Skepticism and Contextualism

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1. What is Epistemic Contextualism?

Let's begin with an example.[1] Imagine schoolteacher Jones in the zoo explaining to her class that the animals in the pen are zebras. Tom is unconvinced and challenges Jones: "Are you sure those aren't antelopes?" After Jones has explained the difference between antelopes and zebras, Tom assures his classmates:

(1) She knows that the animals in the pen are zebras.

Has Tom spoken truly? Surely, Jones's epistemic position seems good enough for satisfying the predicate 'knows that the animals in the pen are zebras' (henceforth 'knows $\underline{Z}$'): Jones has visual experiences of a black and white striped horse-like animal, she can discriminate reliably between zebras and antelopes, she has read the sign on the pen that reads 'Zebra Pen', etc. Thus, Tom's utterance of (1) seems to be a paradigm case of a true 'knowledge' attribution.

Next, imagine a couple, Bill and Kate, walking along. Bill, a would-be postmodernist artist, gives details of his latest ideas: he envisions himself painting mules with white stripes to look like zebras, putting them in the zebra pen of a zoo and thereby fooling visitors. Our couple randomly considers Jones, and Kate claims, at the same time as Tom is asserting (1):

(2) She doesn't know that the animals in the pen are zebras.

In Kate's mind, for Jones to 'know $\underline{Z}$', she must have better evidence or reasons in support of $\underline{Z}$ than are momentarily available to her. In particular, Kate has it that Jones's evidence must eliminate the possibility that the animals in the pen are painted mules. As long as her evidence, however, is neutral with respect to whether or not the animals are cleverly painted mules, Kate claims, Jones doesn't qualify as 'knowing $\underline{Z}$'.

What is going on in our little example? According to our intuitions, an utterance of (1) is true in the context of the school class, while an utterance of (2) is true in the context of the artistic couple. Moreover, (2) is the negation of (1): it doesn't differ from (1) except for containing the verbal negation 'doesn't'. And since the personal pronoun 'she' refers in both contexts to Jones, it seems that the schoolteacher satisfies the predicate 'knows Z' in the context of the school class but not so in the context of the artists.

How are we to account for these phenomena? Firstly, note again that Tom and Kate are talking about one and the same person—Jones—at exactly the same time. Thus, we cannot resolve the situation by claiming, for instance, that Jones 'knows Z' in one context but not the other because she believes Z in one context but not in the other. Similarly, we cannot plausibly respond that Jones has certain visual experiences in one context that she is lacking in the other, or that she has the ability to discriminate reliably between certain scenarios in one context but not the other, or, finally, that she has read the sign on the zebra pen in one context but not in the other. All factors pertaining to the subject are identical with respect to both contexts, as the speakers in both contexts—Tom and Kate—are talking about one and the same subject at one and the same time.[2]

Thus, what the above example suggests is that the mentioned factors—Jones's visual experiences, her discriminatory abilities, etc.—are sufficient for her to satisfy 'knows Z' in one context, but not so in the other. And it is this view that epistemic contextualism (EC) takes at face value: how strong one's epistemic position towards p must be for one to satisfy 'know(s) p' may vary with the context of utterance. In the artists' conversational context, Jones needs to be in a stronger epistemic position—she needs more evidence in support of Z—than in the school class's conversational context in order for her to satisfy 'knows Z'. In fact, some contextualists describe the situation by claiming that contexts of utterance are governed by so-called epistemic standards.[3] Given this terminology, the epistemic standards in our example are lower in the context of the school class than in the context of the artists' conversation. In fact, in the former context, the standards are low enough for Jones to satisfy 'knows Z', while in the latter they are too high: Jones doesn't, in the artists' context, satisfy 'knows Z' but, rather, satisfies 'doesn't know Z'. Now, the notion of an epistemic standard can be explicated in a

number of different ways. On the most popular way, which is inspired by <u>relevant alternatives</u> approaches to contextualism, epistemic standards are said to be higher in the school class's context because, as David Lewis (1996) puts it, satisfying 'knows <u>Z</u>' in that context doesn't require the elimination of the possibility that the animals are painted mules, while this is required in the context of the postmodernist artists: more alternatives must be eliminated in the context with the higher standards than in the context with the lower standards.

