

Epistemic Contextualism and the Sociality of Knowledge

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Abstract

This chapter has four central aims. First, in §1, I distinguish two ideas within epistemology that sometimes travel under the name ‘contextualism’ — the ‘situational contextualist’ idea that an individual’s context, especially their social context, can make for a difference in what they know, and the ‘linguistic contextualist’ idea that discourse using the word ‘knows’ and its cognates is context-sensitive, expressing different contents in different conversational contexts.

Second, in §2, I situate contextualism with respect to several influential ideas in feminist epistemology. These ideas are thoroughly contextualist in the situational sense; I’ll explore the prospects for linguistic contextualist analogues or implementations of them. Simple connections between these feminist ideas and linguistic contextualism will prove elusive, but more subtle ones are possible, and sometimes attractive.

§3 considers the degree to which contextual epistemic parameters are determined interpersonally, as opposed to individualistically. Should contextualists hold that speakers can *individually* determine the contextual parameters that influence the truth-conditions of their utterances? Or are they fixed at a broader social level? I’ll rehearse some influential reasons to opt for the latter, more social, form of contextualism.

In §4 I discuss the practical and moral significance of speakers’ choices of epistemic parameters, given contextualism. For example, I’ll consider how standards-raising can be used to discredit evidential sources, with an eye towards the social and moral consequences of such moves.

1 Disambiguating ‘contextualism’

What one means by ‘context’ depends on the context.

In one sense, something’s context is its relevant background — to consider something contextually is to consider it in relation to its environment; by contrast, an acontextual investigation considers only its intrinsic features. To be a *contextualist* about something in this broad sense is to emphasize the relevance of its environment. When one examines a joke “out of context,” for instance, it may seem cruel in a way it wouldn’t if it were understood within the context of an escalating series of insincere jokey barbs between friends. It is in this sense in which, for instance, a “contextual theory of scientific understanding” emphasizes the

respects in which scientific understanding has different requirements in different cultures.¹ Call this the *situational* sense of ‘context’.

Many contextualists prefer to use ‘context’ in a narrower, distinctively linguistic, sense. In its linguistic sense, ‘context’ refers to certain features of the conversation in which a speech act occurs. For example, right now, you are reading a chapter that I wrote. That’s an important part of the context for the interpretation of the sentences written down on this page. This context plays important roles in interpreting my language, going well beyond providing relevant background information, such as the situational ‘contextual’ fact that I am a professor — the linguistic context plays a relatively direct role in assigning the meanings and truth conditions of my utterances. Consider for instance this sentence from earlier in this paragraph:

- (1) For example, right now, you are reading a chapter that I wrote.

Sentence (1) contains three indexicals: ‘now’, ‘you’, and ‘I’. Let’s focus on the last one, ‘I’. That word refers to me, Jonathan. It does so because of the linguistic context; (1) was produced in a context in which Jonathan was the person producing the utterance. The word ‘I’ is *context-sensitive* — its referent depends on the context. In a suitably different conversational context, (1) would ascribe authorship to someone other than me. Had Justin Trudeau asserted (1) to Xi Jinping, ‘I’ would have referred to Justin, not to me; and, likewise, ‘you’ would have referred to Xi, not to you.² Words like ‘you’ and ‘I’ are context-sensitive.

To disambiguate it from the situational sense, I’ll call this the *linguistic* sense of ‘context’. In the linguistic sense, ‘contextualism’ about a given word is the idea that language using that word is context-sensitive. Contextualism about indexicals like ‘you’ and ‘I’ is uncontroversial. Most semanticists and philosophers of language are also contextualists about gradable adjectives — how tall you have to be to count as ‘tall’ depends on the context in which we’re speaking — and quantifiers — which people are relevant for whether ‘everyone is paying attention’ also depends on the context.³

Within epistemology, there are ‘contextualists’ in both senses.

1.1 Situational epistemic contextualism

In the situational sense, an epistemic contextualist is someone who thinks a thinker’s contextual situation is an important factor to consider for epistemic purposes. Put so abstractly, almost all epistemologists are contextualists: excepting perhaps the extreme individualistic tradition of Descartes’s *Meditations*, practically no one will deny that, for instance, what you know depends a lot on the society you grew up in. (Some feminist critiques of analytic epistemology have complained that too much of that Cartesian assumption remains in force; see §2 below.) Slightly less obviously, nearly all contemporary epistemologists will agree that, for reasons familiar from discussion of Gettier cases, knowledge can depend on external, ‘contextual’ factors like whether the other local newspaper that you didn’t read

¹de Regt (2017, ch. 4).

