

# CONTEXTUAL SHIFTS AND GRADABLE KNOWLEDGE

Andreas STEPHENS

**ABSTRACT:** Epistemological contextualism states that propositions about knowledge, expressed in sentences like “S knows that P,” are context-sensitive. Schaffer (2005) examines whether one of Lewis’ (1996), Cohen’s (1988) and DeRose’s (1995) influential contextualist accounts is preferable to the others. According to Schaffer, Lewis’ theory of relevant alternatives succeeds as a linguistic basis for contextualism and as an explanation of what the parameter that shifts with context is, while Cohen’s theory of thresholds and DeRose’s theory of standards fail. This paper argues that Schaffer’s analysis is unsatisfactory since it fails to show that thresholds and standards cannot cope with skepticism, as it is ultimately the conversation participants who control how the conversation plays out. Moreover, Schaffer fails to show that gradability is of no importance in inquiries.

**KEYWORDS:** knowledge, contextualism, Schaffer, thresholds, standards, alternatives, gradability, gradualism

## 1. Introduction

Epistemological contextualism emphasizes the context-sensitivity of epistemological concepts such as ‘knowledge’ (see, e.g., Lewis 1979; DeRose 2009; Rysiew 2016). In this paper, I will focus on Schaffer’s (2005) analysis of whether one of Cohen’s (1988), DeRose’s (1995), and Lewis’ (1996) influential contextualist accounts can explain what parameter it is that shifts between contexts in knowledge-ascriptions. In short, the three theories suggest different parameters: Cohen suggests that it is whether the threshold value for full justification is reached; DeRose suggests that it is whether the strength of the epistemic position given a particular standard is sufficient, and; Lewis suggests that it is whether relevant alternatives are possible to eliminate.

Schaffer concludes that Lewis’ theory of alternatives provides a workable explanation of what the parameter that shifts between contexts is, whereas Cohen’s and DeRose’s theories fail. I will problematize Schaffer’s conclusion and raise two issues to shed light on how Cohen’s and DeRose’s theories seemingly can, after all, describe certain aspects of ‘knowledge’ that Lewis’ theory does not account for. I will argue that Schaffer fails to convincingly show that Cohen’s and DeRose’s

theories cannot cope with skepticism. Moreover, Schaffer fails to show that thresholds and standards do not provide relevant input for inquiries.

It should be pointed out that other theories such as, for example, subject sensitive invariantism and relativism will not be discussed. Furthermore, I will not address Schaffer's contrastivist position or his wider discussion of contextualism, which he details in several other papers (see, e.g., Schaffer 2001, 2004, 2007, 2008; Schaffer and Knobe 2012; Schaffer and Szabó 2014). Instead, I will engage with his lucidly argued (2005) paper, although Schaffer also addresses this specific topic in other texts (see, e.g., Schaffer 2006, section 4, 2007, sections 2 and 5, 2015, section 30.1.3; Schaffer and Szabó 2014, section 2.2).

## 2. Schaffer's analysis of contextualism

To investigate what the parameter that shifts with context is, Schaffer (2005, 116-118) lists several requirements that an answer should be able to meet. These are given in the form of four desiderata or criteria.

I. *Linguistically plausible*. The parameter should be a naturally occurring linguistic parameter and work together with the concept of knowledge. That is, the parameter cannot be invented just to serve this purpose but should exist naturally in language and be applicable to knowledge and similar concepts.

II. *Predictively adequate*. The parameter should follow our intuitions for what is reasonable for knowledge ascriptions. The parameter should therefore not be linked to anything else that may cause the shifts. Thus, for example, which day it is, must not affect the parameter (Schaffer 2005, 116).

III. *Skeptically resolving*. The parameter should enable problems with various forms of skepticism to be solved in accordance with contextualism. The parameter should thus enable a contextualist explanation that 'renders most ordinary knowledge ascriptions true in ordinary contexts, some (those associated with the specific doubt in play) false in moderately skeptical contexts, and most (or perhaps all) false in radically skeptical contexts' (Schaffer 2005, 117).

