on as a methodological principle, is that our knowledge largely depends on contextual factors. We may or may not be aware of these factors, but they will, nevertheless, define our *epistemic position* in relation to which the truth value of sentences of the form ‘**S knows that P**’ is evaluated, in short, our knowledge.

If this insight was the end of the matter, it is likely that contextualists would not be faced with a particularly complex task, for it would always be possible to provide, through a standardized method, satisfactory arguments for or against someone’s possession of knowledge; namely, in this case, it would only be necessary, which seems quite sufficient, to, on the basis of experiential evidence of the context of sentence ‘**S knows that P**’, offer a conclusive list of reasons why it is or it is not the case that **S knows that P**. Unfortunately, things are not as simple as that.

Specifically, we should bear in mind that the contextualist approach emerges as a response to scepticism in epistemology, which not only presents arguments in favour of the possibility of error in cases when it can be eliminated through counter-evidence, but especially in situations when such counter-evidence cannot be found at all. In other words, since the sceptic aims at making knowledge *qua* knowledge elusive even when it seems utterly inappropriate to express any doubt about it (in cases such as the one when I claim to know that I have hands), he does not hesitate to present such a difficulty for contextualists that, however bizarre it might seem, proves to be insurmountable in evaluating someone’s knowledge.

To that effect, a manoeuvre of the sceptic is to resort to the so-called Cartesian paradox or hypothetical scenarios which puts the subject in such an epistemic position that cannot be ruled out either deductively or by evidence. The most famous among them are scenarios in which the subject is constantly deceived by Descartes’s evil deceiver, or he is a brain in a vat. Since we can never completely eliminate any of these possibilities, the sceptic’s conclusion is that we will never have the basis for any claim such as **S knows that P**, even if it is as certain as the claim that I have hands; because, how can I know that I have hands if I do not know that I am not a disembodied brain in a vat that, through electrochemical stimulation, enjoys the experience of having hands?

Created this way, sceptical paradoxes do not raise hope that something can be known, but that is their task after all. However, in order to preserve knowledge, early contextualists have developed the idea that these scenarios or hypotheses carry weight only in certain contexts, while in others they are irrelevant as an obstacle to knowledge.

Although it remained as the basis of all future efforts to fight scepticism, this view was not easy to maintain in the beginning because, despite pointing out contextual factors as key factors in determining the truth value of sentences of the form **S knows that P**, it was still difficult to find a convincing way of avoiding the so-called conflict of intuitions. In fact, just as we have a strong intuition regarding the truth of our everyday claims, we also have the one that we do not know that we are not brains in a vat; then, do we have sufficient grounds for attributing ourselves any knowledge, even context-dependent one?

Aware of the gravity of difficulty, theorists such as Fred Dretske and Robert Nozick have been forced to abandon the so-called principle of epistemic closure, i.e. that knowledge is closed under known entailment; namely, if **S knows that P**, and **P** entails **Q**, then **S** knows that **Q**. However, if **Q** is a sceptical possibility, to accept this principle implies that we can attribute knowledge **P** to subject **S** only if there is absolute certainty that sceptical scenarios have not been realized. Since their methods could not provide such an epistemic position for the subject with respect to sceptical hypotheses, the solution was either to abandon the principle of epistemic closure of knowledge as wrong (Dretske), or to accept the so-called “abominable conjunction” according to which we know the truth of our everyday claims, even though we do not know that we are not brains in a vat (Nozick).¹

¹ As the condition for one’s knowledge, Dretske’s contextualism implies elimination by evidence of all the relevant alternatives in which it is the case that not-**P**. However, the problem that in the end had to lead to the denial of the principle of epistemic closure of knowledge is that Dretske did not find a sufficiently rigorous criterion for distinguishing relevant from irrelevant alternatives, that is, because, despite pointing out contextual factors as key ones in this respect, it remained unclear whether and when the possibility that subject **S** is a brain in a vat is a relevant alternative. On the other hand, Nozick uses the Rule of Sensitivity in his approach to scepticism according to which **S**’s belief that **P** has to be the one that the subject would reject if it were not the case that **P**. Namely, Nozick believes that, even when it is true, a belief does not have to be *knowledge* because it can be formed accidentally. In order to avoid the chance in knowledge-formation, Nozick adds two conditions determining that, to be knowledge, a true belief must be sensitive, that is, it has to be a belief that we would not even form if it were not the case that **P**; but since our belief that we are not brains in a vat remains insensitive in all contexts, if we want to know something while adhering to Nozick’s principle, there is nothing else to do but

