

Contextualism and the Knowledge Norms*

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Abstract

Epistemic contextualism is widely believed to be incompatible with the recently popular view that knowledge is the norm of assertion, practical reasoning, or belief. I argue in this paper that the problems arising for contextualism from the mentioned normative views are only apparent and can be resolved by acknowledging the fairly widespread phenomenon of non-obvious context-sensitivity (recently embraced by even some of contextualism's most ardent former critics). Building on recent insights about non-obvious context-sensitivity, the paper outlines an independently attractive contextualist account of the mentioned epistemic norms and provides a solution to the puzzles they give rise to in a contextualist framework.

Contextualism and the Knowledge Norms

Let us begin with the knowledge rule of assertion as proposed by Williamson (2000, p. 243):

(TW) It is permissible for x to assert p only if x knows p .

While (TW) is the principle most widely associated with the label 'Knowledge Rule of Assertion', other authors—notably Hawthorne (2004a, p. 23, fn. 58) and DeRose (2002, pp. 167, 187)—have been tempted by a logically stronger, biconditional version of Williamson's knowledge rule:¹

(A) It is permissible for x to assert p iff x knows p .

In what follows I shall refer to the biconditional (A) as the *Knowledge Rule of Assertion*.

Analogously to the knowledge rule of assertion, Hawthorne (2004a, p. 30) and Hawthorne and Stanley (2008) have defended the view that knowledge is the norm of practical reasoning. Here is the *Knowledge Rule of Practical Reasoning*:

(PR) It is permissible for x to use p as a premise in her practical reasoning iff x knows p .

Drawing inspiration from Williamson (2005b, p. 108) and McGrath (2010, p. 396) we may add the *Knowledge Norm of Belief* to the mix:

(B) It is permissible for x to outright believe p iff x knows p .²

Several authors have objected to one or another of these principles on a variety of grounds.³ However, since the final verdict has not been delivered on these issues, I shall in this paper assume the worst-case scenario for the contextualist and presume that neither (A), (B), nor (PR) fail for reasons that are independent of epistemic contextualism.⁴

What are we to do with the above principles within an epistemic contextualist framework? Given that, according to contextualism, the predicate ‘knows’ has different contents in different contexts, we need to formulate the ideas behind the knowledge norms meta-linguistically. As the three principles stand, they arbitrarily declare, from a contextualist point of view, the content of ‘knows’ in this context—the context of this paper—as determining for all possible contexts the norms of assertion, belief, and practical reasoning. This is implausible, given that the standards for the satisfaction of ‘knows’ may vary with context. Consequently, we should, as Cohen (2004, p. 486) and DeRose (2009, p. 99) have done, amend our three principles to reflect the sensitivity of ‘knows’ to the ascriber’s context. Here are the most straightforward and plausible ways to do this:

(A') It is permissible for x to assert p iff x satisfies ‘knows p ’ in x ’s context.

(PR') It is permissible for x to use p as a premise in her practical reasoning iff x satisfies ‘knows p ’ in x ’s context.

(B') It is permissible for x to outright believe p iff x satisfies ‘knows p ’ in x ’s context.

On the face of it, these principles seem as plausible (or implausible) as their non-contextualized cousins. However, as Hawthorne (2004a, §2.4) points out, accepting these three principles leads to serious trouble for the contextualist.

To illustrate the problem, Hawthorne (2004a, p. 87) shows that once the contextualist has replaced (A) with (A') she is committed to the implausible view that there are true utterances of sentences such as (1):

- (1) There are things people know but ought not to assert because their epistemic position is not strong enough with respect to those things (2004a, p. 87).

To see why the contextualist is committed to the existence of true utterances of (1) consider the following toy example. Let ‘Lo’ denote a subject in a conversational context with low epistemic standards and ‘Hi’ a subject in a context with high epistemic standards. Moreover, let it be the case that both Lo and Hi satisfy ‘knows p ’ at Lo’s context but not so at Hi’s. In such a situation Lo can—given EC and (A’)—truthfully assert:

- (2) Hi knows p but she ought not to assert p because her epistemic position is not strong enough with respect to p .

Given that Lo can truthfully assert (2), it follows that she can truthfully assert the equally implausible (1), which—we may assume—she has derived from (2) by existential generalization.

As Hawthorne emphasizes, similar problems arise for contextualism and the *Knowledge Rule of Practical Reasoning* (PR). For once the contextualist has replaced (PR) with (PR’), she is forced to accept that, in our toy example, Lo can truthfully assert the following sentence:

- (3) Hi knows p but she ought not to use p as a premise in her practical reasoning because her epistemic position is not strong enough with respect to p .