IV. *Illuminate inquiry*. The parameter should shed light on the practical role of knowledge ascription for our investigations. For Schaffer, this means that knowledge ascriptions involve that a subject S can answer questions, which Schaffer illustrates through three possible inquiries with three different questions (Schaffer 2005, 117):

- (i): "Is there a goldfinch in the garden, or a blue jay?"
- (ii): "Is there a goldfinch in the garden, or a canary?"
- (iii): "Is there a goldfinch in the garden, or at the neighbor's?"

According to Schaffer, the knowledge ascription “I know that there is a goldfinch in the garden” has different roles in the three different contexts. In the first context, the ascription of knowledge means that the subject can distinguish a goldfinch from a blue jay. In the second context, the ascription of knowledge means that the subject can distinguish a goldfinch from a canary, which is a more difficult task than the task in the first context. In the third context, the ascription of knowledge means that the subject can distinguish his garden from the neighbor’s, which is a completely different kind of task than those in the first and second contexts (Schaffer 2005, 117-118). Schaffer states that the parameter that is being shifted should be able to explain how this is done.

As I view them as reasonable starting points, I will not focus on criticizing Schaffer’s choice of criteria. Now, as aforementioned, Schaffer addresses three possible parameters for contextual shifts: a shift of the *threshold* for full justification; a shift in the *standard* for an epistemic position, and; a shift in the epistemic *alternatives* (Schaffer 2005, 115-116), which we will turn to below.

## 2.1 Thresholds

Schaffer bases his understanding of how thresholds might be the parameter that shifts between contexts on Cohen (1988). The starting point is described to be the threshold value (T) for full justification. In Schaffer’s interpretation, this is presented as S being ascribed an absolute degree of justification (D) for P. What shifts between different contexts is whether D is sufficient to be considered fully justified. D’s sufficiency is controlled by whether D reaches T (Schaffer 2005, 118). The degree of justification can then be compared to an interval between 0 and 1, where movements take place up or down the interval. The context can select a T in different places on the interval. If S’s absolute justification D in a context reaches the threshold value T ( $D \geq T$ ), S is fully justified and thus knows. If, on the other hand, there is a change in contexts that moves the threshold value T so that S’s justification D does not reach T ( $D < T$ ), S does not know. Schaffer’s interpretation of Cohen strikes me as reasonable.

Schaffer then examines whether thresholds can meet the criteria (I–IV) he lists, and concludes that thresholds fail on all accounts. Regarding his first criterion, Schaffer believes that the parameter does not work for the concept of knowledge. Rather, the parameter works for gradable adjectives such as ‘tall’ and ‘justified.’ But ‘knowledge’ is neither an adjective nor gradable according to Schaffer. He further argues that knowledge can be considered to imply justification, but claims that this fact in itself does not make knowledge vague or gradable (Schaffer 2005, 119).

In relation to the second criterion, Schaffer believes that thresholds predict incorrect shifts. As the requirement for justification shifts, we would, according to Schaffer, shift our view of whether knowledge exists or not. This could take place by using comparison classes or by drawing a line (Schaffer 2005, 119). But, in Schaffer's view, such comparison classes do not seem to affect any shifts in the concept of knowledge and what we know, it is instead specific doubts that make us shift our knowledge ascriptions.

Schaffer believes that thresholds do not meet the third criterion concerning skepticism either. Partly because it is not clear why skeptical doubts would create any shifts at all for the threshold value. So, it is unclear why doubts about 'brain-in-a-vat scenarios' should affect the threshold value – make it really high. The skeptic's mentioning of something else than what was originally in focus does not explain why this would affect the threshold value for what we first focused on. Schaffer's second reason for why thresholds do not meet his third criterion is that doubt would shift the threshold value in the wrong way for the skeptic who doubts something specific. When the threshold value shifts, it does so in general, not just regarding something specific, and all truth values are thus affected in that context. But in some skeptical scenarios this does not happen. Statements will be ascribed to the absolute degree of justification,  $D1$  and  $D2$ , and it seems plausible, in Schaffer's view, that  $D1 = D2$ . But in that case the threshold value is raised in both cases if it is raised in one. If, on the other hand,  $D1 \neq D2$ , the lower threshold value cannot be raised above the higher without affecting the other. This means that if you raise the justification requirement somewhere, it affects the justification requirement everywhere. The interconnection is thus problematic for the threshold-parameter (Schaffer 2005, 120).