Given the hypothesized context-sensitivity of the predicate 'know(s) <u>p</u>', it is in general possible that a subject satisfies the predicate in one conversational context but doesn't do so in another, or, in other words, that somebody in a given context speaks truly when uttering a sentence of the form '<u>x</u> knows <u>p</u>' while somebody in a different context speaks falsely when uttering the very same sentence—even though both speakers are speaking about the same subject <u>x</u> at the same time of utterance <u>t</u>. Epistemic contextualism is, as a consequence, a linguistic or a semantic view—namely, the view that 'knowledge'-ascriptions—sentences of the form '<u>x</u> knows <u>p</u>'—may express different propositions in different contexts of utterance. According to EC, 'knowledge'-ascriptions are, as Stanley (2005: 17) puts it, context-sensitive in a distinctively epistemological way: the content of a sentence <u>S</u> containing the predicate 'know(s) <u>p</u>' can change with context, independently of whether <u>S</u> contains further indexicals, is ambiguous, or is context-sensitive in any other way.

In a first approximation, we can thus define 'epistemic contextualism' as follows:

(EC′)   Knowledge ascriptions may express different propositions relative to different contexts of utterance, where this difference is traceable to the occurrence of 'know(s) <u>p</u>' and concerns a distinctively epistemic factor.

Given semantic compositionality—the view that the content or semantic value of complex expressions is a function of its ultimate constituents and the way in which they are combined—(EC′) entails (EC):

(EC) The content of the predicate 'know(s) p' may vary with the context of utterance in a distinctly epistemic way.

According to EC, the predicate 'know(s) p' adds context-sensitivity to a sentence it occurs in, and this context-sensitivity is distinctly epistemic—that is, it goes over and above the context-sensitivity that the verb contributes to the sentence by virtue of its tense.[4]

The exact details as to how to semantically model the context-sensitivity of 'know(s) p' shall not concern us in this article. However, it is worth noting that EC is not a lexical ambiguity theory—that is, it doesn't claim that 'know(s) p' is assigned multiple conventional meanings in English, as are the lexically ambiguous expressions 'bank' or 'orange'. On the contrary, contextualists have commonly compared 'know(s) p' to indexical expressions, such as 'I', 'that', and 'today' or to gradable adjectives such as 'flat' and 'empty': these expressions are widely taken to have only one conventional meaning—what Kaplan (1989) calls their 'character'—but different contents or semantic values in suitably different contexts of utterance.

While there are several distinct ways to semantically model the context-sensitivity of 'know(s) p', contextualists have often stressed an analogy between the semantics of 'know(s) p' and the semantics of gradable adjectives such as 'flat', 'empty', or 'tall': just as what counts as satisfying 'flat', 'empty', or 'tall' may vary with context, contextualists have argued, what counts as satisfying 'know(s) p' may vary with context, too.[5] Given this analogy, EC can be construed as claiming that (1) and (2) in our above example stand in a relation similar to the relation between a basketball coach's utterance of 'MB-T isn't tall' and a jockey coach's utterance of 'MB-T is tall': while the surface syntax of these sentences suggests a contradiction, the propositions expressed are compatible, as the semantic value of 'tall' changes with the context of utterance. Ordinary usage of 'tall' and 'know' seem to be similar: both expressions seem to be context-sensitive.[6]

2. Evidence for Contextualism

The main evidence for EC derives from our intuitions about the truth-values of 'knowledge'-ascriptions in examples such as the above zebra case. However, there are

further, more familiar examples that have been presented in support of EC in the literature. Consider, for instance, Stewart Cohen's (1999: 58) 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 responds, "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 doesn't really know that the plane will stop in Chicago. They decide to check with the airline agent.

