

Beauty and the Beast *Isaac Martin*

To those that pursue that branch of philosophy known as “epistemology,” the skeptic is an ever-present boogeyman. It is in times of true epistemic bliss that the skeptic leaps from the shadows with crème pie, flavored by some exotic fruit. The pie is hurled, haphazardly, at our daydreaming philosopher. The skeptic believes that he always scores a direct hit, though the reality of the situation is in favor of the intended victim. Authors like Cohen give very convincing arguments for why our negative feelings towards skeptical claims are reasonable by giving his take on fallibilism. Cohen (1998) presents us with a thorough exposition of fallibilism in the form of contextualism. His argument is a direct response to the skeptic in an effort to explain our commonsensical intuitions about knowledge. In Cohen we find an argument that does exactly what it intends to do, or at least, almost exactly. Cohen demands a world in which knowledge ascriptions are partially based on context. In this regard he succeeds, but he unwittingly commits us to epistemic relativism in the process. During the course of this paper I shall accomplish two tasks: (1) I shall present an argument for contextualism based entirely on the work of Cohen; (2) I shall explain why such a theory is necessarily relativistic.

By “relativistic” I mean that the theory developed by Cohen falls under the category of “epistemological relativism.” Theories that reside in this category imply or openly assert that certain qualities of knowledge and knowledge ascription are “relative.” This is to say that knowledge and knowledge ascriptions have nothing grounding them beyond the positive or negative reinforcement found in the agent’s community. For instance, a relativist might say that an agent’s claim to knowledge is true so long as their claim coheres with that agent’s personal theory of knowledge, which itself is a function of the community in which that agent resides. In the past, knowledge, like ethics and morality, has been something that is granted by an independent source alien to humanity. This source exists apart from the agents, somehow passing judgment over them. The relativist wants to do away with the notion of an objective frame of reference with which one can judge knowledge claims, because no such frame of reference exists.

Relativism resembles skepticism in some respects. The skeptic will press a knower on the matter of certainty. Today, few consider the possibility that certainty has any place in epistemic theory. This has been made possible by the efforts of philosophers like Peter Unger (1971), who have shown that true certainty cannot possibly be achieved. As few today believe that certainty is possible in epistemology, the skeptic is left being defused and given heavy ordinance simultaneously. The skeptic is in danger because her most powerful weapon, the notion that one cannot have certainty, is being granted. Theories of knowledge are being developed to specifically exclude any notion of certainty, thus the skeptical objection becomes inapplicable. However, she is simultaneously being armed. By granting the skeptic that certainty is not possible, one is giving the skeptic exactly what she wanted. The skeptic is now more of an overseer than a true opponent. Since theories are developed specifically to neutralize the skeptical objection, it creates an environment in which the skeptic is always present, nodding along and then piping up whenever some twist could be construed as introducing certainty.

Relativism shares the doubts about our certainty that skepticism introduces. The difference in the theories is first and foremost a practical matter. The skeptic is entirely negative. Her intent is to dismantle intuitions of knowledge to the point that the term "knowledge" is no longer applicable. The relativist, by contrast, embraces things like epistemology and ethics. The relativist acknowledges the categories we have carved out for these respective fields and has no issue with maintaining them. The relativist simply wishes to defuse them of loaded concepts which require these categories to deal with the world or get at the facts in an objective way.

A good relativist must admit that things like "knowledge" and "ethics" exist. At the very least, they exist as part of a language game being played by anyone who recognizes the terms. The relativist acknowledges these terms as useful while the skeptic regards them as obsolete. To the relativist, the structure of the concepts "knowledge" and "ethics" is not to be argued. That is, the relativist admits there is something called "ethics" and something called "knowledge." The relativist takes issue not with the very existence of these categories, but with the idea that the particular instances of phenomena found within them are objective and universal.

For instance, an ethical relativist may acknowledge that ethical judgments are made in the very way that everyone understands them to be. The ethical relativist may argue that agents are perfectly justified in writing rules by which they must abide. Even further,

they may be perfectly justified in holding each other responsible for actions. The key is that the relativist argues this justification does not come from an objective, universal source. There is no reason, save for people's personal preferences or inherited cultural assumptions, that a *particular* rule should exist. There is also no reason, save for preference or culture, that people should be held accountable for an action when they breach said rules. This way of thinking is also relevant to epistemology. Cohen (1998) produces a theory that is very much in line with the way a relativist would think, though he doesn't actually admit to being one.

