

# Contextualism and the Epistemological Enterprise\*

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**Abstract.** Epistemic contextualism (EC) is primarily a semantic view, viz. the view that ‘knowledge’-ascriptions can change their contents with the conversational context. To be more precise, EC is the view that the predicate ‘know’ has an unstable Kaplanian character, i.e. a character that does not map all contexts on the same content. According to EC, ‘know’ is thus an indexical expression. Notwithstanding this purely linguistic characterisation of EC, contextualists have traditionally argued that their views have considerable philosophical impact, this being due to the alleged fact that their linguistic views about ‘know’ provide the resources for a resolution of sceptical puzzles. In this paper I address an objection to EC claiming that, as a linguistic view about the term ‘know’, EC cannot be of any epistemological significance.

**Keywords:** contextualism, knowledge, disquotation, presuppositions

## 1. Lewis

Here is how David Lewis, one of the major figures in the contextualist scene, attempts to resolve sceptical puzzles. According to Lewis:

(L)  $x$  satisfies ‘knows  $p$ ’ in  $C \leftrightarrow x$ ’s evidence eliminates every  $\neg p$ -world, except for those that are properly ignored in  $C$ .<sup>1</sup>

In addition to this definition of the satisfaction of ‘know’, Lewis stipulates a set of “rules of relevance” specifying which possibilities can be properly ignored in a given context. It is this set of rules that is meant to determine how the content of ‘know’ is influenced by particular contextual factors. The rule doing the main explanatory work with regard to sceptical puzzles is Lewis’s “Rule of Attention” (RA):

(RA) If  $w$  is attended to by the speakers in  $C$ , then  $w$  cannot be properly ignored in  $C$ .

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<sup>1</sup> Note here that Lewis considers one’s evidence to be the contents of one’s perceptual experiences and one’s memories, assuming that these contents can be individuated narrowly. Cp. Lewis (1996), p. 224.

As Lewis points out, (RA) eventually boils down to the apparent triviality that “a possibility not ignored at all is *ipso facto* not properly ignored.”<sup>2</sup>

How are (RA) and (L) intended to resolve sceptical puzzles? Firstly, note that when confronted with sceptical arguments, one inevitably attends to sceptical possibilities, for sceptical hypotheses, i.e. sentences expressing sceptical possibilities, form an integral part of sceptical arguments. Thus, it follows from (RA) that any context in which one considers sceptical arguments is a context in which one cannot properly ignore sceptical possibilities. Secondly, since, by definition, sceptical possibilities resist elimination by one’s evidence, it follows from (RA) and (L) that, for all propositions  $p$  about the external world, one doesn’t satisfy ‘knows  $p$ ’ in contexts in which one considers sceptical arguments. Such contexts are, as I shall put it henceforth, *sceptical contexts*. Thirdly, note that even though Lewis’s account entails that we don’t satisfy ‘knows  $p$ ’ in contexts in which sceptical arguments are at issue, it also entails that we do so in quotidian contexts: in quotidian contexts we don’t attend to sceptical possibilities and thus often satisfy ‘knows  $p$ ’ for various propositions  $p$  about the external world.

Lewis’s views can thus be seen as accounting for both our *Anti-Sceptical Intuitions* (ASI) and our *Sceptical Intuitions* (SI), which are to be represented as follows:

**(ASI)** People often speak truly when they assert ‘I know  $p$ .’

**(SI)** People sometimes speak truly when they assert ‘Nobody knows  $p$ ’ in contexts in which sceptical arguments are discussed.

However, if the semantic value of ‘know’ can change in a way allowing for both (ASI) and (SI) to be true, why then are we puzzled by sceptical arguments? Lewis replies that the puzzle arises because we are often unaware of the relevant contextual shifts in the content of ‘know’. We simply don’t always realise that our everyday ‘knowledge’-ascriptions express propositions that are perfectly compatible with the propositions expressed by ‘knowledge’-negations in sceptical contexts.

## 2. Sosa’s Objection

If EC is a linguistic view as outlined above, i.e. a view about the word ‘know’ and its content, what is its epistemological relevance? Considering Lewis’s attempt to resolve sceptical puzzles, this question may appear somewhat surprising. However, Ernest Sosa thinks that EC,

<sup>2</sup> Lewis (1996), p. 230.

even though true, has only little epistemological relevance, if any at all. Sosa:

“The main thesis of [EC] has considerable plausibility as a thesis in linguistics or in philosophy of language. In applying it to epistemology, however, it is possible to overreach [...]”<sup>3</sup>

Prominent epistemologists such as Keith Lehrer and Hilary Kornblith join Sosa in his assessment of EC, Kornblith declaring straightforwardly that EC is “largely irrelevant to epistemological concerns.”<sup>4</sup> Irrelevance with regard to epistemological concerns, however, is not the only charge the contextualist faces from Sosa’s side. In a more recent paper Sosa even wonders whether “epistemology [can] survive contextualism.”<sup>5</sup> Epistemology providing jobs for philosophers around the world—jobs which may go lost, if epistemology won’t survive any kind of contextualism—there is considerable practical reason for a defender of EC to take a closer look at Sosa’s objection.