As Cohen's example suggests, the sentence 'Smith knows that the flight stops over in Chicago' seems true as uttered in Smith's context but false as uttered in Mary's and John's context. Moreover, it seems as though the practical interests and goals of the conversational participants or how high the stakes are with regard to the proposition that the flight will stop over in Chicago influence the respective contexts' epistemic standards, and thus whether Smith satisfies 'knows': in Smith's own context he satisfies 'knows that the flight will stop over in Chicago', but in Mary's and John's context, where the stakes are significantly higher, he doesn't.

Here is another example reinforcing this point—namely, Keith DeRose's (1992) famous Bank Cases, as presented by Stanley (2005: 3–4):

> Low 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. It is not important that they do so, as they have no impending bills. But as they drive past the bank, they notice that the lines inside are very long, as they often are on Friday afternoons. Realizing that it isn't very important that their paychecks are

deposited right away, Hannah says, "I know the bank will be open tomorrow, since I was there just two weeks ago on Saturday morning. So we can deposit our paychecks tomorrow morning."

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. Hannah notes that she was at the bank two weeks before on a Saturday morning, and it was open. But, as Sarah points out, banks do change their hours. Hannah says, "I guess you're right. I don't know that the bank will be open tomorrow."

Similar to Cohen's example, DeRose's case suggests that it is more difficult to satisfy 'knows' in a context in which the stakes are higher: in Low Stakes Hannah satisfies 'knows that the bank will be open tomorrow', whereas in High Stakes she doesn't, even though she is in exactly the same epistemic position in both cases. And, again, the defender of EC argues that the difference in our intuitions in the two bank cases is due to the fact that the relevant 'knowledge'-ascriptions are made in different conversational contexts: in the context of High Stakes, the argument goes, it is considerably more difficult to satisfy 'knows that the bank is open on Saturday' than it is in the context of Low Stakes.[7]

The above examples and others like them have attracted a large amount of critical attention in recent years. Note, for instance, that the argument in support of EC emerging from the above data amounts to an inference to the best explanation: in evaluating the support EC receives from the examples, we must therefore compare EC's account of the data with competing explanations of rival theories. Such comparisons of explanatory virtue in philosophy, however, are usually rather difficult and complicated. A further challenge to EC's account of the above data pertains to the data's evidential status: some practitioners of so-called "experimental philosophy" have, in recent studies, aimed to

undermine the contextualists' case by arguing that the professional philosopher's intuitions about the above cases do not coincide with the intuitions of the more general public. Now, while the above issues present interesting and legitimate challenges to EC, we shall, in this article, leave them to one side and focus our attention on a topic that is commonly taken to provide an important philosophical motivation for EC: skeptical puzzles.[8]

3. Cartesian Skeptical Puzzles

We have seen so far that EC receives some prima facie support from certain linguistic data—namely, the examples discussed in the previous sections. Traditionally, however, contextualists have also claimed that besides the above empirical evidence in favor of their views there is also an independent, philosophical motivation for EC. More specifically, contextualists have argued that the context-sensitivity of 'know(s) p' suggested by the above examples provides us with an attractive resolution of skeptical puzzles. Now, even though the issue of skepticism has somewhat moved into the background in recent discussions of EC, it is certainly worthwhile considering the traditional contextualist treatment of skepticism in some detail.[9]

To begin our discussion of the contextualist response to skepticism, consider the following argument:

Skeptical Argument
(i)   If I know that I have hands, then I'm in a position to know that I'm not a handless brain in a vat.
(ii)   I'm not in a position to know that I'm not a handless brain in a vat.
(iii)   I don't know that I have hands.[10]

The above argument is valid: if we accept its premises, we must accept its conclusion, too. Moreover, the above skeptical argument leaves us with a philosophical puzzle: its premises are highly plausible while its conclusion is highly implausible. One way to bring this out in more detail is to consider the negation of its conclusion:

(iv)   I know that I have hands.