Even though they were not particularly successful, these early attempts to neutralize the sceptical paradox have nevertheless left their mark on the contextualist theory, if for no other reason than because they have shown that the principle of epistemic closure of knowledge should be preserved due to strong intuitions we have about it. In later literature it seemed that a method was found to, at least for a while, retain the above principle by emphasizing a specific type of context, thus avoiding the conflict of intuitions. Initiators of this approach and its leading proponents are American philosophers David Lewis and Keith DeRose.

Simple conversational contextualism

Both Lewis and DeRose draw on the view that “the apparent breakdown of closure in sceptical contexts identified by Dretske and Nozick is thus accounted for in terms of a failure to appreciate that such cases simply involve the equivocation between two conversational contexts” (Pritchard 2002: 113). In other words, what Dretske and Nozick failed to notice is that “the sceptic reaches his paradoxical results by exploiting the context-sensitivity of epistemic standards. Sceptical conclusions seem plausible because the very practice of sceptical argumentation or ‘doing epistemology’ tends to set epistemic standards so as to make such conclusions true. However, this fact does not invalidate everyday knowledge-claims and attributions, which remain true at everyday (‘non-philosophical’) standards” (Williams 2004: 316).

Indicating that standards for knowledge applied in sceptical contexts are not necessarily the standards relevant to the truth value of everyday sentences of the form ‘**S knows that P**’, Lewis has introduced the operational concept of epistemic standards, which will, as it turned out, mark a turning point in epistemological studies of some contextualists. Noting that sceptical contexts and our everyday conversational contexts imply *different epistemic standards*, Lewis points out that, while none of us is in a position to deny with absolute certainty the possibility of radical sceptical scenarios, nevertheless they do not threaten our everyday knowledge because it is determined by weaker, non-philosophical standards.

to accept conjunction that is “abominable” because it is contrary to the principle of epistemic closure of knowledge.

On the other hand, drawing on Nozick's Rule of Sensitivity, DeRose thinks that a belief in the truth value of a sentence **P** has to be the one that we would reject if it were not the case that **P**, i. e. which we will not form if **P** does not match the facts. He combines this rule with another older strategy for fighting scepticism, where sceptical scenarios are presented as those realized in possible worlds most distant from the actual one, and so in ordinary circumstances the subject's epistemic position is strong enough with respect to sentences of the form '**S knows that P**': "In determining whether *S*'s belief that *P* amounts to knowledge, we have to consider whether it matches the fact of the matter, not just in the actual world, but in all sufficiently close possible worlds as well. The greater the distance one can stray from the actual world, such that *S*'s belief continues to match the facts, the stronger *S*'s epistemic position with respect to *P*" (Ibid., 324).

At first glance, it seems that these are two quite different methodologies, and that there is no point in insisting on similarities between Lewis's and DeRose's theoretical positions; while Lewis does not use the model of possible worlds at all, but focuses on the concept of epistemic standards that are lowered and raised in line with the requirements of conversation, for DeRose it is especially important to keep sceptical scenarios at a safe distance from the actual fact of the matter, or that the strength of the epistemic position of subject with respect to the proposition '**S knows that P**' is comparatively greater than that with respect to the proposition '**S does not know that Q**' (where **Q** is a corresponding sceptical scenario).

However, what makes these approaches methodologically close is DeRose's thesis that, as soon as it is explicitly stated – as in the case when we openly state that '**S knows that not-Q**' – a sceptical scenario is no longer in the most distant but in sufficiently close possible worlds relevant to evaluation of subject's epistemic position with respect to **Q**, which threatens the subject's knowledge that **P** because the epistemic position with respect to the proposition '**S does not know that Q**' becomes stronger than that in which '**S knows that P**'. Lewis's equivalent to this is his thesis that if we are to consider them true, our knowledge-claims of the form '**S knows that P**' have to be formed in line with certain rules, including a particularly important Rule of Attention. Lewis uses this rule to suggest that the sceptical possibility of error, like the one that we are brains in a vat is not an obstacle to knowledge *per se*, but it becomes just that as soon as it is brought to *subject's attention*; from that moment on, the possibility that we are brains in a vat becomes a relevant possibility, and even if the subject has ignored it thus far, he cannot continue to do so.