Finally, Schaffer argues that thresholds fail to account for the fourth criterion, as there need not be a connection between investigations and the threshold value for justification. Schaffer questions that there needs to be a link between the justification threshold for the statement "I know there is a goldfinch in the garden" and investigations into whether this is in relation to a blue jay; a canary, or; the neighbor's garden. The threshold value would then be raised everywhere, similarly as concerning the third criterion. Although there is a difference between justification regarding different bird species and whether the bird is in my or the neighbor's garden, the threshold theory according to Schaffer has the consequence that raising the threshold for justification concerning one question affects the threshold value for all questions.

Schaffer argues that the interconnection makes the theory plausible. But what shifts between contexts must be more sensitive to distinct doubts, which

thresholds fail to be (Schaffer 2005, 119-121). Although I will question his conclusion below, Schaffer does present a lucid and strong case against thresholds.

## 2.2 Standards

Schaffer describes how standards, based on DeRose (1995), shows how what shifts between contexts is how strong an epistemic position needs to be for knowledge. So, S can be ascribed a specific absolute strength for his epistemic position R regarding his belief P. R is likened to the radius of a sphere of possible worlds where the same metric M is used. M is determined by the context, where S can follow the truth and falsehood of P (track the truth). If R reaches far enough, described as a standard radius L, given M, S knows. What differs between contexts is both the kind of sphere of possible worlds that is relevant and whether R reaches far enough for knowledge (Schaffer 2005, 121). The context thus determines M and determines whether  $R \geq L$  (there is knowledge given M). In cases where  $R < L$  there is no knowledge (Schaffer 2005, 121; DeRose 2009, 14). M can expand or shrink depending on the context.

Schaffer describes an example where S can follow the truth given the starting point x and the sphere w1, while this is not the case given the sphere w2. x is thus a central starting point and w1 and w2 are spheres around x. If context 1 gives that M is  $\langle x, w1, w2 \rangle$  and L is 1, then S's belief that P is knowledge in context 1, where S can follow the truth as far as the context requires. R covers x and w1, and L indicates that only one step from x is necessary for knowledge. In context 2 where M is the same as in context 1 but L is 2, R no longer reaches far enough to give S knowledge that P, since S cannot follow the truth given w2. If M in context 3 instead is  $\langle x, w2, w1 \rangle$  and L is 1, then S is not considered to know that P since S cannot follow the truth given w2. In context 3, S can thus only reach one step from x and then reach w2, but S can, as previously mentioned, only follow the truth given w1. The parameter that shifts between contexts is then what kind of sphere of possible worlds is relevant and the standard for how far S must follow – track the truth – for knowledge (Schaffer 2005, 121).

Schaffer mentions how standards are reminiscent of thresholds, a point I agree with. As far as S needs to follow the truth (R), on DeRose's take, can correspond to Cohen's degree of justification (D) (Schaffer 2005, 121-123). However, the theories differ in that D may have an upper limit at 1 while R does not have an upper limit. Standards also include an extra parameter in the form of the concept of sphere of possible worlds (Schaffer 2005, 122).

Schaffer argues that standards – just as thresholds – fail concerning all four criteria. Since standards have not specified any general parameter linked to

knowledge that is usually found in our language, they do not meet the first criterion. There is thus nothing that can function as a precursor to the parameter in our language. The parameter instead, in his view, seems to be taken out of thin air, which the first criterion does not allow (Schaffer 2005, 123).

Regarding the second criterion, Schaffer argues that the wrong shifts are predicted by standards, as shifts regarding what we know and what we do not know should occur when  $M$  is changed and when  $L$  is raised or lowered. In short, this can be described as when the context shifts the strength required for knowledge of an epistemic position is increased or decreased. Schaffer believes, however, that the connection between which the possible worlds are in the context does not have to affect what we count as knowledge. As mentioned earlier regarding thresholds, what makes us shift between situations where we consider ourselves to know and not know is, according to Schaffer, the introduction of particular doubts.