The propositions (i), (ii), and (iv) form an inconsistent set; and so at least one of them has to be rejected. However, merely rejecting one of the members of our set doesn't amount to a satisfactory resolution of our puzzle. As Stewart Cohen (1988: 94) has pointed out, an intellectually satisfying resolution of the skeptical puzzle doesn't merely block the argument by identifying the culprit. Rather, a satisfactory resolution of the skeptical puzzle must, in addition, offer us an explanation of why the false member of the set appeared so plausible at first glance (see also Cohen 1999: 63). Why is it that our intuitions about the truth-values of at least one of the propositions at issue are misguided? And what exactly is the mistake we have made when we find ourselves puzzled by the Skeptical Argument?

4. The Contextualist Solution to Skeptical Puzzles

The traditional contextualist's response to the skeptical puzzle is to claim that the Skeptical Argument is unsound in conversational contexts that are governed by our moderate everyday epistemic standards but sound in contexts with artificially high, skeptical epistemic standards.[11] In everyday contexts, the argument goes, I satisfy 'knows that he isn't a handless brain in a vat' and premise (ii) of the skeptical argument expresses a falsehood: if I satisfy, in ordinary contexts, 'knows that he isn't a handless brain in a vat', then I also satisfy, in ordinary contexts, 'is in a position to know that he's not a handless brain in a vat'. Consequently, the Skeptical Argument is unsound in ordinary contexts, and its conclusion doesn't follow: relative to ordinary contexts, I satisfy 'knows that he has hands' and the conclusion of the skeptical argument expresses a falsehood.

However, as indicated already, things are different in so-called skeptical contexts in which we practice epistemology and consider and discuss skeptical scenarios such as the brain-in-a-vat scenario. In such contexts, the argument goes, the epistemic standards are considerably higher—in fact, outrageously high—to the effect that premise (ii) expresses a truth in such contexts. For instance, contextualists have argued that because skeptical possibilities are epistemically relevant in skeptical contexts, premise (ii) of the Skeptical Argument expresses a truth: skeptical possibilities are, after all, uneliminated

by our evidence, and we therefore do not, in skeptical contexts in which they are relevant, satisfy the predicate 'is in a position to know that s/he is not a handless brain in a vat'. Consequently, when the skeptic asserts, in her skeptical context, 'MB-T doesn't know that he has hands', she asserts a truth. However, it is crucial to emphasize that the truth of the skeptic's assertion does not affect the truth-values of my positive 'knowledge'-ascriptions in ordinary contexts.

To illustrate this view further, it is worth noting that traditional contextualists aim to resolve the tensions between our anti-skeptical intuitions on the one hand and the intuition that skeptical arguments are sound (and their conclusions, therefore, true) on the other. We can represent these intuitions as follows:

<u>Anti-Skeptical</u> <u>Intuition</u> (ASI)
People often speak truly when they assert 'I know <u>p</u>'.

<u>Skeptical</u> <u>Intuition</u> (SI)
People sometimes speak truly when they assert 'Nobody knows <u>p</u>' in contexts in which skeptical arguments are discussed.

The traditional contextualist claims that both of these intuitions are correct and only seemingly contradictory: they are correct because the semantic value of 'know(s) <u>p</u>' varies with the context of utterance; so when we claim in everyday contexts that we 'know <u>p</u>', our utterances are not in contradiction to our utterance of 'Nobody knows <u>p</u>' in skeptical contexts. Thus, it is crucial to note that, according to the traditional contextualist, it is not (iv) which is shown to be true or (iii) which is shown to be false. Rather, the traditional contextualist emphasizes that our skeptical and anti-skeptical intuitions are exclusively intuitions about the truth-values of <u>utterance</u> <u>tokens</u>, which are by their very nature situated in particular conversational contexts. Our intuitions are not about the truth-values of sentences as considered more or less in the abstract in a philosophical essay or discussion. Once we appreciate this point and take into account the context-sensitivity of 'knowledge'-attributions, the skeptical puzzle is—the traditional contextualist argues—easily dissolved: the argument is sound in contexts with

exceedingly high or skeptical epistemic standards, but unsound in contexts with ordinary or everyday epistemic standards.