Cohen's valiant battle begins with an explanation for just why skeptical problems arose in the first place. The existence of skeptics is due in no small part to the entailment principle, the idea that S knows Q on the basis of reason *r* if and only if *r* entails Q (Cohen 1998, p. 91). This view gives rise to skepticism because it demands a logical connection between our reason and our belief. As such, it effectively requires us to be certain. Philosophers like Peter Unger (1971) have shown that certainty is nothing more than a pipe dream. If we are to require it, then we are to be disappointed. In the aftermath of skepticism, epistemology has moved away from certainty towards something more feasible. In Cohen we find this new way of thinking personified, as he tackles issues like the lottery problem and an apparent skeptical paradox.

Cohen tried to defeat these enemies, while defending several notions to which he is partial. The primary concern is, unsurprisingly, with the idea of fallibilism. On this view, certainty is no longer a requirement for knowledge. Fallibilism admits the "fallibility" of agents and produce a theory that does not require these fallible agents to be certain of anything. Fallibilism moves knowledge away from certainty by requiring less of a subject. For instance, it is possible for a subject to know that the time of day is four o'clock, even though he is looking at a chronometer that could be wrong in some distant possible world. Just what allows fallibilism to grant knowledge in uncertain circumstances is a matter of some debate, but in this situation we are given the idea of relevant alternatives.

Relevant alternatives are what a knower needs to be concerned with. It is in their absence, or their reconciliation, that a person can be said to *know P*. A "relevant alternative" is another possibility other than the conclusion that one has reached. For instance, when I claim that the liquid in a bottle is water, one can imagine many possible alternatives. The liquid could, in fact, be vodka. There may not even be a bottle present at all and we are instead being deceived in some way. The mere fact that there are alternatives is what the

skeptic latches onto. A skeptic calls your attention to the fact that a contrary state of affairs could hold, given the positions that you take to support your conclusion. The key is that we are not concerned with mere alternatives, as the skeptic wants us to be. We are concerned with alternatives that are relevant to the context in which we are engaged.

In the case of our unlabeled bottle, it seems perfectly reasonable to give an explanation for why one believes it is full of water and not vodka. Such an explanation is relevant when another agent is asking, "Just what is in that bottle?" It is important to note, however, that in this context there are some things that are *not* relevant. Radical skeptical hypotheses are things that fit the bill very nicely.

In what Cohen describes as a radical skeptical hypothesis, we have no evidence one way or the other to respond (1998, pp. 111-115). If someone wants to press that we don't know whether there is a Cartesian demon, we can do little but admit defeat. The key is that knowledge of things like radical skeptical alternatives are not relevant in all contexts. It does not behoove me to add at the end of every statement "But this is the case only if we are not deceived by a Cartesian demon and I have no way of knowing whether we are." Neither the subject nor the agent with whom they are engaged care about Cartesian demons when the question is "What sort of liquid is in that bottle?"

Of course, the skeptic may care. The skeptic would suggest that we should care at all times, because the very fact that we admit a lack of knowledge concerning Cartesian demons is tantamount to admitting lack of knowledge about any other statement we may make concerning bottles of liquid. The idea that a skeptic is using to press this point is known as the Closure Principle.

The Closure Principle is intuitive, which is why the skeptic holds so much sway while invoking it. The principle asserts that if S knows P and P entails $\sim Q$, then S knows $\sim Q$. Cohen produces a variant of this based on evidence rather than knowledge. His variant can be read as;

1. If S has evidence for P and P entails $\sim Q$, then P has evidence towards $\sim Q$.

While this sentence seems harmless enough, it becomes problematic when Cohen introduces two others that seem to create a paradox. The second proposition and third propositions are, respectively:

2. S does not know $\sim Q$
3. S knows P

These three propositions seem to be in contradiction. In the first condition, Cohen has effectively described the intuition that is represented in formal logic as *modus ponens*. Obviously, we cannot throw out the form. This particular logical form is the most pervasive in standard communication. One could even go so far as to say it is an underlying structure implicit in all arguments. It seems that the first condition must necessarily be accepted, so Cohen goes after propositions two and three.

It may seem hard to imagine how these propositions could ever conflict. Borrowing an example from Dretske to illustrate the paradox, Cohen directs our imaginations to a zoo. In this zoo, we are staring through a cage at what appear to be zebras. In this situation, a young girl passing by may proclaim her approval at the “pwetty zebwas.”¹ However, if her parents were to ask, “How do you know they are not mules in disguise?” she would be left in a bit of a puzzle. Most would agree that, when walking by the cage, our little girl could fairly be said to know zebras are within the cage. When pressed by some outside mover, she would likely be hesitant to claim she knows that the creatures are not mules in disguise. This is an excellent example of the paradox brought about by the Closure Principle because we find the little girl (subject) knows that there are zebras (P), while simultaneously not knowing whether those zebras are not mules ($\sim Q$), even though P logically entails $\sim Q$.