²I here assume that you are not Xi Jinping; if you are, you can change the example as appropriate.

³On gradable adjectives, see Kennedy (1999), Morzycki (2016), Richard (2004, pp. 17–18), or Blome-Tillmann (2017). On quantifiers, see Stanley and Williamson (1995), Stanley and Szabó (2000), Ichikawa (2011a), or Cockram (2017). For dissent against semantic orthodoxy, arguing against contextualism about gradable adjectives and quantifiers, see Cappelen and Lepore (2005).

gave an erroneous report, or whether one is standing in a countryside in which many of the apparent barns are mere façades.⁴

Epistemologists who self-identify as ‘contextualists’ in the situational sense are typically not merely signing up to these truisms; they tend to emphasize features of the ‘context’ that are less *obviously* relevant to epistemology, but to argue that they are nevertheless relevant.⁵ Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath think, for instance, that whether someone knows something depends on how important the question is for them — someone might describe their view as ‘contextualist,’ in the situational sense, because they emphasize the importance of this contextual factor: the importance of the question.⁶

Compare Michael Williams’s (2001) contextualist approach to epistemology. It is not a linguistic thesis — Williams’s response to skepticism is based in the thought that epistemic challenges and questions can only make sense within the context of situational epistemic assumptions. Sarah Wright (2010) describes Williams’s view as a kind of “methodological contextualism”.⁷ She goes on to defend a version of this sort of view, emphasizing in particular the importance of the social roles of knowers.

Some feminist epistemologists have defended related views, complaining about the tendency in some epistemological traditions to abstract away from important contingencies of thinkers, wrongly treating them as irrelevant. Such feminist projects are sometimes described in terms of context, in the situational sense. So it is for instance that Evelyn Brister (2017, p. 59) characterizes “the contextualism defended by feminist epistemologists” as “emphasiz[ing] the moral and political factors that both motivate epistemological inquiry and operate within particular contexts.” I’ll discuss these feminist ideas in more detail in §2.

1.2 Linguistic epistemic contextualism

In the more distinctively linguistic sense, an epistemic contextualist is someone who thinks that epistemic vocabulary is context-sensitive. The most common form of epistemic contextualism — the one I’ll focus on in this chapter — is contextualism about the word ‘knows’. Specific approaches to ‘knows’ contextualism vary, but they tend to posit something like an ‘epistemic standards’ conversational parameter — a feature of the conversational context that indicates how strong an epistemic position is necessary for the word ‘knows’ to apply. This is analogous to the ‘height standards’ that a contextualist about ‘tall’ would posit — a conversation provides a threshold of tallness, and the predicate ‘is tall’, in that context, has in its extension those who meet or surpass it.

A consequence of epistemic contextualism is that sentences attributing ‘knows’ express different propositions in different conversational contexts. Consider sentence (2):

(2) Agatha knows that Bertie is behind the armoire.

⁴On newspaper reports, see Harman (1973, p. 143–4). On barn façades, see Goldman (1976) or Ichikawa and Steup (2017, §10.2). Goldman’s (1976) made the case famous; he later attributed it to Carl Ginet — see Goldman (2009, p. 29).

⁵Note that the relevance here is understood to be *constitutive*, as opposed to merely *causal*. Something can make for a difference in whether someone has knowledge by, say, causing them to seek out more evidence; this is not sufficient for the kind of dependence the theorists in question are positing. See e.g. Ichikawa and Steup (2017, §12) or McKenna (2020, pp. 110–11) for discussion.

⁶Fantl and McGrath themselves do not use the language in this way — they reserve ‘contextualist’ for its linguistic sense — but theirs is the sort of view that is sometimes described as ‘subject contextualist’ — see e.g. DeRose (2009, pp. 22–4). See also Diaz-Leon (2016, pp. 250–1, and n. 9).

⁷Wright (2010, p. 102–3)

Stipulate that Bertie is hiding behind the armoire, and that Agatha has considerable evidence that this is so: she saw him duck into the bedroom, and she can make out the tips of his shoes from between the armoire’s legs. If spoken in a low-standards context, (2) may express a truth, since she has what counts as adequate evidence in that context for Bertie’s whereabouts. But in a higher-standards context, we might insist on stronger evidence in order to count (2) as true; perhaps she’d need to rule out additional farther-fetched possibilities, such as the possibility that Bertie is hiding inside the armoire but for some reason left his shoes underneath it.

Such flexibility in use is one of linguistic contextualism’s selling-points; it is designed in part to account for certain unstable or shifty patterns of intuitions concerning who knows what. Adjudicating the plausibility of contextualism is beyond the scope of this chapter.⁸ Instead, my focus here is on the distinctively social implications of contextualism, and the relationship between situational contextualism and linguistic contextualism.