What, then, is Sosa’s objection? Firstly, note that Sosa seems to concede both the truth of EC and that EC explains what I have called the anti-sceptical intuition. Moreover, note that Sosa assumes with the standard contextualist that philosophical contexts such as the context of his paper are inevitably sceptical contexts: in epistemological contexts, Sosa assumes, one attends to sceptical possibilities, this having as a consequence that contexts of epistemological enquiry are sceptical contexts. This fairly standard assumption then leads Sosa to the criticism that

“[from (ASI)] it is not even clearly inferable *that people are ever right when, in ordinary contexts, they claim to know things*. This will not follow if only because it will not follow that people ever do claim, in an ordinary context, that they *know* things, as opposed to making utterances of the form ‘I know such and such.’ The contextualist line deriving from EC hence does not much support, for us philosophers, the claim *that people do in ordinary contexts after all know things*. Nor does it even much support the claim that speakers are often enough right when they *say* that people know things. This limits the epistemological interest and relevance of [EC], however interesting and important it may remain as a thesis in linguistics.”<sup>6</sup>

We can make more obvious what is going on in this passage by introducing some technical language. Let ‘KQ’ express the content of ‘know’ in quotidian contexts and let ‘KS’ express the content of ‘know’ in sceptical contexts. Now consider (1), which we derive from (ASI) by disquotation:

<sup>3</sup> Sosa (2000), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> See Lehrer (2000) and Kornblith (2000), p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> See Sosa (2005).

<sup>6</sup> Sosa (2000), p. 4; (Sosa’s emphasis).

(1) People often speak truly when they assert that they know  $p$ .

Depending on whether the epistemic standards of our present context are those of quotidian contexts or those of sceptical contexts (1) expresses either (2) or (3):

(2) People often speak truly when they assert that they KQ  $p$ .

(3) People often speak truly when they assert that they KS  $p$ .

Since Sosa assumes with Lewis and other standard contextualists that contexts of epistemological enquiry are inevitably sceptical contexts, Sosa thinks that (1), in the context of both his paper and this presentation, expresses the proposition expressed by (3). The alleged problem for EC is now that (3) is clearly wrong, for it suggests that people in quotidian contexts assert that they KS  $p$ . However, when people in quotidian contexts use the word ‘know’, its semantic value is always KQ rather than KS. Thus, Sosa complains that contextualists convey a falsity, when they assert (1) in a context of epistemological discussion.

### 3. A Closer Look

Is Sosa’s point really damaging to EC? Note that the fact that Sosa exploits to develop his objection is the rather trivial fact that disquotation fails across contexts for indexical expressions: Sosa points out correctly that contextualists, in their own contexts of philosophical enquiry, cannot disquote (ASI). But why should contextualists be interested in disquoting (ASI) in the first place? Sosa, Lehrer and Kornblith do not give an argument in support of the assumption that they should, but they clearly think that the disquotation of (ASI) is an important epistemological goal for the contextualist.

The most plausible way to make sense of this requirement is by assuming that Sosa et al. consider it impossible to be faithful to our anti-sceptical intuitions unless we can disquote (ASI). In reply to this assumption, however, the contextualist can insist that the anti-sceptical intuition is merely an intuition about the truth-values of certain utterances and as such is to be formulated meta-linguistically, as in (ASI). In failing to formulate the intuition meta-linguistically, the contextualist can argue, Sosa is methodologically inaccurate, and only this methodological inaccuracy leads him to require disquotability of (ASI) across contexts. An analogy helps illustrate this point.

The first person pronoun ‘I’ is obviously indexical: it changes its content with the context of utterance, depending on who is the speaker

in the context of utterance. Now, here is a datum that we want our semantics of ‘I’ to respect, call it the *Fish Lovers Intuition* (FLI):

**(FLI)** People often speak truly when they assert ‘I like fish’.

Any semantic theory of ‘I’ that entails the negation of (FLI) is flawed. Now, since (FLI) contains the indexical ‘I’ within quotes, (FLI) cannot be disquoted offhand. In the context of this talk, for instance, I cannot disquote and infer (4) from (FLI):

(4) People often speak truly when they assert that I like fish.

The problem with (4) is not only that it is false: since I am allergic to fish, nobody ever speaks truly when he or she asserts that I like fish. It is rather also the case that, analogously to Sosa’s case about ‘know’, when somebody asserts the sentence ‘I like fish’ that person does not express the proposition that I, MB-T, like fish, for in that person’s mouth, ‘I’ does not refer to me. Thus, disquotations of (FLI) fails across contexts.

