Peter Baumann, *Epistemic Contextualism: A Defence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. ix + 265. ISBN 978–0–19–875431–2

This is a meticulously argued book defending a novel form of contextualism. As Baumann presents it, the main innovation here is in the sort of arguments he provides for the view: they are “theoretical” rather than based on cases. But I’ll argue that the shape of the view itself is importantly different from standard contextualism—and that readers familiar with epistemic contextualism’s origin as a response to scepticism are best placed to appreciate what is distinctive in Baumann’s version of contextualism. In brief, contextualists, including Baumann, describe the view as being about the semantics of words like “know,” but Baumann’s case for contextualism has to do with *knowledge* itself, not our words. This makes the view unsuitable for the standard contextualist anti-sceptical strategy, but it may mean the view is better equipped to engage with scepticism itself.

The book’s eight chapters are organised in three parts. Part I introduces epistemic contextualism and gives Baumann’s main arguments for it. This is the core of the book, according to its “Introduction,” although the contextualist view is not fully articulated until later, in response to objections. Chapter 1 considers cases, mainly by way of illustrating and motivating contextualism. Baumann wants the main argumentative weight to rely not on these cases but on the more “theoretical” arguments of chapters 2 and 3; I will discuss these arguments below. Part II aims to show how contextualism can solve problems (both problems raised by contextualism itself and more universal epistemological problems) and how it can be extended to words and concepts other than “know”/knowledge. Chapter 4 contains Baumann’s most explicit engagement with scepticism, as he briefly treats the traditional contextualist response to sceptical arguments before moving on to a more detailed treatment of lottery scepticism. Chapter 5 raises and addresses a problem raised by contextualism itself: how should we evaluate cross-context knowledge attributions? Suppose you say, in context 1, “S knows p.” Suppose I, a contextualist in context 2, think both that “S knows p” would be false were I to say it and that you spoke the truth in your context. A contradiction looms. Chapter 6 argues that the context-relativity Baumann attributes to knowledge is also a feature of other philosophical concepts; the case he treats in detail is *responsibility*. Part III considers objections (chapter 7) and alternatives (chapter 8).

Below, I will focus on what is distinctive about Baumann’s version of contextualism, but first let me highlight two virtues of his treatment. One: chapter 1 draws a distinction, sure to be helpful for anyone theorizing about context-relativity, “between parameters—or aspects of epistemic contexts—and determinants—or factors which fix the parameters” (9). We can say both that the meaning of “know” is relative to the standard of evidence in a context and that it is relative to the stakes in a context. More carefully, we can say that the stakes partly determine the standard of evidence: the former is a determinant of the latter, a parameter. Baumann provides multiple tables of determinants and parameters, indicating which determine which. Two: Baumann cites the prior literature thoroughly. Philosophers sometimes[[1]](#footnote-1) seem to approach citations and syllabi the same way (“Best not to overwhelm the reader/student—cite where absolutely required and offer no more than one or two recommended readings”), but Baumann clearly aims to cite everything relevant to the questions he addresses.[[2]](#footnote-2) It’s not unusual for multiple consecutive lines to be entirely taken up with citations, and the bibliography spans 25 pages. For this reason, the book will be a valuable entry point for readers new to contextualism.

I said above that readers familiar with epistemic contextualism’s origin as a response to sceptical arguments are best placed to appreciate what is new in Baumann’s contextualism. Here, then, is a short story about the development of epistemic contextualism.

In the beginning, contextualists were mainly concerned with responding to certain sceptical arguments, such as Baumann’s *Skeptical Argument, Template* (SAT), where *o* is some ordinary proposition and *s* describes a sceptical scenario (92):

(1) S does not know that not *s*;

(2) If S knows that *o*, then S knows that not *s*;

(C) S does not know that *o*.