Schaffer believes that standards cannot provide a reasonable contextualist explanation for skeptical problems as it is unclear why skeptical problems would cause any shift in standard. If standards are changed, they would, through 'the standard theory,' affect the truth of propositions, in skeptical problems that focus on a specific thing in the wrong way (Schaffer 2005, 124). The spheres, governed by context, would take into account too much to function. As with thresholds, Schaffer sees the connection as problematic.

Finally, regarding the fourth criterion, Schaffer believes that standards fail, as questions will be affected and controlled by the scenario that is furthest away, in relation to possible worlds. Regardless of the conditions, the most remote scenario will drive up the standard for other scenarios as well. In Schaffer's view, the spheres DeRose uses are too limited to be able to describe what we need. According to Schaffer, standards are too interconnected and do not allow the measure of independent possibilities required for a plausible parameter.

Again, Schaffer presents a strong case against the parameter in question.

### 2.3 Alternatives

The third parameter addressed by Schaffer states that what shifts in knowledge ascriptions in different contexts is a quantity consisting of which epistemic alternatives  $S$  must take into account and which alternatives  $S$  can eliminate. Schaffer links this account to Lewis (1996). Schaffer describes how  $S$ 's belief that  $P$  is ascribed to an absolute elimination force  $E$  for  $P$ , where  $E$  is the number of possibilities  $S$  can eliminate. Which, and how many, relevant alternatives are sufficient, shifts between contexts and the amount of them is ascribed value  $Q$ .

Knowledge arises when E covers Q and S thus has eliminated a sufficient number of alternatives (Schaffer 2005, 125). To illustrate this, according to Schaffer, E can be seen as an arbitrary region and the relevant alternatives Q as another arbitrary region. What shifts is whether E covers Q. To summarize the theory's view of shifts between contexts: The parameter that shifts between contexts is which, and how many, options S must eliminate (Schaffer 2005, 125).

Schaffer gives an example where the regions are likened to a chessboard where P is a certain square. Q stands for the other squares on the board that are relevant options. E stands for the squares S can remove and covers the black squares. If context 1 indicates that Q (the relevant alternatives) only apply to black squares, S has knowledge that P in context 1 since E covers Q. If context 2 indicates that Q applies to the white squares, and context 3 that Q applies to both black and white squares, S does not know that P in any of these contexts, as E in those cases does not cover Q (Schaffer 2005, 125-126).

The reason why the alternatives should be seen as arbitrary regions is that Schaffer wants to point out that nothing connects the alternatives, which should instead be seen as completely independent. Relevant alternatives thus do not need to have a direct connection between them. This also means that no grading between alternatives is possible. An example of two independent alternatives can be given through an ascription of knowledge about knowing what it means to build a computer. "S knows what it means to build a computer" can mean that S knows that certain components are needed to assemble a computer. An independent alternative to the ascription of knowledge can instead mean a completely different kind of thing, for example, that S knows that it means being able to draw all the parts needed in a CAD program. Schaffer's point is that there is no limit to what the alternatives can mean and how different alternatives may be. Radical skepticism's alternatives of, for example, brains-in-vats are extreme cases of alternatives that differ from the alternatives we usually consider. Nothing thus links the alternatives directly to each other. This aspect was elucidated by Schaffer in his fourth criterion.

Schaffer investigates whether the theory focused on alternatives is able to meet the necessary criteria he raised. His first criterion requiring that the parameter is naturally occurring in language can be seen to be fulfilled as the concept of knowledge can be compared to the concepts of 'can,' 'must' and 'regret.' In his view, statements such as "I can run a mile in ten minutes" and "wood must burn" are context-sensitive (Schaffer 2005, 126). Whether these statements are true or not thus depends on what alternatives exist and are relevant. In a context where the relevant alternatives include that I am an incredibly good runner, and that

wood is always burning, the statements can be true. If, on the other hand, I am a bad runner and other laws of nature than those we know are relevant alternatives, the statements can be false. According to Schaffer, this means that knowledge can be linked to a naturally occurring parameter for alternatives.