Therefore, despite all the differences in approach, we can note that both Lewis and DeRose use the concept of *epistemic standards* as a main method of neutralizing sceptical paradoxes, according to which the standards for attributing true knowledge are not fixed, but vary with context in which the knowledge is attributed. Since this context is primarily a *conversational context*, the same knowledge-claim can express both truth and falsehood, depending solely upon the epistemic standards we apply to it: “Relative to *everyday* contextual standards where sceptical error-possibilities are not relevant, ascription sentences will (*ceteris paribus*) express truths, whilst relative to *sceptical* contextual standards in which error possibilities *are* relevant, those same ascription sentences will express falsehoods” (Pritchard 2002:105). Williams calls this approach ‘simple conversational contextualism’, explaining the name in the following way: ”Epistemologies built around these ideas (ideas of epistemic standards, A/N) are *contextualist* because they admit that standards for attributing knowledge are subject to contextual variability. They are *simple* because they recognise only one principal dimension of epistemically relevant contextual variation: the raising and lowering of standards. And they are *conversational* because standards are raised and lowered by conversational developments” (Williams 2001: 2).²

Williams’ contextualism as a critique of simple conversational contextualism

Williams’ contextualist thesis emerged as a result of his discontent with the offered solutions to sceptical paradoxes, above all, with Lewis-DeRose version of contextualism. In short, Williams’s main objection to DeRose’s and Lewis’s contextualism is that it is not really *contextualist enough*: ”Behind its contextualism is a form of invariantism, the idea that there is a simple scale by which epistemic standards can be judged relaxed or demanding, no matter what the subject at issue” (Williams 2004: 337).

² We should draw attention here to a significant difference between Lewis’s and DeRose’s interpretation of contextualism, which, however, does not significantly affect the overall impression. Namely, while DeRose believes that we can ignore sceptical paradoxes until it is explicitly claimed that **S** knows that he is not a brain in a vat, Lewis’ contextualism takes on a somewhat paradoxical form, since it is expected that ignoring the sceptical possibility is carried out at the level of contemplation too. For other Lewis’ rules, see: David Lewis, “*Elusive knowledge*”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74.

Williams maintains that the problem with invariantism is that it is nothing but one manifestation of epistemological realism, the doctrine according to which “the objects of epistemological inquiry have inherent, and thus, context-independent structure” (Pritchard 2002: 116). It seems that Williams is right to doubt that, if we accept the above principle, sceptical paradoxes could be solved in any plausible way at all, because as long as they belong to the same scale as ordinary claims – like they do in Lewis and DeRose - they will constitute a latent threat to our knowledge, and to say that it is preserved only because the sceptical possibility is ignored does not seem intuitively acceptable. In order to finally eliminate this conflict of intuitions that threatens to become permanent, Williams believes it is necessary to start from the hypothesis that “there is no such hierarchy of epistemic contexts - instead, each context is, epistemically speaking, autonomous. To think otherwise is to fall victim to the doctrine of ‘epistemological realism’” (Ibid.).

Thus, Williams advocates the approach that implies the above *autonomy of epistemic contexts* that is in the epistemological literature known as inferential contextualism, and which is based on the insight that “in a particular discipline there will be certain quite general presuppositions that serve to give that discipline its characteristic shape and subject-matter. I like to call them ‘methodological necessities’. Together, they determine the *disciplinary meta-context* for all inquiries of a certain genre” (Williams 2004: 332).

In other words, what Lewis and DeRose failed to recognize, and Williams draws attention to is that regardless of the inferential structure to which they belong, propositions remain without any epistemic status, that is, they acquire this status only within a certain disciplinary meta-context. Since each of these disciplinary meta-contexts also implies a special inferential structure, it is inappropriate to think that all propositions are in the same relation to sceptical scenarios, i.e. this would be acceptable only if, as invariantism presupposes, they would be independent of certain *presuppositions* that we come across in every particular type of inquiry.