5. Error Theory and Contextual Shifts

An important question arises at this point: if the semantic value of 'know' can in fact change in a way allowing for both (ASI) and (SI) to be true, why, then, are we initially puzzled by skeptical arguments? Shouldn't we be somehow sensitive to or aware of the context-sensitivity of 'know(s) p' and avoid making the mistake the contextualist ascribes to us? If EC is true, why, in other words, are skeptical arguments puzzling in the first place?

To account for the puzzling nature of skeptical arguments, the contextualist is committed to the view that we sometimes lose sight of the context-sensitivity of epistemic terms, and in particular that we do so when confronted with skeptical arguments.[12] Therefore, according to the traditional contextualist, we do not recognize that the skeptical conclusion is true in the context of discussions of skeptical arguments while false in everyday contexts. Thus, the traditional contextualist argues that, when we are puzzled by skeptical arguments, we fail to realize that the propositions expressed by the arguments' conclusions are perfectly compatible with the propositions expressed by our everyday 'knowledge'-claims. Contextualists accordingly pair their semantics of 'know(s) p' with the view that we are sometimes unaware of or tend to overlook the context-sensitivity of 'know(s) p'. Stephen Schiffer, in an important paper criticizing this view, aptly calls this element of standard contextualism its error theory (see Schiffer 1996). Ultimately, it is, of course, entirely due to this error theory that EC can claim to be able to account for both the plausibility of skeptical arguments and our intuition that our everyday 'knowledge'-ascriptions express truths.

We shall return to the plausibility of EC's error theory later on in this article (in Section 7). In the meantime, however, note that the contextualist's resolution of skeptical puzzles makes crucial use of the intuitive notion of a shift in or variation of epistemic standards between contexts. It is important to note at this point, however, that arguing for the context-sensitivity of 'know(s) p' on the basis of the claim that the Bank Case, the Airport Case, and our Zebra Case involve contextual variation of epistemic standards is

one thing, while claiming that epistemic standards are 'shifty' in precisely the way required for a resolution of skeptical puzzles is quite a different proposition. In fact, for the contextualist's resolution of skeptical puzzles to be credible, we need to be told more about what exactly the mechanisms underlying contextual shifts and variations are. In other words, we need to be told more about what epistemic standards are and how they are determined by context: why is it that epistemic standards are high in so-called skeptical contexts, and why are they lower in everyday situations?

Different contextualists have different stories to tell about what epistemic standards are and about how they shift and vary. But it is fair to say that the original approaches defended by early contextualists (such as DeRose (1995) and Lewis (1996)) are highly problematic and must be refined and amended substantially before we can grant the contextualist that her view offers a resolution of skeptical puzzles. However, a detailed discussion of the more recent literature on epistemic standards is beyond the scope of this article.[13]

6. Closure

Another important aspect of the contextualist resolution of skeptical puzzles to be mentioned here is that the contextualist resolves skeptical puzzles while fully respecting our intuition that one can extend one's knowledge by competent deduction. To see what I have in mind here, consider the following principle, which is familiar under the label Single-Premise Closure:

> (CL)   If x knows p and x knows that p entails q, then x is in a position to know q.

Here is an instance of (CL) for illustration: if, firstly, I know that the animal outside my window is a fox and if, secondly, I know that its being a fox entails that it's not a cat, then I am also in a position to know that the animal outside my window is not a cat. Of course, I am in a position to know that latter proposition because I can competently deduce it from (i) my knowledge that the animal is a fox and (ii) my knowledge that its being a fox entails that it is not a cat. Single-premise closure captures fairly precisely the intuition that one can extend one's knowledge by means of deductive reasoning.

Now, while some epistemologists have argued that giving a response to the skeptic requires us to give up (CL), the contextualist resolution gets by without any such move.[14] How does the contextualist avoid rejecting closure? Note that, according to EC, every semantic value that the verb 'knows' can express in a given context is, loosely speaking, closed under 'known' entailment. Here is a more precise and contextualized formulation of the single-premise principle to illustrate the idea:

(CLC)   If $\underline{x}$ satisfies 'knows $\underline{p}$' in context $\underline{C}$ and satisfies 'knows that $\underline{p}$ entails $\underline{q}$' in $\underline{C}$, then $\underline{x}$ is in a position to satisfy 'knows $\underline{q}$' in $\underline{C}$.