2 Feminist epistemology and context

2.1 Situational contextualist feminist epistemology

All feminist epistemologists are contextualists in the situational sense: they think that feminist considerations provide crucial context for epistemic questions.⁹ As indicated above, situational contextualists (in the non-trivial sense) emphasize the importance of aspects of the situational context that have been underappreciated. Many feminist epistemological projects fit this pattern. Consider Helen Longino’s “contextual empiricism,” so-called because of its emphasis on the contexts of background assumptions, scientific communities, and science’s broader cultural context.¹⁰

Situational contextualism is also near the heart of Lorraine Code’s (1981) “Is the Sex of the Knower Epistemologically Significant?”, which pushed against the prevailing “objective” epistemological norms that emphasized detached, individual thought, abstracted away from particularities of social context, championing the significance of more “subjective” considerations:

On the subjective side, firmly grounded within this objectivity, yet leading to a considerable degree of diversity within the unity of knowledge are (1) the individual creativity of the human knower, (2) the location of every knower within a period of history, (3) the location of every knower within a linguistic and cultural setting, and (4) the affective side of human nature (contrasted with its purely intellectual side). All of these factors contribute necessarily to the end product of the knowing process: the ensuing knowledge. I call them “subjective” because of their reference to the circumstances of the knowing subject.¹¹

Although Code does not use the words ‘context’ or ‘contextualism’ in this paper, all four of the items she mentions in this quotation could naturally be expressed in these terms, in their situational senses: one must attend to the individual and social context, to achieve a

⁸I have defended it in Ichikawa (2011a,b, 2017a). See also Cohen (1988); DeRose (2009); Lewis (1996).

⁹For further discussion, see Intemann, this volume.

¹⁰See Longino (1990); Rolin (2011).

¹¹Code (1981, p. 269)

full and accurate understanding of epistemology. Abstracting away from individual creativity, thinkers' historical and social locations, and affective profile, as some epistemological traditions had done, is, Code argued, objectionably acontextual.¹²

Standpoint epistemologists' insights take a similar structure: they emphasize respects in which one's social position can be relevant in establishing one's epistemic resources — marginalized social locations, like the role of a Black woman in a white patriarchy, can put someone in a better epistemic position vis-a-vis the circumstances and mechanisms of oppression. In the situational sense, recognizing racism is “context-sensitive”: people in some social contexts — those victimized by racism — have superior epistemic opportunities to perceive certain aspects of social reality.¹³

As Patricia Hill Collins has emphasized, the knowledge produced by and reflective of marginalized communities is not always recognized as such by dominant ones. In her (2000, ch. 11), Collins emphasizes both the productivity and the marginalization of Black women's epistemologies. “Because elite White men control Western structures of knowledge validation,” Collins writes, Black women's experiences “have been routinely distorted within or excluded from what counts as knowledge”. (Collins, 2000, p. 251) It is one thing to achieve knowledge in a given social situation; it is quite another for this achievement to be recognized by the canonical authorities.

One final feminist idea I'd like to mention in this section is epistemic injustice. This idea, too, is naturally understood in situational contextualist terms. In her influential (2007) *Epistemic Injustice*, Miranda Fricker's key notion of testimonial injustice, for example, calls attention to cases in which speakers are given undue credibility deficits as a result of identity prejudices — as when one dismisses one's testimony because one is a woman, for instance. This is not a matter of the truth-conditions of knowledge ascriptions. Fricker does occasionally use the language of ‘context’ and ‘contextualist’; it is clear that she intends it in its situational sense. She describes, for example, a “contextualist” characterization of the virtue of testimonial justice, so-called because it exhibits sensitivity to the social context of the person exhibiting the virtue. The detective should treat the teenager's testimony differently than their counsellor should. Fricker (2007, pp. 122–3).

In his (2013) *The Epistemology of Resistance*, José Medina frequently uses the label ‘contextualism’. Medina's contextualism, like Fricker's, emphasizes the importance of the social context. Medina calls for a “polyphonic” contextualism, contrasting with what he takes to be a too-simple discussion of social context in Fricker. Medina writes for instance that

[t]he expansion of one's social sensibilities — and with it also the pluralization of one's racial consciousness — is an ongoing task that does not have an end. And it is a task that individuals cannot fully carry out all by themselves. Such a task requires sustained interactions with significantly different individuals and groups (interactions that provide disruptions and diverse forms of epistemic fric-

¹²Some twentieth-century feminists tied Code's fourth kind of thought here specifically to gender, suggesting that ‘male’ reasoning was more dispassionate or ‘logical’, and ‘female’ reasoning was more emotional or creative. See e.g. Lloyd (1984). This thought is not prominent among contemporary feminists epistemologists — in part because it may itself perpetuate gender stereotypes. See fn. 18. Note also that many feminist theorists demur at Code's assumption that this sort of situational contextualism is in tension with objectivity; see especially Harding (1992); Kukla (2006).