What shifts between cases where we “have knowledge” and “do not have knowledge” thus seems to be due to special doubts. If the introduction and removal of these doubts are understood in terms of relevance for specific alternatives, Schaffer’s second criterion seems to be fulfilled (Schaffer 2005, 127).

In relation to his third criterion, an explanation is needed as to why skepticism can create particular doubts and how radical skepticism can make us doubt in general. A theory focused on alternatives seems to be able to explain both of these forms of doubt through how the amount of alternatives is expanded. That I am a brain-in-a-vat, which the radical skeptic often takes as an example, is a relevant alternative to basically all the facts I can point out about the outside world. A milder form of skepticism where the alternative that my car has been stolen is mentioned might create doubt concerning that question but not concerning the unrelated question of when the theater opens. This option also does not affect any of the other everyday facts I take for granted. This is an important point to highlight in Schaffer’s overall argumentation as this is a main reason for why alternatives differ from thresholds and standards. The ability of alternatives to be independent is the reason why Schaffer considers them a good explanation for what shifts between contexts.

In Schaffer’s fourth criterion a parameter was needed that could illuminate our investigations. Alternatives can fulfill this role as questions are always, or can be formulated as, multiple-choice questions. The sets of alternatives can be seen as discrete/independent and can thus explain the questions mentioned above. The relevant alternatives will be: {goldfinch in the garden, blue jay in the garden}; {goldfinch in the garden, canary in the garden}; {goldfinch in the garden, goldfinch in the neighbor’s garden}. The alternatives thus differ in what they presuppose (Schaffer 2005, 128).

As mentioned initially in this section, Schaffer believes that alternatives do serve as a reasonable description of which parameter it is that shifts between contexts and thus gives contextualism a plausible starting point as a theory of knowledge. According to Schaffer, the independent property of alternatives is the main reason for his assessment.



## 2.4 Schaffer's conclusion

Schaffer claims to have shown how alternatives provide a working description of what the parameter that shifts between contexts is. In contrast, both thresholds and standards fail to describe what shifts between different contexts. The crucial point that causes Schaffer's conclusion is that alternatives enable independent options, while thresholds and standards are interconnected. Thresholds in the form of points on a range of justification and standards in contextual spheres and a radius of strength of epistemic position coupled to the outer edge of the spheres. Alternatives thus enable options without internal connection. Thresholds and standards enable gradability.

But is the gradability of thresholds and standards really completely irrelevant to depict what shifts between contexts in our knowledge ascriptions?

## 3. Two issues with Schaffer's analysis

Schaffer concludes that alternatives can explain which parameter it is that shifts between contexts by fulfilling the four criteria he presents – thresholds and standards instead fail with all of them. I will question Schaffer's analysis of the third and fourth criteria (concerning skepticism and the practical role in investigations) arguing that there are aspects of these criteria that contradict Schaffer's conclusion. Thresholds and standards seem to cope better with skepticism than Schaffer's analysis claims, and they seem to depict something in our practical investigations which alternatives miss. So, thresholds and standards seemingly can – contrary to Schaffer's opinion – offer relevant input concerning the parameter that shifts between contexts, and thus provide insight into the concept of knowledge. The third and fourth criteria are in focus since Schaffer places the greatest emphasis on them in his analysis, and because the first two (concerning linguistic plausibility and appropriate predictability) are affected by one's view of the latter. For greater clarity, some repetitions of previous paragraphs will be used below.

### 3.1 Thresholds and standards can cope with skepticism

First a quick recap. The parameter-shifts between contexts must be able to tackle skepticism in a manner that is in accordance with contextualism. The parameter must thus enable a contextualist explanation of how: ordinary knowledge ascriptions can be true in everyday contexts; certain knowledge ascriptions may be false in skeptical contexts where specific doubts have been raised; all knowledge ascriptions can be false in radical skeptical contexts (Schaffer 2005, 116-117).

Schaffer believes that neither thresholds nor standards meet the requirement to work as contextualist solutions to skeptical problems. He argues that it is unclear why skeptical doubts would create any shifts at all in terms of thresholds or standards. Why should doubt about whether I am a brain-in-a-vat affect the threshold or the standard? He also claims that raised doubts would affect the threshold and standard incorrectly for moderate skeptics. I will question the plausibility of Schaffer's view.