(CLC) is a meta-linguistic principle. Loosely speaking, (CLC) says that (CL), its non-contextualized cousin, expresses a truth as long as the conversational context is kept fixed.[15] Thus, unlike Nozick (1981) and Dretske (1970), who reject (CL) in giving a response to the skeptic, the contextualist, by ascending semantically, merely modifies and clarifies (CL) in a way that respects our intuitions about the validity of the closure principle. Contextualists have traditionally taken this to be a great comparative advantage of their theories over epistemological theories that advocate closure failure.

7. Criticisms of Contextualism

Epistemic contextualism has been criticized for a number of reasons. In this paper, we shall focus on two criticisms of EC that have figured most prominently in the recent literature. Firstly, Ernest Sosa has wondered what the epistemological relevance of contextualism is, given that EC is a linguistic view—that is, a view about the predicate 'know(s) $\underline{p}$' and its content rather than about knowledge. Considering the contextualist's resolution of skeptical puzzles sketched above, this worry may appear somewhat surprising. However, Sosa thinks that EC, even though true, has only little epistemological relevance, if any at all:

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 … (Sosa 2011: 98)

What, then, is Sosa's objection? To see what Sosa has in mind, let us introduce some technical language. Let 'KE' express the content of 'know' in everyday contexts and let 'KS' express the content of 'know' in skeptical contexts. Now consider (3), which we derive from (ASI) by disquotation:

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

Depending on whether the epistemic standards of our present context are those of everyday contexts or those of skeptical contexts (3) expresses the content of either (4) or (5):

(4) People often speak truly when they assert that they KE p.
(5) People often speak truly when they assert that they KS p.

Since Sosa assumes that contexts of epistemological enquiry are inevitably skeptical contexts, Sosa thinks that (3), in the context of this article, expresses the proposition expressed by (5). Now, the alleged problem for EC is that (5) is clearly false, 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 KE rather than KS. Thus, Sosa complains that contextualists convey a falsehood, when they assert (3) in a context of epistemological discussion.

How serious an objection is this to EC? The obvious reply to Sosa's objection is, of course, that the contextualist ought to distinguish more carefully between the mention and the use of 'know' and thus only assert (ASI) instead of the disquoted (3): Sosa's objection rests on a conflation of the use/mention-distinction.[16] Moreover, it is worthwhile noting that more recent contextualists have developed accounts according to which contexts of philosophical and epistemological enquiry are by no means automatically skeptical contexts.[17] On these more moderate views (3), in the context of this paper, expresses the content of (4) rather than that of (5), and I therefore speak truly when, in the context of this paper and the epistemology classroom more generally,

asserting (3). As a consequence, there are several ways the contextualist can respond to Sosa's charge that EC is epistemologically irrelevant.

Another recently influential type of objection to EC proceeds by highlighting disparities between certain linguistic properties of 'know(s) p' on the one hand and more recognized context-sensitive expressions on the other. Remember that, for instance, contextualists compare 'know(s) p' to gradable adjectives, such as 'flat', 'empty', and 'tall'. However, as Jason Stanley (2005, ch. 2) has pointed out, 'know(s) p' has very different syntactic properties from gradable adjectives: as Stanley shows in great detail, 'know(s) p' is not syntactically gradable and doesn't accept a large number of constructions that gradable adjectives can be felicitously combined with. Similarly, it has been pointed out that our semantic blindness towards the context-sensitivity of 'know(s) p'—discussed above under the label of EC's error theory—is not observed in connection with recognized indexicals such as 'I', 'here', and 'today'. This fact is illustrated by the following principle:

> (6) 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 John Hawthorne (2004: 101) points out, (6) seems entirely natural. But, of course, (6) is false if 'know(s) p' 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 (6) 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 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.