¹³On standpoint theory, see e.g. Collins (1986); Hartsock (1983); Hekman (1997); Wylie (2003). Standpoint theorists are careful not to suggest that these superior epistemic sensibilities are *automatic* or *guaranteed*; false consciousness is certainly possible. The point is that some social locations make developing these epistemic capacities easier and more likely. See especially Wylie (2003, pp. 28–29).

tion). This is what the Imperative of Epistemic Interaction of my polyphonic contextualism tries to capture. (Medina, 2013, p. 224)

Medina’s polyphonic contextualism is, again, situational contextualism. He does not discuss the semantics of knowledge ascriptions. He is emphasizing the importance of specific features of a thinker’s social situation.

2.2 Linguistic contextualist feminist epistemology

Such situation-emphasizing epistemology is not connected to linguistic contextualism in any simple or direct way. Certainly it doesn’t imply it; note that none of the following epistemological statements, for instance, imply anything about the semantics of ‘knows’:

- The social context of an individual can make for a difference in what they know.
- There are distinctively feminine ways of knowing, which are overlooked and undervalued in traditional epistemic theorizing.
- Trans people are much likelier to be able to understand and recognize transphobia than cis people are.

There are two ways to see that the “context-sensitivity” posited by statements like these belongs to the situational notion of context, as opposed to the linguistic one. First, these statements are all using, rather than mentioning, epistemic vocabulary; they are not about language. A careful statement of linguistic contextualism would designate the explicit *mention* of ‘knows’ by putting it in quotation marks.¹⁴ Second, relatedly, the situatedness they emphasize is that of the would-be knower. Contextualists in the linguistic sense focus on the linguistic significance of the conversational situation *of the person making a knowledge ascription*.

One could articulate linguistic contextual analogues for these ideas. One might say, for instance:

- The social context of an individual can make for a difference in the truth conditions of their assertions using ‘knows’.

One might hold, for instance, that people who occupy particular social roles might, because of or even in virtue of those roles, use differential standards in some of their knowledge ascriptions.¹⁵ For instance, perhaps a doctor in a clinical setting will use an epistemic standard according to which a laboratory test result is necessary to say that someone “knows” that a patient has a particular disease — strep throat, say. A parent with basic knowledge of the social prevalence of strep and their child’s symptoms might use a lower standard, whereby someone may count as “knowing” that someone has strep without a laboratory test.¹⁶

This idea is quite different from the idea that one’s social position — whether one is a doctor, say — makes a difference to what one knows. What one’s sentences involving

¹⁴This is one of a few functions that quotation marks serve. I use single-quotes to designate mention of words, and double-quotes to indicate direct quotation. I also use double-quotes as so-called “scare quotes”, drawing particular attention, and perhaps indicating a bit of distance from, the terms used.

¹⁵As I use the term, a *knowledge ascription* is an utterance using the word ‘knows’.

¹⁶This example is similar to, and inspired by, an example by Wright (2010, p. 97). However, Wright’s focus is on context in the subject-situation sense. See also McKenna (2020).

“knows” say is quite a different matter from what one knows, not least because one might easily use “knows” language to talk about someone other than oneself. Suppose a teenager has strep throat, and their parent is familiar with the symptoms, and is confident that this is the correct diagnosis, but no laboratory test or professional diagnosis has been performed. Assume that linguistic contextualism is true, and that relative to a modest epistemic standard operative in the parent’s conversational context, the parent counts as “knowing” that the teenager has strep, but that relative to a stricter standard operative in a doctor’s context, the parent does not count as “knowing”.

On the social-role emphasizing linguistic contextualist view under consideration, the doctor’s conversations about knowledge will require high standards, *regardless of whose epistemic state is under consideration*. So if the doctor, speaking in their professional medical role, says any of these sentences, they will be true:

- (3) The doctor don’t know yet whether the patient has strep.
- (4) The parent doesn’t know yet whether the patient has strep.
- (5) No one knows yet whether the patient has strep.

The doctor’s stringent epistemic standards apply to their own epistemic situation, as in (3), as well as to the parent’s, as in (4). By contrast, a view that relativizes knowledge standards to subject’s social roles, would hold that (3) is true and (4) is false, no matter who says them.