The contextualist thesis that “know” means different things in different contexts gave contextualists a way to explain both why SAT appears persuasive and why it fails to establish scepticism. Since “know” appears in both the premises and the conclusion, we must ask whether the sceptic equivocates. We can grant that the argument is persuasive because there is a meaning of “know” making each premise is true and a meaning of “know” making the conclusion tantamount to scepticism. But there is no one meaning that does all these things, so we have a trilemma: either the argument is invalid because of an equivocation, or it fails to establish scepticism because the meaning of “know” in the conclusion is too strict, or it is unsound because the meaning of “know” in the premise is too permissive.

A second phase in the development of contextualism led to a proliferation of cases. In order to show that the response to SAT was not *ad hoc*, contextualists aimed to show that “know” changes its meaning in ordinary, non-sceptical situations. Contextualists would give a pair of cases and invite us to judge intuitively whether an assertion of the form *S knows p* or *S doesn’t know p* would seem true in each case. If we judge that someone “knows” something in one case but not the other, where the only variation between cases is the conversational context—the sort of thing that can change the meaning of “know” according to contextualists—then we have evidence for contextualism. But, inevitably, opponents of contextualism offered alternative diagnoses of the contextualists’ cases and supplied yet further cases more difficult for contextualists to explain. The details of the debate over cases is less important for my present purpose than exactly what contextualists needed to establish: that changes in conversational context can change the *semantic* value of “know”. Non-contextualists can accept that there are changes in which “know” sentences are appropriately assertible in different conversational contexts, so long as they deny that this is due to a change in truth conditions. Thus, a contextualist would say that “S knows *p*” expresses a true proposition in one case, it expresses a different, false proposition in a paired case differing only in the conversational context; a non-contextualist would say that “S knows *p*” expresses the same proposition in both cases, which is either true in both or false in both; but the non-contextualist can say that one is warranted in asserting “S knows *p*” in one case but not the other. (Following Keith DeRose, Baumann calls this sort of non-contextualist move a “warranted assertibility manoeuvre” or “WAM”.)

It’s no accident that the line between contextualists and non-contextualists was drawn along the semantics/pragmatics distinction. If the main selling-point of contextualism is its diagnosis of SAT, then what we care about is the truth conditions, not the assertibility conditions, of knowledge-attributing sentences. The type of sceptic the contextualist means to address would count it as a victory if we agreed that, strictly speaking, we cannot be said to know very much, but that we nevertheless justifiably act and speak as if we know a lot.

But contextualism has come a long way from its early days. Many contextualists, including Baumann, have at most a weak commitment to the traditional contextualist diagnosis of SAT. Why? Broadly, for two sorts of reason: pessimism about the prospects for settling debates about scepticism and optimism about contextualism’s ability to contribute to other epistemological debates.

Pessimistically: granting that there are multiple meanings of “know”, the sceptic and the dogmatist may still disagree about what we “know” according to any given meaning. Pessimistically again: as Baumann writes, “It would be misleading to say that contextualism is a view about knowledge” (12); contextualism is rather a view about “know” and related words. If scepticism is a problem about knowledge rather than “know”, one might suspect contextualism is an answer to a different question. But optimistically: it turns out contextualism has all sorts of applications outside scepticism, because *do we know anything at all?* is not the only interesting question we can ask about knowledge.

Without a strong commitment to the traditional contextualist diagnosis of SAT, drawing the contextualist/non-contextualist line along the semantics/pragmatics distinction does look arbitrary after all. And indeed Baumann introduces his response to the WAM objection by pointing out that “the semantics-pragmatics distinction is very tricky [….] Even if one grants the WAMmer all their general assumptions about semantics and pragmatics, the objection is still very limited in scope and importance” (162). It is limited, Baumann says, because epistemic contextualism is not only a thesis about language after all, but also applies to solitary thought. If the WAMmer succeeds in arguing that the linguistic phenomena contextualists point to are pragmatic rather than semantic, they still must make a parallel point about our *thoughts* about knowledge if they want to undermine contextualism. But, Baumann argues, no parallel “warranted belief manoeuvre” (WBM) can succeed because solitary thought is not enough like language. In this way, Baumann hopes to “circumvent” (162) the WAM objection rather than meeting it head-on.