Interestingly, however, similar phenomena are not observed with respect to 'I'. Consider (7), a disquotation principle for 'I':

(7) If an English speaker $\underline{E}$ sincerely utters a sentence $\underline{S}$ of the form 'I am

hungry', then $\underline{E}$ believes that I am hungry, and expresses that belief by $\underline{S}$.

Clearly, it is not the case that every English speaker who utters 'I am hungry' believes that I, MB-T, am hungry.

What is worth emphasizing in response to Hawthorne's worry, however, is that the gradable adjectives 'flat' and 'empty' display somewhat similar behavior with respect to disquotation. Consider the following disquotation principles for 'flat' and 'empty':

(8) If an English speaker $\underline{E}$ sincerely utters a sentence $\underline{S}$ of the form '$\underline{A}$ is flat', and '$\underline{A}$' is a name or indexical that refers to $\underline{a}$, then $\underline{E}$ believes of $\underline{a}$ that $\underline{a}$ is flat, and expresses that belief by $\underline{S}$.

(9) If an English speaker $\underline{E}$ sincerely utters a sentence $\underline{S}$ of the form '$\underline{A}$ is empty', and '$\underline{A}$' is a name or indexical that refers to $\underline{a}$, then $\underline{E}$ believes of $\underline{a}$ that $\underline{a}$ is empty, and expresses that belief by $\underline{S}$.

As the intuitive plausibility of (8) and (9) demonstrates, 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 context-sensitivity of 'know(s) $\underline{p}$' 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.
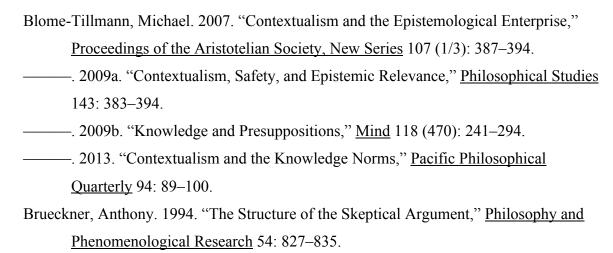
Finally, it is worth emphasizing that, even if 'know(s) $\underline{p}$' varies in certain linguistic respects—whether semantic, syntactic, or pragmatic—from other recognized context-sensitive expressions, it is not clear whether the contextualist should be worried about such a discovery. For why shouldn't we accept that 'know(s) $\underline{p}$' is linguistically exceptional? Let's not forget, after all, that 'know(s) $\underline{p}$' combines a number of fairly interesting and unique properties: 'know(s) $\underline{p}$' is a factive verb that accepts a sentential complement, and its satisfaction at a context is, arguably, the norm of assertion, practical reasoning, and belief at that context.[18] Moreover, 'know(s) $\underline{p}$' gives rise to skeptical

puzzles, which surely makes the predicate rather unique. This combination of properties is no doubt unique, and we should therefore not expect 'know(s) p' to function in each and every linguistic respect exactly like other context-sensitive expressions. Thus, if EC should in fact commit us to the uniqueness of 'know', then this shouldn't worry us too much, as long as a coherent, illuminating, and systematic account of this uniqueness can be given.

8. Conclusion

In summary, epistemic contextualism not only offers an interesting approach to skeptical puzzles but is also motivated by a large set of empirical data. To be sure, the philosophical jury is still out on epistemic contextualism: the view is, after all, still rather contentious and hotly debated in the literature. However, it is undeniable that EC is nowadays rather popular, not only amongst epistemologists but also amongst philosophers more generally.[19] And as we begin to achieve an increasingly better understanding of natural language semantics in general and linguistic context-sensitivity in particular, contextualists may hope that EC will someday become one of the progressively more standard views in philosophy. At least to the author's mind, the prospects are rather bright that EC will one day be considered as making a lasting and important contribution to our understanding of skepticism and skeptical puzzles.

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[1] The following example is derived from the zebra case in Dretske (1970).