Adjudicating between agent-situational and speaker-conversational implementations of broad contextualist ideas like this is a subtle philosophical matter; the kinds of considerations that push theorists through the space of options have been well mapped-out in the debates between conversational contextualists and so-called “interest-relative invariantists”. They turn especially on whether the linguistic contextualist thesis is semantically plausible, the acceptability of the idea that knowledge itself depends on such factors, and intuitions about cases in which the speaker and the subject are different in important ways. These explorations are beyond the scope of this chapter.¹⁷

What of the idea that there are distinctively feminine ways of knowing? What would a correlate of this view along conversational contextualist lines look like? To my knowledge this sort of approach has not been articulated or defended in the literature — perhaps because by the time philosophers were writing and thinking clearly enough about conversational contextualism to make the distinction clear, feminist epistemologists had mostly shifted away from expressing feminist insights via the idea of distinctively feminine ways of knowing.¹⁸ Still, one can imagine a view along these lines: perhaps in some linguistic communities, only detached, “objective” epistemic practices can issue into beliefs that count as “knowledge”, while others countenance (perhaps instead of these, or perhaps in addition to them), more situational or emotional considerations. I’ll discuss a possible version of this view below.

It is less clear to me how to express anything resembling the core insight of standpoint theory in conversational contextualist terms. The key idea of standpoint theory is that some social locations enable the achievement of an epistemic standpoint, which affords greater

¹⁷See the essays in Ichikawa (2017b) for a comprehensive overview.

¹⁸Code expressed ambivalence about the “wish to celebrate ‘feminine’ values as tools for the creation of a better social order” already in her (1991, p. 17), after rehearsing some of the historical feminist motivation for it. Rooney (2011, p. 7) argues that this suggestion has marginal significance within feminist epistemology, and has been given exaggerated focus by critics of the latter.

epistemic access to certain elements of the workings of society. I see no prospects for fruitfully implementing this as a linguistic contextualist idea. One could articulate a view according to which members of oppressed demographic groups tend to use lower epistemic standards, and therefore to have more positive knowledge ascriptions count as true in their mouths — but this would increase the amount of “knowledge” among the privileged and the oppressed alike. (There is also, so far as I can see, nothing to commend the plausibility of such a linguistic view.)

Consider also the discussion of Patricia Hill Collins and Black feminist epistemologies above. Collins emphasizes respects in which dominant epistemologists refuse to recognize the epistemic achievements of alternative epistemologies. Collins, a sociologist by training, does not emphasize questions about the semantics of knowledge ascriptions or the metaphysics of knowledge, but she does sometimes speak in terms of epistemic standards, as in this passage:

African-American women academicians who persist in trying to rearticulate a Black women’s standpoint also face potential rejection of our knowledge claims on epistemological grounds. Just as the material realities of powerful and dominated groups produce separate standpoints, these groups may also deploy distinctive epistemologies or theories of knowledge. Black women scholars may *know that something is true* — at least, by standards widely accepted among African-American women — but be unwilling or unable to legitimate our claims using prevailing scholarly norms. (Collins, 2000, p. 255, emphasis added)

The invocation of standards accepted among Black women might tempt one to a linguistic contextualist analysis. Perhaps a particular insight is available to many Black women, via a particular epistemology unauthorized by the dominant epistemologies. One *could* say that Black women often speak in a conversational context according to which the products of their subordinated epistemologies count as “known”, and that white men typically do not speak in such contexts. But such semantic machinations are not necessary to make what is clearly Collins’s central point: the social institutions widely seen as legitimating knowledge do not recognize achievements of the Black feminist standpoint as such; they are denied the status of knowledge. One might well think — setting this linguistic contextualist interpretation aside — that they are *wrong* to do so, in the straightforward sense that when they say that Black women do not know via these methods, they speak falsely. So I do think that the most natural interpretation of Collins’s treatment of subjugated epistemologists is as offering a situational contextualism, as opposed to a linguistic one.

Nevertheless, I do think there are interesting prospects for a contextualist treatment of unjust denials of “knowledge” status.

