

CONTEXTUALISM AND CONTEXT INTERNALISM

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ABSTRACT: Contextualism is the view that the word ‘knows’ is context sensitive and shifts according to the relevant standards in play. I argue that Contextualism is best paired with internalism about contexts. That is to say, an attributor’s context is completely determined by mental facts. Consequently, in the absence of awareness, external facts do not lead to contextual shifts. I support this view by appealing to the typical cases contextualists employ, such as DeRose’s Bank Cases and Cohen’s Airport Case. I conclude by reflecting on the nature of attributor’s themselves, and suggest this also supports the view that Contextualism is internalistic about contextual shifts.

KEYWORDS: contextualism, Bank Cases, pragmatic encroachment

In this paper I argue that Contextualism is best paired with internalism about context. That is to say, I argue that an attributor’s context is fixed by the salient contextual standards presently before her mind. I begin by outlining what contextualism is, then present several cases contextualists use to support their view, which also suggests an internalist reading of context. I conclude by providing more fundamental reasons for thinking contextualism is best paired with context internalism.

1. What is Contextualism?

Contextualism is the view that the meaning of the word ‘knows’ is context sensitive. More specifically, contextualists argue that the truth of knowledge attributions shift with the relevant contextual standards that are in play. For example, contextualists maintain that when one entertains skeptical hypotheses—or even alternate possibilities—the epistemic threshold for knowledge shifts upward, making it more difficult for attributors to have knowledge. However, in ordinary contexts—those that obtain outside of philosophical study, discussion and reflection—the standards of knowledge are usually lower.¹ In this way,

¹ It’s worth mentioning that contextualists think ordinary people naturally find themselves in a low standards context. That is to say, low—or moderately low—epistemic standards are the default. However, given the increased popularity of science fiction films ranging from *Inception*, *The Matrix*, *The Thirteenth Floor*, etc. It is no longer clear whether low standards contexts

contextualists deny knowledge invariantism, the view that there's only one standard of knowledge. Contextualists typically adhere to the following thesis about knowledge.

The Contextualist Thesis

Whether a knowledge attribution, 'S knows that p,' made by an attributor A, is true or false, depends upon whether A's evidence (or, strength of epistemic position) is strong enough for knowledge relative to standards of knowledge in A's context.

A major motivation for Contextualism is the desire to articulate an effective and satisfying response to external world skepticism.² The skeptical worry is that it's impossible to have external world knowledge given classical fallibilism.³ This is puzzling, however, since ordinary people, as well as philosophers, take themselves to know many things about the external world. The skeptical worry can be formulated as an argument which runs as follows, where 'K' is the knowledge operator and 'BIV' is a brain-in-a-vat hypothesis, according to which all my external world experiences are generated by an evil scientist manipulating my brain, and 'hands' is a generic placeholder for any external world object:

- P₁. K(hands) → K~BIV
- P₂. ~K~BIV
- C: ~K(hands)

While Dretske famously denied P₁ (the closure principle), maintaining that one can know that one has hands, even if one doesn't know the falsity of BIV hypotheses,⁴ Contextualists are reluctant to abandon this principle. Rather, their answer to skepticism is a rejection of P₂ for ordinary contexts.

The skeptic defends P₂ by claiming we are never in a strong enough epistemic position to deny this premise. Suppose the BIV scenario is true. Skeptics argue that an envatted subject S, and a non-envatted subject S*, possess the same quality of evidence when considering propositions related to the external world.

should be considered the default epistemic threshold. However, this is a topic for another paper.

² I take classical fallibilism to be the conjunction of two views: fallibilism and classical epistemology.

³ Classical fallibilism is the view that knowledge doesn't require truth entailing evidence. In other words, subjects can know propositions even if they are not epistemically certain of its truth. Hence, S could know that p even if logical space affords her the possibility of being mistaken.

⁴ Epistemic closure is a principle whereby knowledge is closed under known entailment. The principle is as follows: (sKp & sK(p → q)) → sKq. For more on the denial of closure, see Fred Dretske, "Epistemic Operators," *Journal of Philosophy* 67, 24 (1970): 1007-1023.

Since the quality of evidence is the same for both S and S*, and consequently indistinguishable by perceptual evidence alone, the skeptic claims external world knowledge is impossible.

Contextualists draw attention to a conflict within our belief structure. On the one hand, skepticism seems convincing. The argument for skepticism is valid and appealing to one's epistemic intuitions, it seems sound, although the conclusion strikes many philosophers as unacceptable.