Schaffer's treatment of thresholds and standards is very similar and two main points are used in both cases:

(a<sup>1</sup>): It is unclear why skeptical arguments should affect us at all (our thresholds or standards);

(a<sup>2</sup>): Doubts affect the threshold and standard incorrectly for moderate skeptics.

The first point, (a<sup>1</sup>), can be questioned by pointing out how it is the conversation participants who decide whether, when, and how a skeptical argument applies or not. The answer to (a<sup>1</sup>) thus depends on whether the conversation participants accept the skeptic's argument or not. This provides support for thresholds and standards as the appearance of ambiguity that Schaffer's objection stipulates and relies on is entirely up to the conversation participants to handle. This thus applies not only to both thresholds and standards but also to alternatives. What Schaffer misses is that how we use thresholds for full justification or standards – as well as alternatives – is governed by the conversation participants and it is up to *them* how far the threshold or standard should extend. Assuming that this is "unclear" is thus unreasonable.

This view is in line with how Lewis writes that what one may assume and ignore is determined by speakers and listeners in a context (Lewis 1996, 378-379). Another passage from Lewis (1979) elaborates his position:

At any stage in a well-run conversation, a certain amount is presupposed. The parties to the conversation take it for granted; or at least they purport to, whether sincerely or just 'for the sake of the argument'. Presuppositions can be created or destroyed in the course of a conversation. (Lewis 1979, 339)

Cohen (1988) describes how the skeptic *forces our attention* and it is when we fail to realize this that we experience that we have problems with the skeptic's argument. Thus, even if the skeptic's argument is based on compelling rhetoric, we do not *have to* agree with, or accept, the skeptic's argument:

Skeptical arguments exploit the fact that certain considerations can lead to a shift in the standards of relevance. Failure to recognize the shift can lead us into paradox. [...] The apparent closure failures are illusions that result from

inattention to contextual shifts. (Cohen 1988, 110-111)

Finally, DeRose leaves open the question of whether the skeptic actually manages to shift the context:

For the fact that the skeptic can invoke very high standards that we do not live up to has no tendency to show that we do not satisfy the more relaxed standards that are in place in more ordinary conversations and debates. (DeRose 1995, 5)

Thus, according to DeRose, it is rather a question of choice, as pointed out above, the conversation participants make about how the conversation should proceed and what they want to communicate. DeRose's pragmatic argument for why we should prefer contextualism over skepticism is that we seem to want knowledge. The important thing to highlight is that we can choose:

Indeed, since the bold skeptical solution and our new contextualist solution under consideration closely parallel each other, there's not much difference in how they solve the puzzle. That the bold skeptical resolution involves us in systematic falsehood is one of the few differences to be found here, and it's a weighty consideration against that resolution. (DeRose 1995, 48-49)

The lines of inquiry that have been addressed illustrate how thresholds and standards do not need to have a problem with skepticism if one starts from Lewis', Cohen's and DeRose's views of what happens in a conversation rather than Schaffer's. Thus, it does not have to be unclear whether, and if so when or how, skeptical arguments should affect us – it is up to the conversation participants. (Lewis' (1979, 340-341) 'rule of accommodation for permissibility' highlights some relevant aspects to how there tends to be hierarchical differences that govern conversations.) In relation to (a<sup>1</sup>), and Schaffer's third criterion, thresholds, standards, and alternatives can thus be considered equally plausible in relation to skepticism.

Concerning (a<sup>2</sup>), Schaffer's initial formulation is problematic. When he exemplifies the skeptical scenarios that are introduced for a subject, he formulates the contexts as follows:

(i) 'I know that my car is parked on Elm', and (ii) 'I know that the movie starts at nine.' In a moderately skeptical context in which unresolved doubts have been raised as to whether my car has been stolen and relocated, (i) should count as false, though (ii) should still count as true (no doubts have yet been raised about *that*). Whereas in a radically skeptical context in which unresolved doubts have been raised as to whether one is dreaming, or a brain-in-a-vat, etc., (i) and (ii) should both count as false. (Schaffer 2005, 117, italics in original)