[2] Similarly, it follows that we cannot plausibly explain the phenomena by pointing out that Jones is in a different practical situation with respect to the two contexts: she isn't. This fact about the above example provides problems for so-called <u>Subject-Sensitive</u> <u>Invariantist</u> accounts of knowledge. See, for instance, Fantl and McGrath (2002); Hawthorne (2004); Stanley (2005).

[3] Cf. Cohen (1988); DeRose (1995); Lewis (1996).

[4] Cf. Schaffer and Szabó (forthcoming) for the above definition of EC.

[5] For this analogy see Unger (1975); DeRose (1995); Lewis (1996); Cohen (1999, 2004).

[6] Not all contextualists endorse the analogy to gradable adjectives (see, for instance, Schaffer et al. [forthcoming]), but it is at this point helpful in illustrating the general concept of context-sensitivity underlying the view.

[7] Note that since the relevant 'knowledge'-ascriptions in DeRose's bank cases as presented above are made from the first person perspective—they are so-called <u>self-</u><u>ascriptions</u>—the data from DeRose's example are not suited to support EC over certain rival accounts such as <u>Subject-Sensitive</u> <u>Invariantism</u> (SSI): according to SSI, whether one knows p depends in part on one's own and thus the subject's (as opposed to the ascriber's) epistemic standards (see Hawthorne (2004); Stanley (2005); Fantl and McGrath (2009) for versions of this view). A straightforward subject-sensitive invariantist explanation, however, is not available for Cohen's Airport Case and the Zebra Case in Section 1 of this paper.

See DeRose (2011) for a critical discussion of some experimental philosophy papers in the area.

Ludlow (2005), for instance, defends EC purely on the basis of the linguistic data, leaving aside the issue of skepticism entirely.

[10] Here is a formalized version of the argument, where 'sh' is shorthand for 'skeptical hypothesis' and where 'op' ranges over ordinary propositions about the external world:

(i) $Kp \rightarrow \Diamond K\neg sh$. -   A

(ii) $\neg\Diamond K\neg sh$.   -   A

(iii) $\neg Kp$.   i, ii   MT

[11] The following is a description of standard contextualist views on skeptical puzzles, as it can be found—more or less explicitly—in all major writings of contextualists. See, for instance, DeRose (1995) and Cohen (1999).

[12] Cf. Cohen (1988: 106); DeRose (1995: 40).

[13] Lewis's (1996) "Rule of Attention" and DeRose's (1995) "Rule of Sensitivity" offer accounts of contextual shifts that, on the face of it, are useful for the resolution of skeptical puzzles, but that turn out to be problematic for independent reasons. For criticism of DeRose's approach, see Blome-Tillmann (2009a), and, for a refinement of Lewis's relevant alternatives approach to contextualism that avoids a number of problems, see Blome-Tillmann (2009b).

[14] Note also that the skeptic uses (CL) when motivating premise (i) of her argument: she reasons from the assumption that I know that my having a hand entails that I am not a handless brain in a vat to the conclusion that if I know that I have a hand, then I am in a position to know that I am not a handless brain in a vat, i.e., to premise (i) of the Skeptical Argument. The precise reasoning is as follows:

Closure Argument for (i)

(1) $(Kp \wedge K(p \rightarrow \neg sh)) \rightarrow \Diamond K\neg sh$.   from CL

(2) $K(p \rightarrow \neg sh) \rightarrow (Kp \rightarrow \Diamond K\neg sh)$.   1   Exp

(3) $K(p \rightarrow \neg sh)$.   -   A

(i) $Kp \rightarrow \Diamond K\neg sh$.   2, 3   MP

Note that there are other ways to motivate (i), but I shall ignore them in this paper (see, for instance, Brueckner (1994)).

[15] See DeRose (1995); Lewis (1996); Cohen (1999).

[16] See Blome-Tillmann (2007) for more details on this line of reasoning.

[17] See Blome-Tillmann (2009b) and Ichikawa (2011a, 2011b).

[18] See Blome-Tillmann (2013) for a discussion of the knowledge norms in a contextualist account.

[19] See Chalmers et al. (forthcoming), whose data suggest that EC is the most widely accepted view in the semantics of 'knowledge'-attributions.