



Shifting standards

What's the context?

Epistemic contextualism (EC)

'S knows that p ' is true just in case:

- (i) S believes p
- (ii) p is true,
- (iii) S is in a strong epistemic position

But there are **variable standards** governing just *how* "strong" the subject's epistemic position must be.

“In addition to marking an important departure from traditional epistemological assumptions, EC is claimed to provide a novel resolution to certain puzzles about knowledge—not least, skeptical ones—as well as to best comport with our everyday knowledge-attributing practices.”
(SEP)

N.B. Wittgenstein's "fly-bottle"

- Wittgenstein said that philosophical problems don't call for analysis and explanation, like those in science. Philosophical problems are *merely the result of confusion about language*.
- When we understand the way language works, the problem disappears.
- The purpose of philosophy is "To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle"

Maybe some of the problems of epistemology will disappear when we realise that "know" is context-dependent?



(By the way ...)

- Paul Horwich (NYU) on Wittgenstein's legacy:

“Apart from a small and ignored clique of hard-core supporters the usual view these days is that his writing is self-indulgently obscure and that behind the catchy slogans there is little of intellectual value.”

Contextualism

“Contextualism on its own is **not a theory of knowledge**: it’s a theory about knowledge-attributing language, a **semantic topping** that can be spread onto various different underlying theories of knowledge.”

Jennifer Nagel, p. 93

- Many other words (e.g. ‘here’, ‘tomorrow’, ‘tall’, etc.) have meanings that are partly determined by context.

“‘Contextualism’ is the standard name for the view that words like ‘know’ and ‘realize’ are context-sensitive.” (Nagel, p. 88.)

- E.g. is Chris Paul *tall*?

(Getting confused about this *would* be like being stuck in a fly-bottle!)



Transmissibility argt for scepticism

1. I don't know that I'm not a BIV. $\sim K(\sim BIV)$
2. If I'm a BIV, then I have no hands. $BIV \Rightarrow \sim \text{hands}$
3. Epistemic closure: $[K(p) \ \& \ K(p \Rightarrow q)] \Rightarrow K(q)$

4. $\therefore K(\text{hands} \Rightarrow \sim BIV)$ (from 2)
5. \therefore If $K(\text{hands})$ then $K(\sim BIV)$ (3, 4)
6. $\therefore \sim K(\text{hands})$ (1, 5)

Contextualist response

- When you ask someone, “Do you have hands?” they rightly say “yes”
- If you ask, “Are you sure those aren’t fake hands, made of plastic?” they rightly say “yes”.
- But if you ask, “Are you sure you’re not a BIV, being provided with convincing sensations, etc.?” then this *changes the context*. They then say, “I guess not”

Varying standards

“...the fact that the skeptic can...install very high standards which we don't live up to has no tendency to show that we don't satisfy the more relaxed standards that are in place in ordinary conversations. Thus...our ordinary claims to know [are] safeguarded from the apparently powerful attacks of the skeptic, while, at the same time, the persuasiveness of the skeptical arguments is explained.”

- (Keith DeRose 1992, 917)

- Why is the sceptical argument (transmissibility) persuasive *at all*?
- Because, contextualists say, we're unaware of how language works, specifically the context-sensitivity of "knows".
 - (So Contextualism includes an error theory.)
- Contextualism thus says that the closure principle *holds*. Mentioning BIV at the start of the sceptical argument sets a high standard for 'know'.
- But then the sceptical conclusion doesn't contradict common sense.

Internalist (evidentialist) contextualism

- On this view, knowledge is JTB (plus something to satisfy Gettier).
- The degree of J (justification) required for K depends on the context.
- “Ordinarily, ordinary standards obtain. We can satisfy those standards. But sometimes the standards are higher. And sometimes, as when we are discussing skepticism, the standards are so high that we do not meet them. In those contexts, attributions of knowledge are typically not true.” (Feldman p. 153)

Externalist contextualism

- There are a variety of externalist views, and at least some of them can incorporate contextualism.
(Which ones?)
 - Process reliabilism, for example, might allow the definition of “reliable” to vary with the context, e.g. in the error rate, or the range.
 - Nozick’s truth-tracking reliabilism refers to “close” possible worlds, and this also might depend on context.
 - Plantinga says that there are degrees to which a belief is warranted.

E.g. Relevant alternatives theory

- “Do you know that’s a zebra?” means, “Can you rule out its being a (lion, giraffe, hippo, ostrich, gazelle, impala, ...)”
- “Do you know that’s a zebra, not a painted donkey?”



- Asking that different question *changes the set of relevant alternatives*, and so the meaning of ‘know’.
- Of course if this is right, then epistemic closure:
 $[K(p) \ \& \ K(p \Rightarrow q)] \Rightarrow K(q)$ is false.
- Would the failure of epistemic closure be a good or a bad thing?

- *S* knows proposition *P* iff *S*'s evidence eliminates every *salient* possibility in which not-*P*.
- The sceptic's questions have the effect of making possibilities salient which previously weren't.

Problem?

“One difficulty it [the relevant alternatives theory] seems to face is that it is hard to see how it can account for knowledge based on inductive reasoning. This is because the falsity of an inductive conclusion is never ruled out by one’s evidence, and it is hard to see why the falsity of the conclusion is not a relevant alternative in any case of inductive reasoning.”

A satisfactory response to the sceptic?

“Contextualism’s tender tolerance for other points of view does not appeal to everyone. Critics of contextualism continue to resist the idea that the sceptic and the common man are both saying something true, and continue to wonder which way of talking really manages to get it right about knowledge itself, once and for all.”

- Nagel, p. 96.

objection

“... why exactly would the context-sensitive workings of our language be obscured to us when we are talking about knowledge, if they are so transparent when we are talking about times, places, and qualities like ‘tall’?”

Nagel, p. 96

(Feldman also makes this argument.)