A virtue of the contextualist response to skepticism is twofold. First, viewing 'knows' as context-sensitive allows the contextualist to respond to skeptical worries without abandoning fallibilism.⁵ Second, while contextualists accept the conclusion of skeptical arguments in contexts when skeptical possibilities are entertained, they deny that skeptical arguments are applicable in all contexts. In ordinary situations, when skeptical worries and alternative possibilities are not entertained, many 'S knows that p' statements come out true, assuming such true beliefs meet the lower evidential threshold. In other words, contextualism responds to skepticism, while also appreciating the philosophical thrust of the problem.⁶

2. Internalism

Before outlining two ways of viewing contexts, I will explain the internalism/externalism distinction as it relates to epistemic justification. In their most basic forms, internalists views impose constraints on justification-determining factors that externalists reject. For example, according to internalism, a justified belief must be recognizable on reflection, whereas externalism denies this.⁷ According to

⁵ One would like to adhere to fallibilism so as to avoid widespread Cartesian skepticism.

⁶ One might be inclined to wonder how contextualism differs from an alternative approach called the "ambiguity theory of knowledge." According to this theory, there are multiple senses of the word 'knows.' While contextualism is similar to this view, there are marked differences which delineate the two. Perhaps the most important difference is the way in which each view the role context plays in determining the truth of knowledge attributions. For the ambiguity theory, one can simply stipulate which sense of the word 'knows' one is employing (much the same way as I can stipulate that I am talking about a financial institution when I use the term 'bank'). Context, therefore, plays either no role, or a marginal one, in determining true knowledge attributions. Contextualists, on the other hand, make the knowledge attributors slaves to context. Contextual features determine the evidential threshold, and therefore determine whether a knowledge attribution is true. In other words, the main difference is that for the ambiguity theorist, agents control which sense of 'knows' they employ, while contextualists depend upon context to determine whether a knowledge attribution is true.

⁷ Michael Bergmann has argued that internalism doesn't necessarily require awareness. For

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internalist epistemologists, the transformation from an unjustified to a justified belief occurs by having the right mental states (usually by possessing and employing evidence in the belief formation process).

While context internalism diverges from justificatory internalism, both in its subject matter and aim, there's nevertheless an important parallel: something mental entirely fixes either justification or contexts.

Context internalism can be understood in several ways, such as the imposition of constraints in terms of awareness, access, mentality, or perception. Perhaps the best way to understand context internalism is through a subject's attitudes, beliefs, desires, intentions etc. in the formation and construction of a context. An implication of this view is that two subjects (or attributors) could be similarly situated in external circumstances, but be in different epistemic states depending on their beliefs.⁸

3. Contextualism and Context Internalism

We can start by making an obvious observation: contexts are fixed by factors that are either entirely internal or partially external. If what fixes an epistemic context is completely internal, only mental factors are relevant in judging what context an attributor or subject is in.

In making the argument that contextualism is best paired with context internalism, we need to further specify how contextual standards of the word 'knows' shift.

Here is my primary reason for thinking that contextualism is best paired with context-internalism. When contextualists evaluate which context an attributor is in, they consider factors that are presently before a subject's mind. External factors, inasmuch as they are not salient, or worse, fail to be cognitively accessible to subjects or attributors, fails to elevate the epistemic threshold for knowledge.

Consider classic cases presented by both Keith DeRose and Stewart Cohen. In reviewing these cases, it's important to keep in mind several questions: do

brevity, I will not engage with his arguments here. For those interested, consult ch. 3 of Michael Bergmann, *Justification without Awareness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁸ While it is a worthwhile task to evaluate the plausibility of context internalism, I will not pursue this task here. A robust account of context would need to take into consideration arguments and findings from fields like philosophy of language, mind and metaphysics, as well as those from psychology and cognitive science. However, the features of context which need elucidation are only those which relate to the epistemic standards associated with the word 'knows.'

external factors *themselves* determine the attributor's context? Or is it the subject's *awareness* of them? Second, in the absence of such awareness, would contextual shifts occur?

Bank Case A. My wife and I are driving home on a Friday afternoon. We plan to stop at the bank on the way home to deposit our paychecks. But as we drive past the bank, we notice that the lines inside are very long, as they often are on Friday afternoon. Although we generally like to deposit our paychecks as soon as possible it is not especially important in this case that they be deposited right away, so I suggest we drive straight home and deposit our paychecks on Saturday morning. My wife says 'Maybe the bank won't be open tomorrow. Lots of banks are closed on Saturdays.' I reply, 'No, I know it will be open. I was just there two weeks ago on Saturday. It's open until noon.'