And again, we can infer that Lo can truthfully assert the following rather implausible existential generalization:

- (4) There are things people know but ought not to use as premises in their practical reasoning because their epistemic position is not strong enough with respect to those things.

Drawing inspiration from Tim Williamson (2005b, p. 111) and Matt McGrath (2010, p. 396) we may produce a similar objection to contextualism based on (B’). As should be obvious by now, if we accept both contextualism and (B’), then we are committed to the view that Lo can truthfully assert the following sentence:

- (5) Hi knows p but she ought not to outright believe p because her epistemic position is not strong enough with respect to p .

And again, we can infer from (5) the existentially generalized (6):

- (6) There are things people know but ought not to outright believe because their epistemic position is not strong enough with respect to those things.⁵

Up until now we have only considered implausible consequences arising from EC and the *sufficiency* claims made by the principles (A'), (B') and (PR')—that is, by the claims that the satisfaction of 'knows *p*' in *C* is *sufficient* for assertion, belief, or practical reasoning in *C*. However, the principles (A'), (B') and (PR') are biconditionals, and—as Hawthorne contends with respect to those principles governing assertion and practical reasoning—EC seems equally troubled by their *necessity* claims. In particular, Hawthorne (2004a, p. 88) shows that from the conjunction of (A') and EC we can infer that there are possible high-standards contexts in which we can truthfully assert (7):

- (7) People often flat-out assert things that they do not know to be true but are not thereby subject to criticism.

To illustrate why the contextualist is committed to the existence of true utterances of (7), consider Hi's utterance of (8):

- (8) It is permissible for Lo to assert *p* even though she doesn't know *p*.

Similar consequences arise with respect to (B') and (PR'):

- (9) It is permissible for Lo to outright believe *p* even though she doesn't know *p*.
(10) It is permissible for Lo to use *p* as a premise in her practical reasoning even though she doesn't know *p*.

And again, we see that (9) and (10) license the truth of the existentially quantified sentences (11) and (12) respectively:

- (11) People often rely on things that they don't know to be true in their practical reasoning but are not thereby subject to criticism.⁶
(12) People often outright believe things that they don't know to be true but are not thereby subject to criticism.

At this point I should presumably note that I do not find the examples (7)-(12) as unintuitive and bizarre as (1)-(6). In fact, it is worth emphasizing that to some of my informants these examples do not seem odd at all.⁷ Given their somewhat unclear intuitive standing, I shall in what follows ignore the necessity cases. It is worth emphasizing, however, that the contextualist cannot gain a dialectical advantage from

such a move—Hawthorne’s and Williamson’s conclusion is, after all, more than amply supported by the data from (1)-(6). Those cases demonstrate rather forcefully, I believe, that it just does not seem right that the normative constraints governing assertion, belief, and practical reasoning are ascriber-dependent in the way the contextualist claims ‘knows’ is. Thus, I conclude together with Hawthorne (2004a, p. 86) that contextualism ‘seems to disconnect facts about knowledge from [the] normative facts’ in a way that appears ‘highly disruptive to our intuitive sense of the epistemic landscape’.⁸

Non-Obvious Context-Sensitivity

Is there a good response available to the contextualist? Why is it that utterances of the above sentences seem so bizarre to us, given that they are, assuming EC, sometimes true?⁹ In dealing with these questions it is, I take it, crucial to consider other examples that are problematic for the contextualist. To begin with, note that, according to contextualism, Hi from our toy example can truthfully assert the sentences under (13), while Lo can truthfully utter those under (14):

- (13) Lo doesn’t know p , but her utterance of ‘I know p ’ is true.
Lo doesn’t know p , but her utterance of ‘I don’t know p ’ is false.
- (14) Hi knows p , but her utterance of ‘I know p ’ is false.
Hi knows p , but her utterance of ‘I don’t know p ’ is true.

Interestingly, these examples are very similar to the ones from the previous section. For instance, note that (13) and (14) are also felt to express contradictions or to exhibit a considerable amount of conceptual tension. Besides these phenomenological similarities, it bears emphasizing that (13) and (14)—just like (1)-(6)—express counterintuitive truths only when interpreted on the backdrop of our toy example featuring Hi and Lo. More specifically, the type of background example required involves an asymmetry of epistemic standards between ascriber’s context and subject’s context—an asymmetry that competent speakers seem unable to pick up on when interpreting the examples at issue.¹⁰ Given these rather striking similarities, we may hypothesize that the puzzling cases from the previous section are instances of a broader phenomenon that is altogether independent of the normative constraints articulated by (A’), (B’) and (PR’).