Consider epistemic injustice. As explained above, Fricker’s treatment of epistemic injustice is contextualist in the situational sense, not the linguistic one, and most of the subsequent literature on the topic has followed Fricker in this regard. Neither Fricker (2007) nor Medina (2013), for instance, have any commitments about whether the truth-conditions of sentences containing “knows” are context-sensitive. However, I do think that an idea rather connected to this thought *can* be expressed in a linguistically contextualist framework. On standard invariantist ways of thinking about testimonial injustice, a speaker might know something, and say it, but be disbelieved due to an identity prejudice. So the speaker would be wrongly *thought of* as not knowing, even though she would genuinely know. By contrast, a linguistic contextualist might hold that in some circumstances, people responding to someone’s testimony might raise the conversationally established epistemic standards to

a level relative to which the subject literally doesn't count as "knowing" the fact in question. If this conversational move is performed because of an identity prejudice — if one raises the standards in order to refuse to count someone as "knowing" because, say, they are a woman — and thereby prevents uptake in the conversation, this could be a distinctively linguistic contextualist kind of epistemic injustice. In my (2020) I call this phenomenon "contextual injustice". I'll say a bit more about contextual injustice in §4.

3 Individual vs. social standards

For the remainder of the chapter, my focus will be on the linguistic form of contextualism, as opposed to the situational one.

In this section I take up a question about the sociality of epistemic standards. Contextualists think epistemic standards are provided by conversational contexts.¹⁹ But how is it that contexts give rise to standards? In particular, one may wonder how social the setting of epistemic standards is. One possibility is that they are settled individually — so that each speaker settles their own reference for context-sensitive indexicals like 'I' or 'you'. When I speak, I use 'you' to refer to someone (perhaps you), and when you speak, you use 'you' to refer to someone else (perhaps me). There is not in general any need to settle on a shared conversational referent of 'you'. Perhaps epistemic standards work in a similarly individualistic way. You and I can each fix our own standards for what counts as "known" in our respective mouths.

Another possibility is that epistemic standards are set at a broader social level, with one communal standard governing the broader conversation. And this possibility, in turn, divides into two subcategories: if epistemic standards are determined collectively, do they do so as a function of individual standards, or do they arise more holistically from the shared conversation? In other words, is the conversational epistemic standard a function of individual epistemic standards of the conversational participants?

Linguistic contextualism has been motivated in part via a response to skeptical arguments. Consider a testimony skeptic, who thinks that reliance on someone else's word is inconsistent with knowledge. I believe that Amanda went for a bike ride because she told me so; contextualism allows that in skeptical contexts, skeptical sentences like (6) can express a truth:

(6) Jonathan doesn't know that Amanda went for a bike ride.

This is thought to be an intuitive result; it explains the felicitous use of claims like (6), as in a conversation like this one between me and a skeptic:

SEXTUS: What did Amanda do yesterday?

JONATHAN: She went for a bike ride.

SEXTUS: Did you see her riding her bike?

JONATHAN: No, but I spoke with her afterward, and she told me about it.

SEXTUS: Then you don't really know what she was doing; maybe she didn't tell you the truth.

¹⁹The terminology of 'epistemic standard' is not entirely standardized in the literature; not all contextualists agree that — or use the terms such that — standards are determined by contexts. DeRose (2009, p. 228) uses 'standards' differently than I do. See Ichikawa (2017a, pp. 31–4) for discussion, and for an explanation for why I prefer this usage.

JONATHAN: Fair enough! I don't know that Amanda went for a bike ride. But I do know that she *said* she went for a bike ride.

A contextualist will also hold that in nonskeptical contexts, nonskeptical sentences like (7) will express a truth.

(7) Jonathan knows that Amanda went for a bike ride.

Consider this conversation between me and a nonskeptic:

THOMAS: Do you know what Amanda did yesterday?

JONATHAN: I do, actually. I saw her last night and she told me that she went for a bike ride.

THOMAS: Oh that's good, I hope she had a nice time. I know how she enjoys biking.

Contextualism is designed in significant part to allow for both (6) and (7) to express truths in their respective contexts; this is thought to best capture certain linguistic intuitions.²⁰

One thing both of these dialogues have in common is that their participants seem to agree on the use of epistemic standards; in the first, Sextus and I both employed stringent standards, and so endorsed skeptical sentences; in the second, Thomas and I employed more lax standards, and endorsed nonskeptical ones.

As Keith DeRose (2004) emphasizes, this is not always the case. Sometimes speakers seem to be using, or making a bid for the use of, different epistemic standards. This is typical of apparent *disputes* about knowledge. In this alternate version of my conversation with Sextus, the individual conversational participants, me and Sextus, do not agree on which standard to use:

SEXTUS: What did Amanda do yesterday?

JONATHAN: She went for a bike ride.

SEXTUS: Did you see her riding her bike?

JONATHAN: No, but I spoke with her afterward, and she told me about it.

SEXTUS: Then you don't really know what she was doing; maybe she didn't tell you the truth.

JONATHAN: No, she wouldn't lie to me about something like that. I know that she went for a bike ride.

SEXTUS: Nothing you are taking someone else's word on can amount to knowledge. You don't know whether she went for a bike ride.