From these considerations, however, it finally follows that if Sosa’s argument against EC were viable, then we should be able to complain analogously about contextualism about ‘I’ that from (FLI) “it is not even clearly inferable” that I like fish. This is, however, an absurd objection to contextualism about ‘I’: contextualism about ‘I’ merely has to *respect* (FLI), but it does not have to be able to establish that I like fish. Analogously, EC merely has to *respect* (ASI), but it does not have to be able to establish that people know that they have hands.

Another point to be mentioned here is that the failure of contextualists to distinguish between meta-language and object-language is to a large part responsible for Sosa’s misunderstanding of EC. Here is a quote from Sosa:

“Quite often contextualism is thought to show that even if we fail to know about ordinary matters in philosophical contexts, such as whether one has hands, we do often enough know those same matters in ordinary contexts. But this simply does not follow from the contextualist position, even though the advocates of contextualism speak as if it does.”<sup>7</sup>

Sosa is clearly right here. Contextualists such as Cohen and Lewis usually write as if it were an entailment of EC that we know all sorts of things in quotidian contexts. Here is a quote from Cohen (1999):

“[I]n everyday contexts, I can know that I don’t see a cleverly-disguised mule, on the basis of the inductive evidence I have against such a scenario. In sceptical contexts where the standards are higher, I fail to know, on the basis of the inductive evidence, that I do not see a cleverly-disguised mule.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Sosa (2000), p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Cohen (1999), p. 66.

Of course, if EC is correct, then both occurrences of ‘know’ in this quotation take KS as their semantic values: they are used in a context of epistemological discussion and such contexts are, according to EC, inevitably sceptical. Thus, contextualists’ failure to distinguish rigorously between object-language and meta-language has certainly given rise to the impression that EC should allow for the disquotation of (ASI).<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. A New Approach

The above considerations may still leave us somewhat uneasy. Can’t Sosa’s objection be more intuitively paraphrased as the objection that only claims in which epistemological terminology is *used* as opposed to *mentioned* can count as epistemological claims? According to this view, EC does not qualify as an epistemological theory, since it is only a view about ‘knowledge’ rather than about knowledge. Now, the contextualist can, of course, plausibly reply that, due to the context-sensitivity of ‘know’, defining epistemology thus ultimately begs the question against EC. I shall, however, not pursue this line of argument any further here. Instead, let me rather present a slightly amended version of standard contextualism that will eventually allow us to make interesting usage of the word ‘know’ in most epistemological contexts.

The account of EC I have in mind is a broadly Lewisian account that differs from Lewis’s original theory only in replacing his *Rule of Attention* (RA) with what I call the *Rule of Conversational Presupposition* (RCP):

**(RCP)** If  $w$  is incompatible with the speakers’ conversational presuppositions in  $C$ , then  $w$  can be properly ignored in  $C$  (unless a rule other than (RCP) states that  $w$  cannot be properly ignored in  $C$ ).<sup>10</sup>

How does this new conversational rule help us out of the predicament generated by Sosa’s objections? Clearly, if only changes in the speaker’s conversational presuppositions rather than the mere attendance to a sceptical possibility can turn one’s context into a sceptical context, then

<sup>9</sup> Contextualists are, of course, aware of the formal shortcomings of their presentations. In fact, they typically give a warning that, for stylistic reasons, they do not properly distinguish between object-language and meta-language and apologise for their failure to do so. See Cohen (1999), p. 65 and Lewis (1996), p. 238.

<sup>10</sup> The other Lewisian rules, such as the *Rule of Actuality* and the *Rule of Resemblance*, help avoiding obvious problems such as failure of the factivity of ‘know’.

there are numerous contexts of epistemological enquiry in which we can satisfy ‘knows  $p$ ’ for all kinds of propositions  $p$  about the external world: in contexts of epistemological enquiry we can perfectly well presuppose that we aren’t handless brains-in-vats, for instance.

Thus, on my new presupposition-based account of EC, by asserting ‘People know  $p$ ’ in a philosophical context I can express exactly the same proposition as I do if I assert the very same sentence in a quotidian context, provided that I make the same—or at least relevantly similar—presuppositions in both contexts. Independently of my considerations in the previous section, Sosa’s point does accordingly no harm to our new approach to EC. The new contextualists can, after all, in most cases legitimately disquote (ASI).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Note that (RCP) does not render impossible a contextualist resolution of sceptical puzzles, for my view predicts accurately that we have sceptical intuitions in only those contexts of epistemological enquiry in which we cease to conversationally presuppose the negations of sceptical hypotheses. This explains the datum that some epistemologists (Mooreans) are unmoved by sceptical arguments: they simply don’t stop presupposing that they aren’t brains-in-vats. Moreover, note that my new account entails that ‘knowledge’ is not—as Lewis puts it—“elusive”: it doesn’t as easily vanish because epistemic standards cannot be raised by merely alluding to sceptical hypotheses.