This, in my view, tips the scales in favor of the alternatives-account and is not a neutral formulation. On the one hand, if one insists on an interpretation, as

Schaffer does, where threshold- and standard-shifts '*globally infect* other truth-values' (Schaffer 2005, 119, italics in original) it might be correct that the theory of alternatives offers a better explanation – since the presented formulation specifically involves discrete/independent relevant alternatives. Regarding (a<sup>2</sup>), thresholds and standards might then indeed not be optimal (and possibly incorrect) for explaining moderate skeptical scenarios. If threshold- and standard-theories are disallowed to invoke any sensitivity to different “epistemic positions” they could possibly fail to make sense of this specific matter. However, by reformulating the case set-up slightly, highlighting gradable qualities of knowledge, other intuitions might arise that instead pose problems for alternatives-theories. That is, if the shift in context, and the introduced doubts, is formulated to involve *how much* or *how well* I know about the relevant topics, thresholds and standards might fare better than alternatives at explaining the shifts. This point will be elaborated on below concerning the second issue.

### 3.2 Alternatives misses an aspect of knowledge ascriptions that thresholds and standards can explain

Schaffer's fourth criterion pointed out that the parameter that shifts between contexts should shed light on the practical role of knowledge ascriptions for our investigations. Knowledge ascriptions to the subject S thus mean, according to Schaffer, that S can answer questions. These questions are similar to the parameter for knowledge ascription linked to different contexts. The parameter must be able to illuminate and evaluate these issues (Schaffer 2005, 117-118). Schaffer uses three different examples of contexts and questions in them:

- (i): “Is there a goldfinch in the garden, or a blue jay?”
- (ii): “Is there a goldfinch in the garden, or a canary?”
- (iii): “Is there a goldfinch in the garden, or at the neighbor's?”

In context (i), the ascription of knowledge means that the speaker can distinguish a goldfinch from a blue jay. In context (ii), the ascription of knowledge means that the speaker can distinguish a goldfinch from a canary, which is more difficult (Schaffer 2005, 117). In context (iii), the ascription of knowledge means that the speaker can distinguish his garden from the neighbor's, which is a completely different kind of task (Schaffer 2005, 117-118). The parameter that shifts should be able to explain how this is done.

In his answer, Schaffer wants to show that the fourth criterion is fulfilled through the parameter of alternatives, as questions are always, or can be, formulated as multiple-choice questions. The sets of alternatives can thus be seen

as discrete/independent and can hence explain the questions in (i)–(iii), or so Schaffer argues (Schaffer 2005, 128). Thresholds and alternatives instead fail since:

(b): Thresholds and standards are too interconnected (in how they treat increases and decreases of the threshold value and the standard, respectively).

But alternatives only seem to fully capture what happens in the shift between context (ii) and (iii), where another kind of thing constitutes the relevant alternative. In the shift between context (i) and (ii), alternatives instead miss an aspect of what we are expected to know, or so I claim. Schaffer himself described how (ii) means that something *more difficult* needs to be done. If the alternatives are independent, which Schaffer uses as a reason to consider that alternatives are the preferred parameter, it also means that the aspect that someone who can distinguish between a goldfinch and a canary can do something *more/better* than someone who can only distinguish between a goldfinch and a blue jay is ignored. Here, the interconnection of thresholds and standards, i.e., gradability and possibilities of increases and decreases in strength, seems to be just what is sought after. The *interconnection* pointed out in (b), which Schaffer raised as an objection to thresholds and standards, thus seems to constitute exactly what is needed to illuminate the aspect of the concept of knowledge that we are looking for.

The interconnection can be seen in both Cohen's thresholds and DeRose's standards. In these cases, it is gradability that is in focus, which shows that the connection that Lewis and Schaffer want to remove from the concept of knowledge – what Cohen and DeRose take into account – is exactly what is sought after. DeRose explains how we can shift our epistemic positions and how it can be required more or less/something better or worse of us:

[...] One could gather further evidence, strengthen one's epistemic position with respect to both not-H and O, and make even one's belief that not-H sensitive.  
(DeRose 1995, 33)