At first glance this may seem to be a conundrum, but Cohen has a skillful response. He points out that one only enters this paradox when they are pressed by the skeptic. Under normal circumstances, the little girl is perfectly happy to claim she knows that the creatures are zebras. After all, there is no relevant alternative present for her to consider. The idea that the creatures are mules does not occur to the little girl, at least until she is asked. When the little girl is pressed on her knowledge, the context changes. With a change in context comes a change in the requirements for knowledge. These requirements are based entirely upon the new context. In this case, the girl is asked if there is any possibility that she is wrong, to which she has little choice but to answer yes. As such, she does not have knowledge of the creatures, but this is only true in the context of a skeptical engagement.

It is not until the relevance of an alternative passes some unseen threshold that it must be considered. It is in this very fact that we find the reason Cohen is an epistemic relativist. In the zebra problem, it would seem that the theory of relevant alternatives is a requirement for the success of fallibilism and contextualism. Without

¹ A phonetic representation. The correct spelling in English would be “pretty zebras.”

such a varying degree of relevance, the skeptical position must always be in consideration and we are left being able to claim little or nothing as knowledge. The problem with relevant alternatives is that the relevance of an alternative seems to be a matter of convention. There are no general conditions for relevance, only the vague notion that a person should let their “intuitions” be their guide. These “intuitions” are not anchored by the alien force of objectivity we formerly thought existed. Thus, if they are to exist at all, they must be dictated by communal norms or merely personal preferences.² This is exactly what the relativist wishes to find because it means that the particular phenomena of this epistemic theory are dependent on the agent in question. Cohen writes:

We cannot pull criteria of relevance out of thin air. We formulate such criteria by reflecting on the deliverances of our intuition regarding cases. (1998, p. 116)

Obviously Cohen does not want to pull criteria out of thin air. Such an act would mean that the criteria are completely arbitrary, which means they aren’t really criteria at all.³ Instead, he suggests we discover criteria through reflection upon our intuitions regarding the context. He points out guidelines we can use to determine the relevance of a theory. For instance, he mentions the concept of probability.

Cohen’s mention of probability is accompanied by a warning: one must not rely solely upon it. Consider a large lottery. In a lottery your odds of winning are extremely low. Even so, you are not said to “know” that you have lost before the drawing has actually occurred. When the drawing does occur, you may check the newspaper for a report on the numbers. Based on that newspaper report an agent is said to know whether they have won or lost the game. Assuming the odds for winning the game are one in 60,000,000 and the odds for a paper making a misprint are about one in 1,000,000, then we have encountered a situation where our intuitions about knowledge seem to conflict. Cohen’s response to the Lottery Problem is that our chance of winning is relevant before the drawing because it is salient. We are focused upon it. After the drawing we are justified in believing the newspaper because in everyday contexts, the alternative that a newspaper has misprinted is not salient.

² Most would admit that personal preference is strongly influenced by social normativity, making normativity a very real player in this equation.

³ If the criteria listed can be changed at will, they do not function as criteria. Since they do not function as criteria, they are not criteria, regardless of how you wish to name them.

This example might lead some to think we should never use probability as a guide for whether an alternative is relative, but Cohen points out that probability really does have a place.

When you consider whether a zookeeper might disguise a group of mules to look like zebras in order to fool his customers, the idea of probability certainly seems important. We may even use it as our sole justification to reject the skeptic. Indeed, extreme skeptical questions are often dismissed on purely probabilistic grounds. For instance, a sensitive individual may develop a mild case of the flu. The poor soul assails his doctor, worried that he may be a carrier for some unknown fatal condition. The doctor assuages the worry by pointing out that the odds of one acquiring an unknown fatal condition are extremely low. "How low are the odds, doctor?" the patient may be compelled to ask. A response like "one in 20" may not serve to completely put this individual at ease. The doctor answers:

The number of people afflicted by unknown and fatal conditions, in the United States, is roughly 2 per year. In other words, the odds that you are such an individual are roughly one in 150,000,000.