Here, I am speaking as if I'm using a modest standard whereby a sentence like (7) is true and (6) is false, but Sextus is speaking as if he's using a high standard where (6) is true and (7) is false. A contextualist *could* say that we are each speaking in contexts where our utterances do express truths — such that, in a fairly literal sense, Sextus and I are talking past one another — but there are strong reasons for contextualists not to understand things this way.

For one thing, if Sextus and I really are each employing different epistemic standards, then our claims are not ultimately in tension with one another. My utterance of (7), and Sextus's utterance of (6), are no more in conflict than our utterances in this dialogue:

²⁰See e.g. DeRose (2009, ch. 2), Pynn (2017).

SEXTUS: I am an ancient Greek skeptic.

JONATHAN: I am not an ancient Greek skeptic.

Here, we employ different referents for the pronoun ‘I’ — Sextus uses that word to refer to Sextus, and I use it to refer to me. And so our claims here are obviously consistent. A contextualist who applies this diagnosis to (6) and (7) in the disagreement above would say that our claims are just as irrelevant to one another: Sextus is saying I lack a certain high-standards epistemic state, and I’m saying I have a certain modest-standards one.

This is intuitively the wrong result; the debate between me and Sextus about whether I can know what Amanda did yesterday is an actual disagreement, in a way that our respective declarations about whether we are ancient Greek skeptics is not. Some philosophers have thought — mistakenly, in my view — that this “talking past one another” story is or must be the contextualist diagnosis of exchanges like this one.²¹ But this is not so. It is entirely possible — probably preferable — for a contextualist to think that the relevant conversational standard for ‘knows’ is fixed at the shared conversational level. Since Sextus and I are in the same conversation, we face considerable metasemantic pressure to converge on an epistemic standard, which will govern both our utterances. We are in effect *deciding together* whether to be in a high-standards context or a low-standards one. Since we are pulling in different directions, our linguistic bids amount to a practical disagreement.²²

This kind of thought could be implemented in various ways. DeRose’s own story is a kind of supervaluationist one: each speaker in a conversation employs a “personally indicated standard,” and the knowledge ascription is true if it is true on all the personally indicated standards at play in the conversation, false if it is false on all of them, and indeterminate otherwise. In past work, I have defended a less individualistic conception of the social standard; I do not assume that individuals do or can indicate standards in a way insulated from the broader social role of their conversations; nor do I think that all conversations are egalitarian with respect to the ability to fix conversational standards. Conversational power dynamics, for example, have a role to play in explaining why some speakers have more influence on the epistemic standard than others.²³

Although contextualists aren’t always explicit on this point, my own sense of the literature is that most contemporary contextualists think of their view in one or another of these shared social ways: conversational participants are working together, whether as individuals or collectively, to set an epistemic standard that applies to the entire conversation. This, then, is another sense in which broader social considerations play roles in epistemology: here, the conversational context, which includes broader social considerations, makes use of those considerations in fixing the shared epistemic standard that governs knowledge ascriptions in that context. I’ll discuss some of the social and political implications of this kind

²¹This has been one of the central motivations for *relativism*, as opposed to contextualism, about ‘knows’. See Richard (2004) and MacFarlane (2005, 2007).

²²On practical disagreement and considerations for and against contextualism, see Huvenes (2014), Khoo (2017), or Brendel (2017).

²³DeRose’s view has this egalitarian implication because he holds that truth of a knowledge ascription is a matter of conversational *unanimity* with regard to whether the standards are such that it would be true, since all participants have an equal say in whether such unanimity obtains. See Ichikawa (2020, pp. 7–8) for discussion.

of choice in the final section of this chapter.

4 The moral and political significance of epistemic parameters

If the single-standard approach to ‘knows’ just described is correct, then participants in a conversation involving knowledge ascriptions are engaged in a collective action of setting epistemic standards, which will influence whether a knowledge ascription expresses a truth or a falsehood. Since knowledge ascriptions are practically, morally, and politically significant, the collective choice of epistemic standards can be significant in those ways too.