The phenomenon hinted at by the above cases is, of course, familiar from discussions of the so-called ‘semantic blindness objection’ to epistemic contextualism. In fact, examples such as (13) and (14) have been used abundantly to object to contextualism by a large and illustrious group of philosophers.¹¹ Contextualists themselves, on the other hand, have developed responses to objections of this type. The most widely accepted line of argument is to acknowledge that while ‘know’ behaves rather differently from what we may call *core indexicals*—expressions such as ‘I’, ‘here’, ‘now’, and ‘tomorrow’—it behaves remarkably similarly to predicates that are associated with contextually filled but unpronounced (or ‘hidden’) argument places.^{12,13} In particular, ‘knows’ is often claimed to behave remarkably similarly to gradable adjectives such as ‘flat’ or ‘empty’. To give a flavour of this similarity note that problematic cases analogous to (13) and (14) also arise for ‘flat’ and ‘empty’:¹⁴

- (15) *A* isn’t flat, but Phil’s utterance of ‘*A* is flat’ is true.
A is flat, but Phil’s utterance of ‘*A* is flat’ is false.
- (16) *A* isn’t empty, but Phil’s utterance of ‘*A* is empty’ is true.
A is empty, but Phil’s utterance of ‘*A* is empty’ is false.

Further examples illustrating the non-obviousness of the context-sensitivity of ‘knows’, ‘flat’, and ‘empty’ are familiar from the literature. Here is a disquotation principle for ‘knows’ originating from (Hawthorne 2004a, p. 101):

- (17) If an English speaker *E* sincerely utters a sentence *S* of the form ‘*A* knows that *p*’, and the sentence in the that-clause means that *p* and ‘*A*’ is a name or indexical that refers to *a*, then *E* believes of *a* that *a* knows that *p*, and expresses that belief by *S*.

As Hawthorne (ibid.) points out, (17) seems entirely natural. But, of course, (17) is false if ‘knows’ is context-sensitive: since *E*’s context might be governed by epistemic standards that are different from those operative in this paper, the disquotation of ‘knows’ in (17) is illegitimate. Since the possibility of an asymmetry between *E*’s and our own epistemic standards is largely hidden from competent speakers, the contextualist must again accept that the context-sensitivity of ‘knows’ is non-obvious: it is not as readily detected by competent speakers as the context-sensitivity of core indexicals.

What is again worth emphasizing at this point, however, is that the gradable adjectives ‘flat’ and ‘empty’ display very similar behaviour with respect to disquotatation principles such as (17). Consider the following two principles:

- (18) If an English speaker *E* sincerely utters a sentence *S* of the form ‘*A* is flat’, and ‘*A*’ is a name or indexical that refers to *a*, then *E* believes of *a* that *a* is flat, and expresses that belief by *S*.
- (19) If an English speaker *E* sincerely utters a sentence *S* of the form ‘*A* is empty’, and ‘*A*’ is a name or indexical that refers to *a*, then *E* believes of *a* that *a* is empty, and expresses that belief by *S*.

As (18) and (19) demonstrate, the context-sensitivity of ‘flat’ and ‘empty’ is just as non-obvious or hidden from competent speakers as the context-sensitivity of ‘knows’. Thus, on the assumption that gradable adjectives are in fact context-sensitive, the (supposed) context-sensitivity of ‘knows’ has been shown to be no more puzzling or mysterious than the comparatively humdrum context-sensitivity of ‘flat’ and ‘empty’. It is due to data such as these that there is a growing consensus in the literature that the semantic blindness objection is not all that damaging to contextualism.¹⁵

But let us return to the topic of contextualism and the knowledge norms. We have seen above that with respect to expressions that are non-obviously context-sensitive, speakers are sometimes unaware of the possibility that there is an asymmetry between the ascriber’s and the evoked subject’s standards of flatness, emptiness, or epistemic strength. The reason why competent speakers are prone to disregard this possibility is an interesting question; but one that is, I take it, to be answered by psycholinguists rather than philosophers. What matters to us at this point is that speakers do in fact make the mentioned type of mistake when confronted with examples involving asymmetrical distributions of standards. Given that all of the examples from the previous section are instances of this general type, it is, I take it, not surprising that the sentences at issue should appear rather bizarre. Competent speakers tend to read the examples from the previous section on the background assumption that there is no asymmetry between the ascriber’s and the subject’s epistemic standards. On that assumption, however, the examples express genuine violations of the normative constraints articulated by (A’), (B’) and (PR’). It is, therefore, not really startling that they should seem odd.