Thus, what enables Williams to practically equate epistemic context with disciplinary matrix is the concept of *epistemic status of a proposition*, according to which, beyond the inferential structure they belong to, propositions are without any implications; on the other hand, propositions that are free of such structural determination – propositions such as the one that I know that I have hands – refer to the so-called *generic objects* and they are most susceptible to sceptical scenarios because only epistemology’s meta-context can give them

epistemic status. However, Lewis and DeRose did not notice this, and with their thesis that there is a single inferential structure within which all propositions are in the same, not particularly affirmative relation to sceptical scenarios, they confused claims involving generic objects (specifically, generic claims) with those that have a quite different epistemic status: “Simple conversational contextualists think that the sceptic *raises the standards* for knowing. But issue contextualism opens another possibility: that the sceptic changes the subject; that ‘doing epistemology’ involves a radical break with ordinary epistemic standards, so that sceptical doubting is *not* an extension of ordinary doubting but at best a partial and deceptive simulacrum of it” (Ibid., 319).³

To sum up – what in Williams’s view determines a context is primarily “epistemic structure it endorses - in terms of inferential relations that obtain between the types of beliefs at issue in that contexts. And since no contexts employs universal standards, this contextual epistemic structure is also identified in terms of what it takes for granted – which propositions it regards as being immune from doubts in terms of that context” (Pritchard 2002: 118.). Williams calls these propositions *methodological necessities*, and this enables him to replace the idea of epistemic standards with the concept of the *epistemic status of a proposition* as central to his approach. This shift implies the following difference: “A physicist can raise indefinitely the level of scrutiny to which the results of a particular experiment are subject, repeating the experiment under ever more stringently controlled conditions. But if he starts wondering whether he is a brain in a vat, this will not inaugurate an even more scrupulous approach to his research: rather, the introduction of the generic defeater submerges the given inquiry in completely different kind of investigation” (Williams 2001: 22).

³ The proposition in which one claims to know that one has hands has been adopted in the epistemological literature as a paradigmatic example of our ordinary claims of the form **S knows that P**. However, in Williams’ view, it is anything but ordinary. Namely, since it is difficult to imagine a context except the epistemological one in which one’s claim to know that one has hands would have meaningful implications, or even be justified, Williams suspects that the insistence on this example is accidental, and that associating it with sceptical paradoxes is in fact a way to revitalize a doctrine close to realism that can support it (fundamentalism), and according to which all our knowledge of the external world can be derived from sensory perception, without any theoretical mediums in the process. However, while this may be true of propositions such as the one in which one claims to know that one has hands (which is why they are called generic), the situation is quite different when it comes to most of our other propositions.

Advantages and difficulties of inferential contextualism

Thus, in Williams's view, because of different inferential structures they belong to, propositions of physics and propositions of epistemology have a quite *different epistemic status*, which is why "the sceptic needs to do more than merely raise sceptical error-possibilities if she wishes to change the context in her favour – what she needs to do is persuade agents to join her in a specific type of theoretical investigation" (Pritchard 2002: 120). However, the difficulty of this view, which Thomas Grundmann draws attention to, is that some contexts – as autonomous inferential contexts – imply a set of methodological necessities that are beyond doubt, even though they do not have the truth value. For example, the presupposition in the meta-context of astrology is that the course of the stars and other planets *predestine* our lives, and this would be the methodological necessity in Williams's view, which as such, cannot be questioned. However, Grundmann observes that, if this thesis was adopted, it would inevitably result in a *justificational relativism*, because in the context of scientific inquiry to which it aspires, the presupposition of astrology has no value: "If the course of the stars does not influence our lives, than astrological predictions are not reliable. So even if methodological necessities do not need to be *justified* within a given context of inquiry, they do have to be *true*" (Grundmann 2004: 347).

In other words, Grundmann insists that methodological necessities, in order not to be arbitrary, have to be true, and the requirement for this cannot even be set within Williams' contextualism which is so-called *subject contextualism*.⁴ However, one should not think that it could be done in an impartial manner within attributer contextualism that Grundmann argues for and which Lewis and DeRose advocate too, and the example can be any sentence of the form '**S knows that P**'.