How are knowledge ascriptions practically, morally, and politically significant? The precise answer is controversial, but reflection on examples makes it clear that there is at least some connection. For instance, if someone approaches you with concerns about whether your friend has engaged in serious misconduct, what they know, and what you know, become obviously important questions. If they know your friend has sexually assaulted their student, for instance, you’re in a very different moral situation than you are if they merely suspect it.²⁴

One way to explain the practical significance of questions about knowledge would be via a knowledge norm for action or assertion. According to the former, one can permissibly act only on considerations which one knows — so if I know that my friend has engaged in serious misconduct, this could justify significant actions in response: perhaps asking them to apologize, or declining to invite them to future events, or ending the friendship. But if I merely suspect that they have done so, but do not know it, such actions would be hasty and inappropriate. According to the latter, one may only assert what one knows; so I can tell others what I heard about my friend if and only if it amounts to knowledge.²⁵

The knowledge norms for action and assertion are controversial. If they are not correct, then the interaction between knowledge ascriptions and practical, moral, and political matters are less straightforward.²⁶ But it is clear that there is some connection between knowledge and these practical questions — saying that one knows communicates somehow or other that it is appropriate to say or act on it, and saying that one doesn’t know indicates that it isn’t.²⁷

If what we accept as ‘known’ depends on shared contextual parameters, and has significant implications for important practical, moral, and political questions, linguistic contextualism implies important connections between conversational contexts and these normative matters. Contextualists have an interesting explanation to offer for ways in which knowledge discourse can be normatively important. In my (2020) “Contextual Injustice,” I suggest that important practical, moral, and political norms govern our collective choices regarding conversational contexts: there are better and worse epistemic standards that we might employ. When we employ the wrong standards, we can enact significant harms — even if we speak truly with the sentences we use to enact those standards.

²⁴For discussion of an example of this kind in some detail, see Crewe and Ichikawa (2021); Ichikawa (2020).

²⁵On a knowledge norm of action, see Hawthorne and Stanley (2008), Brown (2008a), Fantl and McGrath (2009), Weatherston (2012), Ichikawa (2012), or Ichikawa (2017a, ch. 5). On a knowledge norm of assertion, see Williamson (2000, ch. 8), Lackey (2007), Schaffer (2008), Brown (2008b), or Ichikawa (2017a, ch. 6).

²⁶Given contextualism, they cannot be entirely straightforward anyway, even if the knowledge norms are correct. See DeRose (2009), Worsnip (2017), or Ichikawa (2017a) on the subtle interaction between knowledge norms and contextualism.

²⁷Those who deny knowledge norms often attempt to explain away the intuitions behind them in part by citing this fact. See e.g. Brown (2006); Rysiew (2017).

Here is an example. In October 2018, Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi was murdered inside a Saudi consulate in Turkey. By November 16, American intelligence agencies had concluded with a high degree of confidence that Mohammed bin Salman, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, had ordered his assassination.²⁸ But the following week, American President Donald Trump issued the following as part of a “Statement from President Donald J. Trump on Standing with Saudi Arabia”:

The crime against Jamal Khashoggi was a terrible one, and one that our country does not condone.

... King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman vigorously deny any knowledge of the planning or execution of the murder of Mr. Khashoggi. Our intelligence agencies continue to assess all information, but it could very well be that the Crown Prince had knowledge of this tragic event – maybe he did and maybe he didn’t!

That being said, we may *never* know all of the facts surrounding the murder of Mr. Jamal Khashoggi.²⁹

Focus on the epistemic vocabulary in the latter half of the passage: *Maybe* the Crown Prince was involved, *maybe* he wasn’t, we may never *know*. One way to criticize Trump’s utterance would be to say that it is false — that we *do* know, on the basis of strong intelligence reports, that bin Salman ordered the murder. But there is another way to complain, too. Given contextualism, Trump might have expressed true propositions with these sentences, because he was using particularly stringent epistemic standards; that doesn’t mean there is nothing to criticize: the choice of such an epistemic parameter has the harmful effect of quieting calls for a proactive response to a brutal murder. I suggest in my paper that there is a general connection between invoking skeptical standards, and the kind of conservatism that involves deference to the status quo.³⁰

This kind of dynamic can also shed new light on some instances of testimonial injustice. One way in which a testifier might be epistemically wronged via testimonial injustice would be for someone to underestimate the level of epistemic support their testimony offers. This is, I think, the most natural way to interpret Miranda Fricker’s discussion of credibility deficits.³¹ But a different strategy for blocking uptake of someone’s testimony would be to raise the epistemic standards: what someone says might not count as “known” (and so might not warrant a response), because of the high epistemic standards in play in the conversation. Manipulating epistemic standards can also be unjust.

Reflection on contextual injustice, then, is also among the many ways to appreciate the complex interactions between contextualism and social epistemology.³²

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²⁸Harris et al. (2018).

²⁹<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-donald-j-trump-standing-saudi-arabia>. Emphasis in original.

³⁰Ichikawa (2020, pp. 14–16).

³¹Fricker (2007, p. 17). See Ichikawa (2020, p. 16).

³²Thanks to Aidan McGlynn and Patrick Rysiew for detailed comments on a draft of this chapter.

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