A response of this nature will put all but the most obsessive patients at ease. After all, one pursues activities with much higher probability of lethality on a daily basis.⁴ At this point the doctor is likely entitled to the claim "I know you do not have an unknown and fatal condition." What is of key importance here is to recognize that, while probability is being invoked, it is not being invoked in a way that would aid the skeptic. The details of this situation are different from the lottery case because "salience" has to do with the likelihood that our patient does *not* have a strange condition. Our attention is being placed on the alternative that is likely, while in the lottery example our attention is focused on the alternative that is unlikely: the alternative in which we win. As such, in the patient scenario, the alternative holding the possibility that we are the unlucky 150,000,000th person is not salient and thus not relevant.

This concept may still be difficult to grasp. After all, both probabilities are numerically equal. The key is in identifying just where our attention is being directed. In the Lottery Problem, our attention is directed at the probability involved and solely at the probability. If we were to focus merely on the probability in our medical example where the odds closely resemble that of the lottery problem, then the alternative in which we are ill truly would be salient. The key is understanding that we are not so focused on

⁴ Driving, eating, crossing a street, etc.

probability in the medical example. Other factors, such as an authoritative figure confidentially communicating to you that you are not ill, come into play. Some might suggest that factors like “authoritative figures” should not be considered. After all, a pure appeal to that figure would be a logical fallacy. If we are to be perfectly logical about the matter, then probability would be at the forefront of relevance. Perfectly logical thought, however, is not at all how most agents go about their day. Logical fallacies often work themselves into consideration when agents have found that sort of reasoning to work for them in the past. Whether or not logical fallacies should be “allowed” for consideration is not the issue; the reality of the situation is that they are used by agents for consideration of relevant alternatives. We are not concerned with perfect logical thought, but with our everyday notions about knowledge and just how agents generally go about attaining it.

Clearly probability has some place in the criteria of relevance. What we must be careful of is focusing solely upon it. Doing so brings even minor possibilities into relevance and does not reflect how we engage the world. Perhaps more importantly, probability alone cannot be our sole criteria for relevance because the numerical point at which an alternative becomes relative is completely arbitrary. There is no clear reason why we draw the line at one in 150,000,000 rather than one in 1,000,000 or even one in two for that matter.

Consider a hypochondriac. This particular subject worries that he may be infected with a fatal virus which, during its early stages, exactly resembles the flu. The hypochondriac, like the patient above, finds a doctor as quickly as possible. The doctor hears the hypochondriac out and then goes about an examination. After a time the doctor concludes that patient has the flu. The hypochondriac asks, “But what if it is virus P that looks just like the flu but is actually fatal?” to which the doctor can only respond that it is highly unlikely that is the case.

The alternative in which the hypochondriac is terminally ill is salient in this situation. Not for the doctor, of course, but for the hypochondriac. The doctor is perfectly content to send this man home with an order of bed rest. The hypochondriac, on the other hand, is not so comfortable. To the hypochondriac, odds of one in 150,000,000 or even one in 150,000,000,000 are unacceptable. The alternative that he may be terminally ill is salient so long as there is a mathematical possibility that can be envisioned.

This example shows that arbitrarily drawing the line for what counts as a relevant alternative is a problem. That is, it is a problem assuming one wants a theory of knowledge that allows everyone to

agree upon what counts as knowledge. Cohen tiptoes around this problem. Unfortunately, he still ends up making enough noise to wake the beast of relativism.

Cohen asserts that we must avoid probability as the sole guide to relevance. Instead we should appeal to our "intuitions" about criteria for relevance. Cohen points out that no general criteria for relevance are forthcoming from his article. Instead, we are left with the quote:

We try to devise criteria [for relevance of alternatives] by reflecting on the deliverances of our intuitions regarding cases. We try to devise criteria that capture those intuitions. (1998, p. 116)

The terms in this sentence are ambiguous. He justifies his ambiguous terms by openly admitting they beg the question against the skeptic. His strategy is to assert that they do not beg the question any more than the skeptic begs the questions against a knower (1998, pp. 115-117). That is, the theory of relevant alternatives demands the skeptic play its game while at the same time skepticism demands that its own game be played. As such, the relative alternatives theorist and the skeptic will never have satisfactory conditions for knowledge in tandem. Instead, only by accepting the assumptions of the relevant alternatives theorist can we be said to have knowledge.

This is all well and good if we are not ultimately concerned with convincing the skeptic, but merely with reconciling our theory of knowledge with our own intuitions. I contend that this is all the epistemological question there is to be settled. It accomplishes this task quite well, but at what some would say is too high a price. The ambiguous terms previously mentioned such as "intuitions" and "deliverances" need to be acknowledged for what they are. These terms are descriptive not merely of relevant alternatives, but of *relativistic* alternatives.