Namely, apart from arguing that the truth of a sentence of the form '**S knows that P**' depends upon conversational factors that may or may not include a sceptical error-possibility, proponents of this type of contextualism emphasize an external instance which is the instance

⁴ Given the above justificational relativism, it might be more appropriate to call Williams's contextualism *discursive* rather than *inferential* or *subjective contextualism*, though it would not significantly improve his position as regards Grundmann's attack.

of someone who, on the basis of appropriate evidence, attributes or denies knowledge to the subject. But since this instance is not, or could ever be an ‘omniscient mind’ that would, as such, know every ‘fact’ that the ‘world divides into’, but just another subject who in the process of knowing does not know whether he is or he is not a bran in a vat, the sentence ‘**S knows that P**’ can be reworded as ‘**S₁ knows that S₂ knows that P**’, which results in nothing else but an equivocation of the concept of knowledge that realists tend to avoid at all cost. That is, if **S₂ knows** a relation concerning the external world denoted by **P**, **S₁** can *know* what **P** refers to (as the content of mental state of **S₂**), regardless of whether **P** is true or not. Since the part of the sentence ‘**S₂ knows that P**’ is also a relation from the perspective of **S₁**, in fact, a *relation concerning the external world*, the sentence ‘**S₂ knows that P**’ can be translated into just **P**, which means that we are back where we started, i.e. that ‘**S knows that P**’, except that “**knows**” has changed its meaning compared to the one it had in the beginning.

The previous example has no other role than to show that basic epistemological concepts such as knowledge, external world, etc. do not have inherent and context-independent structure, but that this structure is dependent upon certain presuppositions that we come across in every particular type of inquiry. In the case of attributer contextualism, these presuppositions or, in Williams’ terminology, *methodological necessities* are the presuppositions of epistemological realism, and the problem of equivocation arises only when we firmly hold the view that “knowledge” includes only justified true beliefs. Otherwise, if we give up the above view, it will acquire, as demonstrated by the previous example, more *modal* than *true* character, but it will, nevertheless, still be knowledge. In short, there is no reason to attribute only one meaning to knowledge when it is obvious that it has several meanings – except, of course, if we adopt certain realistic assumptions.⁵

However, it seems that by making reference to a sceptical scenario in our interpretation we have committed ourselves to the possibility that it has been realized, and so in the end, we cannot confidently claim any knowledge, even modal one. However, this does not distance us

⁵ Therefore, attributer contextualism is based on an artificial distinction used to retain the thesis that objects of epistemological inquiry have inherent and context-independent structure. However, this form of contextualism would only be justified if the subject who attributes knowledge was in such an epistemic position that he would know with absolute certainty whether a sceptical possibility had been realized. But given his abilities as a human being, and that he is more or less in a similar epistemic position as the subject whose knowledge is evaluated, the distinction seems forced.

from Williams' position at all, which does not pretend to solve sceptical paradoxes but, which is especially telling, to diagnose them.

Namely, we can say that the problem of sceptical paradox is for Williams directly related to the problem of the infinite regress of justification; this has evidently been overlooked by other contextualists and results from the preconception implying in itself that the starting presuppositions of epistemology have a special status in relation to the presuppositions of other disciplines, because they do not make claim to the truth value, but its *conclusions* do. Hence the problem; namely, if contextualists like Grundmann and others are willing to take seriously hypotheses that we cannot rule out the possibility that our *experience* could be manipulated by a mad scientist or an evil deceiver, then why do they dismiss so easily the thesis that it could be influenced by the stars, in an equally bizarre way?

Aside from the fact that sceptical scenarios do not need to be multiplied to become more convincing, and the one that will always be 'beyond' our experience is sufficient, what seems to prevent contextualists from interpreting the methodological necessity of astrology as a version of the sceptical paradox is the fact that celestial bodies like stars and planets share a common destiny with other objects of our experience (at least in principle), while sceptical scenarios always elude it. However, this does not mean that they cannot govern our lives not only in the way that astrologists assume, but precisely in the way that would always elude empirical testing. In a word, the presupposition of astrology *can* be interpreted as a version of the sceptical paradox, but in this case, we would have to give up astrology and start practicing epistemology.