To illustrate this point further let us consider a particular example. Here is (2) again:

- (2) Hi knows p but she ought not to assert p because her epistemic position is not strong enough with respect to p .

Remember that utterances of (2) by Lo were said to be true for the following reasons: the first conjunct of (2) is, given contextualism, true because ‘knows p ’ takes its semantic value in the ascriber’s context of utterance—in this case in Lo’s context, which is governed by low epistemic standards. The second conjunct of Lo’s utterance of (2) is true, too, because, assuming (A’), Hi is permitted to assert p iff she satisfies ‘knows p ’ in her own—that is, in Hi’s—context. But since, by assumption, Hi doesn’t satisfy ‘knows p ’ in Hi’s context, it follows that she ought not to assert p because her epistemic position is not strong enough with respect to p . Thus, given (A’) and EC, both conjuncts of (2) as uttered by Lo are true—and that is so because ‘knows’ in (2)’s first conjunct is sensitive to Lo’s low standards while Hi’s higher standards determine the truth-value of the second conjunct. The truth-value of Lo’s utterance of (2) is, accordingly, partly determined by Lo’s epistemic standards and partly determined by Hi’s epistemic standards. Moreover, Lo’s utterance of (2) is only true because the ascriber’s (that is, Lo’s) standards differ from the subject’s (Hi’s).

Given our notorious blindness towards the fact that the subject’s and the ascriber’s standards may differ, it is now no longer surprising that competent speakers should find (2) bizarre—despite its expressing a truth in Lo’s mouth. This is so because utterances of (2) are in fact in violation of the highly intuitive (A’), given ordinary speakers’ implicit assumption of symmetrical standards. To illustrate this further note that if Hi had the same standards as Lo does, it would, given (A’), be permissible for Hi to assert p iff Hi satisfies ‘knows p ’ in *Lo’s* context. In other words, given (A’) and ordinary speakers’ assumption of symmetrical standards, (2) must express a falsehood, for if the standards are in fact symmetrical, then the truth of (2)’s first conjunct entails, together with (A’), the falsity of its second conjunct. Given our tendency to assume symmetrical standards—illustrated not only by (13) and (14) but also by examples involving gradable adjectives such as (15)-(19)—it is thus to be expected that ordinary speakers should find (2) rather bizarre. Summing up, what accounts for ordinary speakers’ intuitions concerning (2) is their blindness towards the fact that epistemic standards sometimes vary between subject and ascriber—or, at least, that they sometimes do so in examples cooked up by

philosophers. Analogous considerations apply with respect to (4) and (6), and thus also with respect to the examples they are used to motivate—that is, with respect to (1), (3), and (5). In conclusion, acknowledging the fairly widespread phenomenon of non-obvious context-sensitivity (recently embraced by even some of contextualism’s most ardent former critics (see Cappelen and Hawthorne 2009))¹⁶ provides us with an independently motivated solution to the puzzles that the mentioned epistemic norms have been argued to generate in a contextualist framework.

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Notes

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¹ Cp. (Brown 2010, pp. 249-50).

² As Williamson (2005b, p. 108) puts it, ‘if one knows [p], then one can hardly be wrong to believe [p]; conversely, given that one does not know [p], it arguably is wrong to believe [p].’ McGrath (2010, p. 396) only assumes the sufficiency of knowledge for permissible belief.

³ See, for instance, (Kvanvig 2007, Lackey 2007, Brown 2008b, 2010, forthcoming, Goldman 2008, Littlejohn 2009, Smithies 2010, Neta 2009). For an alternative view to the knowledge norm of belief see (Wedgwood 2002, forthcoming).

⁴ For a different approach see Goldman (2008, p. 472), who argues that ‘[g]iven the falsity of [the] principles on which Hawthorne relies, contextualism cannot be faulted for violating them.’

⁵ In a draft version of his (2010) that is available on his website at <<http://web.missouri.edu/~mcgrathma/pubs-papers/ContextualismIntellectualism.doc>> McGrath uses very similar examples, pointing out that the resulting constructions ‘sound[...] decidedly wrong’. However, McGrath has removed the material from the published version of the paper.

⁶ Hawthorne (2004a, p. 88) uses the example ‘You should rely on propositions that you don’t know to be true in your practical reasoning’ instead of my (11), but Hawthorne’s obliging sentence cannot be derived from contextualism in conjunction with the merely permissive (PR): surely, Hawthorne’s ‘should’ was meant to be a ‘may’ here. Moreover, it should be noted that the use of the second-person personal pronoun ‘you’ instead of a proper name or a third-person personal pronoun is problematic, since it suggests that subject and ascriber of Hawthorne’s sentence are in the same conversational context. For utterances of the relevant type of sentence to be true, however, subject and ascriber must be in different contexts with different epistemic standards.

