Summary

This paper develops a non-relativist version of contextualism about knowledge. It is argued that a plausible contextualism must take into account three features of our practice of attributing knowledge: (1) knowledge-attributions follow a default-and-challenge pattern; (2) there are preconditions for a belief’s enjoying the status of being justified by default (e.g. being orthodox); and (3) for an error-possibility to be a serious challenge, there has to be positive evidence that the possibility might be realized in the given situation. It is argued that standard “semantic” versions of contextualism (e.g. those of Lewis, Cohen, DeRose) fail to take these features into account, which makes them overly hospitable to the sceptic, and that Williams’ version of contextualism, although incorporating (1), fails to do justice to (2) and (3). According to the contextualism developed here, although epistemic standards vary with the context, the truth-value of particular knowledge-attributions does not. Contexts here are understood as being constituted by two elements: an epistemic practice (a rule-governed social practice such as a scientific discipline, the law, a craft etc., in which knowledge-claims are evaluated according to specific standards) and the “facts of the matter” (i.e. those facts which, together with the epistemic standards in question, determine which error-possibilities are relevant and thus have to be eliminated for a knowledge-claim to be true). If there are several epistemic practices, and thus several contexts, in which a knowledge-claim can be evaluated, it is the “strictest” practice that counts. In this way, the counterintuitive consequence of other versions of contextualism that the same knowledge-claim can be true in one context, but false in another, can be avoided. At the same time, scepticism can be resisted since even in the “strictest” epistemic practices, error-possibilities become relevant only when backed by positive evidence that they might in fact obtain.

Contextualism about knowledge is the view that the standards someone must meet in order to know something vary with the context of ascrip-
tion. In this paper, I want to defend and refine a contextualist approach to knowledge and scepticism. After a brief exposition of the sceptical problem, I will sketch the standard contextualist approach to it as expressed (with significant variations), for instance, in the work of David Lewis, Steward Cohen, and Keith DeRose, and argue that this approach is unconvincing, among other reasons because it is too hospitable to the sceptic (1). Looking at knowledge-attributions in real-life cases will motivate a contextualist approach enriched by a “default and challenge” conception of justification (2), as has been proposed before by, among others, Michael Williams. Although I sympathise with much of Williams’ account, I will argue that his conception of a “default justificational status” is insufficiently complex, and that, for this reason, his version of contextualism is also overly hospitable to the sceptic (3). Next, I will sketch some features of a sufficiently complex contextualist-cum-default and challenge conception of knowledge. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the contextualism defended here, as compared to other versions of contextualism, is that it does not imply that the same knowledge-claim can be true in one context but false in another. This in turn is a consequence of construing contextualism about knowledge not as a linguistic thesis about the usage of the expression “to know” and its cognates, but rather as a claim about the different standards at work in different epistemic practices. As I will argue, if a knowledge-claim can be evaluated by the standards of different practices, it is always the “strictest” practice that counts (4). Despite incorporating some features of “absolutist” conceptions of knowledge, however, the “epistemic practice” contextualism defended here can deal with the sceptical challenge in a satisfactory way (5).

I.

I leave my apartment. In the staircase, I stop and ask myself whether I locked the door. Did I? Do I know that I did? In order to know that I did, I must be able to rule out that I forgot to lock the door, which on reflection I can’t. So I don’t know that I locked the door.—Now I turn back to check whether I locked the door. I press the handle and find the door is locked. Do I now know that the door is locked? The intuitive answer clearly is: yes, now I know the door is locked.

But many epistemologists would hesitate. After all, there are many possible situations compatible with my finding the door locked (more