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There are two issues I want to very briefly raise in response to Robin McKenna's paper. First, I question whether or not the disagreement problem faced by indexical contextualism is really a problem. Secondly, I consider whether or not McKenna's own solution is really in keeping with indexical contextualism.¹

§ 1: Is the Disagreement Problem Really a Problem?

Let's quickly take stock. Consider the following scenario:

Disagreement: Moore and Skeptic walk into a bar. Moore says, "I know I have hands."

Skeptic replies, "No, you don't."

In Disagreement, Skeptic is using high standards for knowledge, and Moore is using low standards. According to what McKenna has identified as the 'basic motivation' for epistemic contextualism, Moore and Skeptic both speak truly (McKenna, § 1). However, we are supposed to have a strong intuition that Moore and Skeptic in Disagreement are saying something incompatible, that they are legitimately disagreeing.² This purported disagreement poses a problem for the epistemic contextualists insofar as they are unable to track it, insofar as they cannot account for it – call this *the disagreement problem*. And insofar as this a genuine problem for contextualists, it is an opportunity for epistemic relativism – which boasts a semantics that *can* account for the purported disagreement. This state of affairs motivates McKenna's paper. By identifying the disagreement problem as genuine and challenging an eminent contextualist's solution (namely DeRose's), McKenna makes room for his own solution to the disagreement

¹ I also wanted to raise a worry regarding McKenna's reading of Keith DeRose's (2009) solution to the disagreement problem, but this had to be cut in the end due to space limitations.

² See DeRose 2009, 1:130.

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problem which is meant to be contextualism-friendly and correspondingly block the move to epistemic relativism.

But is the disagreement problem really that much of a problem for contextualism? If it's not, then the motivation for McKenna's paper seems somewhat undermined. Two points to this effect: First of all, I don't share the intuition that Skeptic is genuinely disagreeing with Moore. It may just be that I am not abreast of the relevant literature, but it seems to me that Moore and Skeptic are simply talking past each other. Even where they seem to be directly contradicting each other, it is my suspicion that if they were to say what they each mean by 'knows' (be it in terms of low standards or high standards) the debate would dissolve or at the very least shift to a debate regarding what 'knows' *should* mean – a presumably benign debate for contextualism. Secondly, even if the disagreement problem is a genuine problem for contextualism, I wonder how big of a problem it actually is. After all, DeRose, McKenna's seminal defender of contextualism against the disagreement problem, doesn't seem too troubled by it. In *The Case for Contextualism* (2009), DeRose offers several possible contextualist solutions to the disagreement problem, and regarding his favored solution he admits that it is not "anything close to...conclusive" (DeRose 2009, 1:151). What is more, DeRose urges people...

...not to judge contextualism about knowledge by plugging [his] preferences on these issues into the contextualist position, thinking of the result as '*the* contextualist position', and then counting it against epistemic contextualism that it doesn't handle situations of disagreement in a way you find attractive (DeRose 2009, 1:151 - emphasis DeRose's).

While critiquing and improving upon a seminal solutions to the disagreement problem may be a worthy enterprise, one does not get a sense from DeRose that some such solution is absolutely needed lest contextualism be deemed unpalatable – lest the floodgates of epistemic relativism be opened.

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§2: McKenna's Solution to the Disagreement Problem

McKenna expressly desires to explicate a solution to the disagreement problem that is in keeping with indexical contextualism – usurping the need to endorse epistemic relativism. My second worry is that McKenna's solution, while certainly not an endorsement of *truth relativism*, may actually be more in keeping with *indexical relativism* than indexical contextualism. Let me try to explain.

Two things go into determining the truth-value of a given proposition: its content and its circumstance of evaluation. For the contextualist, the content of a given proposition is determined by the context of utterance and the conversational meaning. According to *indexical contextualism*, standards of evaluation are a part of the context of utterance, which in turn affect the propositional content. According to *non-indexical contextualism*, the standards of evaluation are part of the context of utterance, but instead of affecting the propositional content (which is held constant), the standards of evaluation toggle the circumstances of evaluation. Epistemic relativists, on the other hand, add another feature to the semantic picture: context of assessment. According to the *truth relativist* the context of assessment is part of the circumstance of evaluation. For the *indexical relativist*, the context of assessment is a determinate of a proposition's content.³

While this taxonomy is no doubt rough and under-described, an important symmetry nevertheless emerges, which makes it easy to see why the differences between indexical contextualism and indexical relativism, on the one hand, and non-indexical contextualism and truth relativism, on the other, are subtle – making them easily confused. Both indexical contextualism and indexical relativism hold the circumstances of evaluation to be determined by

³ For a full taxonomy of indexical contextualism, non-indexical contextualism, and truth-relativism see Greenough 2011.

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the world (which is toggled by the context of utterance). In contrast, both non-indexical contextualism and truth relativism hold the circumstances of evaluation to be determined by both world and epistemic standards (non-indexical contextualism taking the standards to be pulled from the context of utterance and truth-relativism taking the standards from the context of assessment).

McKenna's solution to the disagreement problem, as I roughly understand it, is to explain the disagreement between protagonists like Skeptic and Moore by appealing to "the conditions that are most salient in which they [each] are assessing [a given] utterance" (McKenna, § 5). My challenge for McKenna is simply to explain why this solution isn't actually a form of indexical relativism.⁴ Appealing to the conditions that each member of a conversation find most salient certainly *feels* a lot like an appeal to a context of assessment, and so I think McKenna needs to tell us why such a feeling is mistaken and tell us why his solution is well and truly in keeping with indexical contextualism. But what is more, what's most salient for the participants may itself be the subject of dispute – after all their 'disagreement' can be seen as an attempt to push around the score, so to speak. They will typically also disagree about what is most salient. What's the way out? Make salience an assessment-sensitive matter.

Conclusion

Contextualism and relativism, to be sure, are not my forte, so there has been a risk of naivety on my part. Nevertheless, I think I have raised some interesting concerns for McKenna's paper. McKenna's paper is interesting and brings some exciting ideas to the debates surrounding contextualism, relativism, and disagreement. Nevertheless, given what I have said above, I think

⁴ To be sure, if McKenna's solution *is* in keeping with indexical contextualism, it is not entirely clear to me how explaining the disagreement between the protagonists by appealing to their divergent salient conditions is any different from explaining the disagreement by appealing to their divergent standards. If there is no great difference here, then presumably the contextualists had the material to solve the disagreement problem all along.

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more will ultimately need to be said concerning (i) the legitimacy of the disagreement problem for contextualism, (ii) the problems and limitations of DeRose's solutions to such a problem, and (iii) whether or not McKenna's own solution is really in keeping with indexical contextualism.

Works Cited:

- DeRose, Keith. 2009. *The Case for Contextualism: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context*. Vol. 1. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Greenough, Patrick. 2011. Truth-Relativism, Norm-Relativism, and Assertion. In *Assertion: New Philosophical Essays*, ed. J. Brown and H. Cappelen. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- McKenna, Robin. forthcoming. "Contextualism, Epistemic Relativism, and Disagreement." *Philosophical Writings*