Bank Case B. My wife and I are driving home on a Friday afternoon, as in Case A, and notice the long lines. I again suggest we deposit our paychecks on Saturday morning, explaining that I was at the bank on Saturday morning only two weeks ago and discovered that it was open until noon. But in this case, we have just written a very large and very important check. If our paychecks are not deposited into our checking account before Monday morning, the important check we wrote will bounce, leaving us in a *very* bad situation. And, of course, the bank will not be open on Sunday. My wife reminds me of these facts. Then she says, 'Banks do change their hours. Do you know the bank will be open tomorrow?' Remaining as confident as I was before that the bank will be open then, still, I reply, 'well, no, I don't know. I'd better go in and make sure.'⁹

Inspecting DeRose's Bank Cases reveals that Keith's context shifts from a low, to a high standards one relative to his wife making salient the possibility of the bank changing its hours. In other words, it's salience of error, not merely the possibility of error, that leads to an upward shift in contextual standards.

We arrive at the same conclusion when considering Cohen's Airport case. Mary and John's context doesn't shift upward until the possibility of error is made salient.

The Airport Case

Mary and John are at the L.A. airport contemplating taking a certain flight to New York. They want to know whether the flight has a layover in Chicago. They overhear someone ask a passenger Smith if he knows whether the flight stops in Chicago. Smith looks at the flight itinerary he got from the travel agent and respond, 'Yes I know—it does stop in Chicago.' It turns out that Mary and John have a very important business contact they have to make at the Chicago airport. Mary says, 'How reliable is that itinerary? It could contain a misprint. They could have changed the schedule at the last minute.' Mary and John agree that Smith

⁹ Keith DeRose, *The Case for Contextualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1-2

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doesn't really *know* that the plane will stop in Chicago. They decide to check with the airline agent.¹⁰

John and Mary start off in a low standards context, and it's only after they are made aware of the potential for a misprint in the itinerary that an upward contextual shift occurs.

Internal, rather than external facts, fix the context in all three of these cases. If Keith's wife hadn't reminded him that banks sometimes change their hours, he would still be in a low standards context. In Cohen's Airport case, Mary and John both start off in a low standards context and it's only when certain error possibilities are entertained that their context becomes more epistemically demanding, consequently elevating the epistemic threshold for knowledge.

Another reason to think contextualists ought to endorse internalism about contexts is the view's inability to handle other bank-style cases. Stanley argues that contextualism gives the wrong answer in cases that lack saliency of error. For example, consider his case.

Ignorant High Stakes

Hannah and her wife Sarah are driving home on a Friday afternoon. They plan to stop at the bank on the way home to deposit their paychecks. Since they have an impending bill coming due, and very little in their account, it is very important that they deposit their paychecks by Saturday. But neither Hannah nor Sarah is aware of the impending bill, nor the paucity of available funds. Looking at the lines, Hannah says to Sarah, 'I know the bank will be open tomorrow, since I was there just two weeks ago on Saturday morning. So we can deposit out checks tomorrow morning.'¹¹

Since neither Hannah nor Sarah is aware of the impending bill, Stanley argues that, by contextualism's lights, they are in a low standards context. Consequently, Stanley argues that contextualists must maintain that they know the bank is open.¹²

Finally, there's a more basic reason for thinking contextualists should

¹⁰ Stewart Cohen, "Contextualism, Skepticism and the Structure of Reasons," *Philosophical Perspectives* 13, 13 (1999): 58

¹¹ Jason Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), 5

¹² One might worry that Stanley's case can be explained in alternative ways. For example, Hannah and Sarah seem to behave irresponsibly, and perhaps what explains their lack of knowledge is this fact. However, this applies to all high stakes bank cases. If one has an impending bill due, it's irresponsible to put it off even if one knows the bank will be open. For example, even if S knows the bank will be open, S might not know she will get into a car accident on the way there, or perhaps she will misplace the check. While the point about irresponsibility is an important one, I for the sake of brevity, I will not entertain it further.

endorse context internalism: knowledge attributors are the locus of contextual shifts. Broadly speaking, the nature of a knowledge attributor requires awareness of what is being attributed. If there's an upward shift in the contextual standards, an attributor S must, on some level, be aware and sensitive to things like possibilities of error. Given the cases presented above, and the nature of attributors, it's plausible to view contextualism as internalistic.¹³

¹³ One might deny that the knowledge attributors needn't be aware of what they attribute. Consider the snarky skeptic who just goes around denying people know anything, but isn't aware of what she's saying. In this sense, one might say that one knowledge attributors—or attributors more generally, don't require awareness. While this is an interesting criticism, and requires a detailed response, I will not pursue it at length here. However, I am inclined to develop an account of authentic versus inauthentic knowledge attributors. Another response is that perhaps ordinary knowledge attributions don't require awareness (after all, people use words like 'know' frequently without fully understanding them). However, in cases where an attributor makes salient skeptical situations or possibility of error scenarios, it seems like they are aware—on some level—of what they are doing. However, since these responses are in an immature state, I will save their development for a different paper.