Schaffer and Szabó (2014) discuss this matter in connection to comparing knowledge with gradable adjectives and verbs. They conclude that there is a precedent for using 'knows' in a gradable manner, although they stress that it is in an idiomatic and *ad hoc* way (Schaffer and Szabó 2014, 503). They also argue that 'perhaps there is literal grading, but of something other than the knowledge state.' (Schaffer and Szabó 2014, 504, fn. 14). However, other interpretations seem possible. For example, Dutant (2007) suggests that knowledge can involve degree modifiers and Lai (2019, 6, italics in original) argues that knowledge should be interpreted '[...] as a *spectrum concept* analogous to 'red', 'bright', and 'cold'.' (see

also, e.g., Hetherington 2001). Such gradualism thus highlights that propositions can be known more or less/better or worse.

The interconnection and the gradability of the concept of knowledge, as well as justification, thus seem to be needed to depict all aspects of Schaffer's fourth criterion. Thresholds, as well as standards, thus seem to be able to add something to the investigation of the concept of knowledge that alternatives miss. Schaffer's second point (b) thus turns out to highlight something that proves to be a strength with thresholds and standards – contrary to what Schaffer claims.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

Schaffer fails to show that thresholds and standards have a problem with skepticism, as it is ultimately the conversation participants who control how the conversation plays out. It is the conversation participants who decide whether, and if so how, the interconnection in the theories affects the conversations and whether this should be seen as a problem or not. Moreover, Schaffer's analysis fails to show that gradability is of no importance concerning his fourth criterion – which thresholds and standards account for better than alternatives.

Some type of gradualism, where knowledge is seen as a spectrum concept and/or propositions are seen as being possible to know more or less/better or worse, thus seemingly remains a plausible option. Now, since (human) communication is a complex natural phenomenon, and all models must involve *some* abstraction and idealization, it also seems reasonable – indeed inevitable – that any particular parameter will only give a partial picture.<sup>1</sup>

#### References

- Cohen, S. 1988. "How to be a fallibilist." *Philosophical Perspectives*. 2 (Epistemology): 91-123.
- DeRose, K. 1995. "Solving the skeptical problem." *The Philosophical Review* 104(1): 1-52.
- . 2009. *The case for contextualism: Knowledge, skepticism, and context, Vol. 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dutant, J. 2007. "The limited gradability of 'knows'". *unpublished manuscript*.
- Hetherington, S. 2001. *Good knowledge, bad knowledge: On two dogmas of epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for Stefan Schubert's knowledgeable input concerning an earlier version of this text. Thanks to Asa Kasher, Martin L. Jönsson and my anonymous reviewers for comments.

- Lai, C. 2019. "The concept of gradable knowledge." The University of Edinburgh. *Doctoral thesis*.
- Lewis, D. 1979. "Scorekeeping in a language game." *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8: 339-359.
- . 1996. "Elusive knowledge." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74(4): 549-567.
- Rysiew, P. 2016. "Epistemic contextualism." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), edited by E. N. Zalta. URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/contextualism-epistemology/>>.
- Schaffer, J. 2001. "Knowledge, relevant alternatives and missed clues." *Analysis* 61(271): 202-208.
- . 2004. "From contextualism to contrastivism." *Philosophical Studies* 119(1/2): 73-103.
- . 2005. "What shifts? Thresholds, standards, or alternatives?." In *Contextualism in philosophy: Knowledge, meaning, and truth*, edited by G. Preyer and G. Peter, 115-130. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2006. "The irrelevance of the subject: Against subject-sensitive invariantism." *Philosophical Studies* 127(1): 87-107.
- . 2007. "Knowing the answer." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 75(2): 383-403.
- . 2008. "The contrast-sensitivity of knowledge ascriptions." *Social Epistemology* 22(3): 235-245.
- . 2015. "Lewis on knowledge ascriptions." In *A companion to David Lewis*, edited by B. Loewer and J. Schaffer, 473-490. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Schaffer, J., and Knobe, J. 2012. "Contrastive knowledge surveyed." *Noûs* 46(4): 675-708.
- Schaffer, J., and Szabó, Z. G. 2014. "Epistemic comparativism: A contextualist semantics for knowledge ascriptions." *Philosophical Studies* 168(2): 491-543.