⁷ In a similar vein, Brown (2008a, p. 1141ff), Littlejohn (2009, p. 464), and Smithies (2010, p. 5) point out how natural it is to think that subjects in Gettier (or fake barn) situations are permitted to assert *p* or rely on *p* in their practical reasoning despite the fact that they do not know *p*.

⁸ (Hawthorne 2004a, p. 31). In other places Hawthorne (2004b, p. 519) is more guarded and admits that ‘[n]one of this leaves me utterly convinced that contextualism is wrong’. I am more pessimistic: I take it that if there is no satisfactory response to Hawthorne’s challenge, then these examples present a rather serious objection to contextualism.

⁹ Cohen (2004) and DeRose (2009, pp. 246-251) have offered responses to Hawthorne's objection. However, I take it that neither of those responses is fully satisfactory. DeRose develops three different approaches for handling the cases at issue. As DeRose himself (2009, p. 250) admits, his first approach cannot handle all of the above examples; I shall therefore ignore it. On DeRose's second approach (2009, p. 247), utterances of the problematic sentences cannot express truths because of the way in which epistemic standards are determined by context. In particular, DeRose claims that the very assertion of one of the above sentences changes the epistemic standards in a way that makes their knowledge-ascribing (or denying) conjuncts either false or truth-valueless. There are two problems with this approach. First, the data from Hawthorne's cases are not that we deem utterances of the relevant sentences odd because their knowledge-ascribing (or denying) conjuncts are false or truth-valueless. Rather, we deem them odd because they seem contradictory or because we sense a distinct conceptual tension between their conjuncts. Secondly, DeRose does not offer a general account of what epistemic standards are and how they are determined by context. But without such a general account, the claim that utterances of the above sentences shift epistemic standards must seem *ad hoc* (cp. Blome-Tillmann 2009, p. 289). On DeRose's third and preferred approach the problematic sentences can sometimes express truths but 'will at least often be problematic, badly misleading, and will constitute cases of speakers choosing to say the wrong thing' (2009, p. 248). DeRose (2009, p. 251) further proposes that instead of asserting the sentences at issue, speakers should assert sentences that contain explicit reference to the epistemic standards in both the ascriber's and the subject's context to avoid the oddity of the examples (1)-(12). I am unsure whether I understand DeRose's third approach properly, but it seems to me that it does not offer an explanation of the relevant sentences' oddity. For another approach to the above examples see (Cohen 2004), and for criticism of that approach see (Hawthorne 2004b).

¹⁰ Note that the mentioned examples are usually considered out of context and do not include descriptive names such as 'Hi' or 'Low'. In such cases it is, I take it, even less likely that philosophically untrained (but competent) speakers would pick up on the mentioned contextual asymmetry.

¹¹ See e.g. (Schiffer 1996, Feldman 1999, Pritchard 2002, Davis 2004, Hawthorne 2004a, Stanley 2004, 2005, Bach 2005, MacFarlane 2005, forthcoming, Williamson 2005a, 2005b).

¹² See (Neta 2003, Cohen 2005, DeRose 2006, Blome-Tillmann 2008, Schaffer and Szabó forthcoming).

¹³ In fact, the analogy suggests an explanation of why the context-sensitivity of 'knows' and that of gradable adjectives is more non-obvious than that of core indexicals: as far as I can tell, all and only non-obvious indexicals are context-sensitive in virtue of being associated with contextually filled but unpronounced argument places.

¹⁴ For discussion of the comparison between 'know' and gradable adjectives see (Blome-Tillmann 2008), which is based on materials from my 2003 Oxford BPhil thesis. See also Cohen (2005), who argues along similar lines, as does DeRose (2006, pp. 209-212; 2009, ch. 5; DeRose uses cases containing 'tall' instead of examples containing 'flat' and 'empty').

¹⁵ In fact, two of EC's previous and most ardent critics, Herman Cappelen (2005) and John Hawthorne, are now (Cappelen and Hawthorne 2009) proposing more relaxed criteria for context-sensitivity that arguably classify 'knows' as context-sensitive.

¹⁶ Note that the context-sensitivity of the non-gradable adjectives 'local' and 'nearby' is non-obvious, too. Again, it is worth noting that these predicates are plausibly construed as being associated with hidden context-sensitive argument places.

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