This is an extremely important fact because it gives us an insight into the key problem for Williams that every discipline has to solve in its own framework, that is, in line with its own goals and needs. It is the problem of the infinite regress of justification that, as soon as we question the astrological presupposition that the stars and planets govern our lives is no longer solved in an astrological, but epistemological manner; this means that by doubting the validity of astrological presuppositions, we automatically commit ourselves to methodological necessities of epistemology according to which, truth be told, *the agent of a sceptical scenario can be any entity, provided that his action in this direction continually transcends our experience.*

So, the fact that the regress in astrology is stopped in a different way does not mean that it is a more *arbitrary* way than within epistemology, but only that these two are different

inferential structures with completely different methods and goals. In short, methodological necessities of epistemology are not sceptical scenarios as such, but rather sceptical scenarios that repeatedly elude experience, in a word – *Cartesian paradoxes*. Thus epistemology has no special status compared to other disciplines, but it also has to deal with the problem of defining the subject and methods of its inquiry that it solves by using presuppositions it has as a discipline and, among other things, by using sceptical scenarios created so that it is impossible to falsify them, and which we find within a special inferential structure – epistemological one.⁶

Conclusion

Although the interpretation of astrology’s meta-context as epistemological one may not be the best way to defend Williams’ position, it has served to show its strength in diagnosing the sceptical paradox that is nothing but the methodological necessity of epistemological realism, the doctrine for which Williams has low regard. Such Williams’ attitude towards realism is, in our view, quite justified, because as long as it is understood as an “inert, static relation” – as, with impressive precision, William James described the essence of a realistic conception of truth – it will be able to transcend the limits of our experience just like sceptical scenarios do. In order to avoid this empty transcendence, Williams believes that knowledge and truth need to be interpreted not in a realistic vein, but a pragmatist one, as a set of provisional hypothesis related to the specific contexts of inquiry (inferential structures) that have consequences for our practice. The emphasis is, therefore, on the *consequences*, and what Williams draws attention to, among other things, is that even when we accept them as a possible reality, sceptical scenarios will still have no consequences for our practice; in fact, their only consequences are theoretical ones, and as such, they concern only epistemology’s meta-context: “The sceptic takes himself to have discovered, under the conditions of

⁶ Apart from pointing out methodological necessities of epistemology’s meta-context, interpretation of the starting presupposition of astrology as a version of the sceptical paradox substantially blunts Grundmann’s sharp criticism of inferential contextualism; because just like the usual sceptical scenarios cannot be *empirically* tested, there are no grounds to think that it can be done with the newly created one. In short, Grundmann would accept the possibility that our experience could be manipulated by a mad scientist or an evil deceiver, but not that we are puppets of some *impersonal* force, although it is clear that, at least from an *epistemological perspective*, it is the same thing.

philosophical reflection, that knowledge of the world is impossible. But in fact, the most he has discovered is that knowledge of the world is impossible under the conditions of philosophical reflection” (Pritchard 2002: 118).

Therefore, by omitting the equality sign between knowledge and justified true belief one should not think that Williams has given up the search for truth or knowledge *qua* knowledge, but only that in his case they have more dimensions than the one found in inquiries inspired by realism. However, given that realism in epistemology is still a very lively doctrine, the question remains whether abandoning it the way Williams does means to abandon epistemological inquiry as such, or whether it is still possible to remain within epistemological theory even if we give up established ideas about its subject as inherent and context-independent entity?

If the key problem of epistemology was to be repeatedly found in the problem of solving sceptical (Cartesian) paradoxes, the answer to the first question would be – yes; however, since Williams does not claim to solve the sceptical paradox – moreover, we have seen that he expresses a reasonable doubt that these paradoxes could be solved at all within traditional epistemology, with its methodological necessities – Williams’s position is still *epistemologically instructive* in the sense that the problem of scepticism can be interpreted as largely a pseudo-problem that will disappear the moment epistemological realism is given up. On the other hand, although Williams presents sound arguments against epistemological realism, it should be said that these arguments have already been known from a broader theoretical view like Peirce’s, Quine’s, or Wittgenstein’s pragmatism, and if the work of these theorists have not led to giving up realism, it is unlikely that Williams’s would. However, it is paramount that Williams is no doubt the first theorist to offer an enlightening diagnosis of the problem of sceptical paradoxes, and it is *epistemologically important* that he figured it out using non-epistemological tools that could, nevertheless, be incorporated into theoretical and methodological apparatus of a future epistemology. From this perspective, however, it is difficult to say what this epistemology would look like, but it is certain that its methodological necessities would not be those of epistemological realism.

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