Cohen fails to give general conditions for relevant alternatives. Instead, he proposes what seem to be guidelines. When he uses terminology like "intuitions" and "deliverances," he neglects to explain how these thought processes lead to a universally agreeable account of knowledge. As far as my intuitions are concerned, the words "intuitions" and "deliverances" describe thought processes whose conclusions are entirely dependent on the agent that is having them.

Most epistemologists seek an account of knowledge that can be universally acceptable. The theory of relevant alternatives can certainly be accepted by all agents without contradiction. We could all go about claiming knowledge based on resolution of the relevant alternatives on a case by case basis and this may work perfectly fine.

If this is to be done we must be wary of our theory's relativistic nature. Intuitions vary from agent to agent, thus their deliverances and conclusions concerning relative alternatives will also vary. It is imperative that this variance be acknowledged because great confusion may otherwise result.

For instance, if we were to assume that everyone had the same (or at least very similar) intuitions about knowledge, we would end up having very dim views of people that did not share our opinion on a subject. Dissenters would not simply be of a different opinion, they would have something wrong with them. This line of thought is dangerous, because it dehumanizes agents. It causes us to regard our fellow dissenting agent as inferior. From here, we end up with a plethora of situations not generally viewed as desirable. War, murder and hatred would run rampant as we tried to "fix" these individuals who are not abiding by their intuitions. Of course those agents are abiding by their intuitions and playing the knowledge game that has been agreed upon. It is simply that their intuitions are different than ours.

The reasons listed here for our interest in relativism seem little more than trendy Western concerns. A reader in some radically different community could dismiss our interest in human rights and tolerance, even our distaste for murder and war. The above paragraph should not be read as a universal reason for individuals to accept relativism. Indeed, some agents may have no reason at all for accepting relativism. By its own admonition, relativism will likely not be accepted by all agents, but this is not a problem. The fact that all agents do not accept relativism or the fact that relativism cannot be argued from a standpoint such that all agents "should" accept it does not detract from its value *to us*. We have historically been concerned with an objective standpoint, but this concern is no longer helpful to us. Other concerns that supersede it have been pushed to the forefront, like the concern for a theory of knowledge that preserves our intuitions. We should abandon those goals that are detrimental, such as an objective argument, in favor of those that we truly care about.

It is clear that terms like "intuition" and the need to qualify statements as only being important "to us," are consequences of the realities of epistemic relativism. So long as contextualism (and thereby fallibilism) relies upon notions like "intuitions," it will be doomed to reside in the domain of epistemological relativism. Here we should ask ourselves if this is really the problem that so many would assert it to be. Some would suggest that to go the way of epistemological relativism is to throw everything up in the air. By seeing all knowledge claims as relative to the intuitions of the agents

involved, we allow for radically different claims to be held as knowledge at the same time.

This would surely be a problem if people had wildly different intuitions about knowledge. The thing is, they don't. At least, persons that share identification with the same community usually do not have wildly different intuitions about what should count for knowledge (or what should be a relevant alternative). Group identification is important for the theories of contextualism and fallibilism because it binds together the lengths of string that are knowledge intuitions. Instead of a table covered in wildly scattered bits of string, we have neatly bound bundles of string with some quaint loose ends.

The loose ends refer to the fact that even within communities, there will be dissension as to what counts as a relevant alternative. Persons will dissent, they will argue and in the end there may not always be resolution towards a knowledge claim. After all, intuitions about relevant alternatives will not always be reconciled. This may seem problematic to the epistemologist that desires a universal account of knowledge, an account that allows a claim to be identified as knowledge by anyone that looks at it. But this is not really a problem at all, because this truly is the way that knowledge claims function. It is never the case that a knowledge claim will be agreed upon by all persons, universally, as knowledge. Of course there are simple claims "I exist," but even these can be called unknown by the agent whose intuition is to always consider radical skeptical alternatives.

By granting the viability of relativism, we allow theories like contextualism and fallibilism to thrive. Our intuitions are placated, the theory is consistent and practical, all is right with the world. The problem is in the acceptance of relativism, a theory that is regarded in the same way as most regard skepticism. This bias must be overcome, because relativism does not equal skepticism. It is neither negative nor paralyzing and it is an accurate description of the world in which we live. By embracing the beast of relativism, by loving it, we transform it into a beautiful prince whose benevolent attitude allows the kingdom to thrive and be merry.

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