I am not wholly persuaded by Baumann’s case against WBMs—in part because, although he hopes to avoid “presuppos[ing] too much philosophy of language in one’s epistemology” (162), presupposing too much philosophy of mind seems no better. If belief amounts to storing a sentence in a literal language of thought, then one might worry moving from speech to belief does not take us away from the realm of language after all. But the WBM response to the WAM objection is striking in the clear break it makes with standard epistemic contextualism, which is very definitely a semantic theory about words like “know”, not a theory about the knowledge relation. By the time we reach Baumann’s WBM argument in chapter 7, we have been provided with the means to anticipate this break, given the main arguments for contextualism in chapters 2 and 3: as I’ll argue shortly, those arguments appeal to claims about *knowledge*, but not to a connection between knowledge and the semantics of any particular word. Still, one might have wanted this break with standard contextualism made clearer sooner—particularly in advance of the applications of contextualism in Part II.

The argument of chapter 2 appeals to reliability conditions on knowledge; chapter 3 examines the connection between luck and knowledge. In both cases, Baumann’s premises are partly motivated by judgments about cases and partly by theoretical considerations. In order to solve the generality problem for reliabilism (and Baumann argues, other theories of knowledge), we should adopt contextualism about “reliable,” with *reference class* as a contextual parameter. Knowledge requires reliability, and so knowledge is similarly relative to a reference class. The best account of epistemic luck considers a belief lucky if the probability of its being true, conditional on the believer’s being in “certain circumstances and us[ing] certain ways of belief acquisition” (84) is below a certain threshold. Then we adopt contextualism about “lucky,” with a *description* of circumstances and ways of belief acquisition as a contextual parameter. Knowledge, then, is similarly relative to descriptions.

As a matter of philosophical personality, I tend to share Baumann’s preference for theoretical arguments over intuitions about cases. Intuitions vary, and the richness a case needs to generate robust intuitions tends to provide multiple explanations of any such judgment. But there is a reason for arguing from cases in the debate over contextualism: because it is a *semantic* theory about a certain word, intuitive judgments of native speakers about the use of that word have a special place. (This is not to deny that there can be theoretical arguments in semantics; see, for example, some of the objections Baumann addresses in sections 7.2-7.3.) The theoretical principles underwriting the arguments from reliability and luck may establish a certain context-relativity of *knowledge*, but they are missing a tie between that philosophical concept and “know” or any other word in ordinary English, to say nothing of other languages. For all that these arguments show, it could be that the concept of knowledge we need for philosophical use is not the referent of any word in a natural language. Baumann’s response to the WAM objection appears to accept this conclusion: WAMs “don’t constitute a basic objection against contextualism and don’t capture much of the core of contextualism” (173), because they target only the contextualist’s claim about the semantics of “know”. This can only make sense if contextualism is not, after all, a semantic theory.

If I have a criticism of the book, it is that the early chapters are not clear enough about the kind of contextualism that will be defended. But that is only a way of saying that readers need to invest some effort in uncovering what is distinctive about Baumann’s contextualism—and I am confident that effort will be richly rewarded. The turn away from semantics closes off certain applications, including the traditional contextualist defusing of SAT, but it opens up new questions, new directions of contextualist inquiry.

Readers whose interest in contextualism is driven by an interest in scepticism will not find a new defence of the old anti-sceptical strategy, but they will find new tools for engagement with scepticism without having to settle decades of debate about semantics and pragmatics. Readers *un*interested in standard contextualism because scepticism concerns knowledge rather than the semantics of “know” will find a welcome turn from language to epistemology proper. Those who are familiar with debates over epistemic contextualism will find a stimulating new direction in this book; readers new to those debates, looking for a guide to the literature, will find this as good a starting point as any. In short, there is something here for everyone.

1. *Mea culpa.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Inevitably, Baumann falls short of total comprehensiveness—the literature on contextualism is *vast*. But he doesn’t fall short by much. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)