

Contextualism and Gradability – A Reply to Stanley

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Abstract: Contextualism in epistemology is the claim that the knowledge predicate is context-sensitive in the sense that it has different truth conditions across different contexts of use. Jason Stanley objects against this view that if it were correct, then “know” should be gradable in the same way as gradable adjectives. Since it lacks gradability, it also lacks the postulated context-sensitivity. Or so Stanley argues. In this paper, I show that the contextualist is not committed to the gradability of the knowledge predicate in the first place. I will distinguish between what I will call *pure threshold predicates*, which either apply *simpliciter* or not at all in each context, and *impure threshold predicates*, for which context determines whether they apply *simpliciter*, but which can also be satisfied to certain degrees. Threshold predicates are not gradable, but many of exhibit just the kind of context-sensitivity that is postulated for “know”. Pace Stanley, three claims are going to be established: that the lack of gradability of the knowledge predicate (i) does not jeopardize its context-sensitivity, (ii) does not dismantle the analogies contextualists have claimed to hold between “know” and gradable adjectives, and (iii) is perfectly consistent with the idea of varying high epistemic standards.

Contextualism in epistemology (henceforth “contextualism”) is the view that knowledge claims – paradigmatically statements of the form “S knows that p” or “S doesn’t know that p” – are context-sensitive in the sense that they have different truth conditions across different contexts of use, depending on the epistemic standards obtaining within each context. As a result, “S knows that p” as uttered in a context with low standards does not express the same proposition as “S knows that p” as uttered in a context with high standards.¹ Witness Keith DeRose:

[T]he truth conditions of knowledge-ascribing and knowledge-denying sentences (...) vary in certain ways according to the context in which they are uttered. What so varies is the epistemic standards that a subject must meet (or, in the case of a denial of knowledge, fail to meet) in order for such a statement to be true. In some contexts, “S knows that P” requires for its truth that S have a true belief that P and also be in a very strong epistemic position with respect to P, while in other contexts, the very same sentence may require for its truth, in addition to S’s having a true belief that P, only that S meet some lower epistemic standards. Thus, the contextualist will allow that one speaker can truthfully say “S knows that P”, while another speaker, in a different context, where higher standards are in place, can truthfully say “S doesn’t know that P”, though both speakers are talking about the same S and the same P at the same time. (DeRose, 2000: 91)

Contextualists have often emphasized that these features of the semantics of “know” are not unique to the knowledge predicate. Rather, they can also be found in gradable adjectives: the truth conditions of “S is tall” vary across contexts with varying standards for tallness. As a result, “S is tall” can be true in one context and false in another. The analogy between “know”

¹There are versions of contextualism which do not involve a commitment to higher and lower standards. As Stanley himself points out, these views are immune to his objection.

and gradable adjectives has thus often served as an important motivation and illustration of contextualism.

Jason Stanley argues that this line of thought spells trouble for contextualism. Specifically, he argues that if the knowledge predicate were in fact contextsensitive in the postulated way then it should also be analogous to gradable adjectives when it comes to gradability; like “tall” and “flat”, it should exhibit the property of being gradable. Since it does not exhibit this property, contextualism fails. Let's have a closer look at the line of thought Stanley develops. He writes:

According to [contextualists], knowledge ascriptions come in varying degrees of strength. In other words, knowledge ascriptions are intuitively gradable. Contextualists speak (...) of higher and lower standards for knowledge. Comparative adjectives are one natural kind of gradable expressions. It is therefore no surprise that epistemologists (...) have been exploiting the analogy between “know” and adjectives such as “flat” and “tall”. But (...) the attempt to treat “know” as a gradable expression fails. First, it shows that one cannot appeal to the context-sensitivity of adjectives to justify the context-dependence of knowledge ascriptions. Secondly, it casts doubt upon the claim that knowledge comes in varying degrees of strength (...). (Stanley, 2005: 35f.)

In this passage, Stanley indicates that contextualists are somehow committed to the claim that knowledge ascriptions are gradable. But this claim is false, according to Stanley. Its falsity can be shown by applying two tests for gradability to the case of the knowledge predicate.

First, if an expression is gradable, it should allow for modifiers. For example, predicative uses of gradable adjectives allow for modification, as in:

- (1) (a) That is *very* flat.
- (b) That is *really* flat.

(...) Secondly, if an expression is gradable, it should be conceptually related to a natural comparative construction. So, for “flat” “tall”, and “small” we have “flatter than”, “taller than”, and “smaller than”. (ibid.: 36)

Stanley then argues that “know” fails both of these tests; constructions such as “I don't really know it” (modification) or “I know it better” (comparative) and are not to be taken literally. Genuine modifier uses allow for constructions like “This is flat, but not really flat”. Genuine comparatives allow for constructions like “I am tall, but you are taller”. None of these constructions are available in the case of “know”: “I know it, but I don't really know it” and “I know it, but you know it better” seem infelicitous.

On the basis of these findings, I think one should grant that “know” is indeed not gradable. Where Stanley goes astray is in thinking that this finding casts doubt upon contextualism as such. In fact, as I am going to show, neither the analogies that are said to obtain between gradable adjectives and “know” nor the idea of varying epistemic standards commit contextualists to the gradability of “know” in any way.

What contextualists say is that in different contexts different standards for what counts as knowledge obtain. In some contexts they are high, in others they are low. That is, in some contexts, the epistemic position a subject must be in to count as knowing must be stronger than in others. As a consequence, the truth conditions of knowledge sentences vary. In *these* respects, “know” works just like gradable adjectives.

But from this it does not follow that “know” itself should be gradable. For the very same analogies contextualists emphasize between “know” and gradable adjectives hold between

“know” and clearly non-gradable, yet obviously contextsensitive expressions, such as “tall enough” or “sufficiently flat”.

All the crucial things the contextualist says about “know” can be said about these expressions as well. In different contexts, different standards for counting as sufficiently flat or tall enough obtain. In some contexts they are high, in others they are low. If, for instance, one tries to decide whether a certain lawn can be used for a bocchia game, the standards for sufficient flatness are rather lax. If physicists try to decide whether a certain surface can be used for an experiment, the standards may be much higher. The same goes for “tall enough”. A rather high standard obtains in conversations about reaching the ceiling, and a rather low standard obtains in conversations about reaching the windowsill. That is, in different context, a subject must have different heights to count as tall enough and a surface must have varyingly few bumps in order to count as sufficiently flat. Consequently, the truth conditions of “x is sufficiently flat” and “S is tall enough” vary across contexts. But neither “sufficiently flat” nor “tall enough” is gradable.

If this is true, however, and the analogies contextualists have emphasized between “know” and gradable adjectives also hold for clearly non-gradable contextsensitive expressions like “tall enough” and “flat enough” then gradability does not seem to be a relevant feature in this analogy. It seems to be an independent feature of some expressions, which are in other respects analogous to the predicate “know”.

Why does Stanley think that contextualists are committed to the gradability of “know” in the first place then? Looking for Stanley's reasons is instructive; I take it that underlying his gradability objection is a misled understanding of contextualism itself. Invoking certain remarks by Stewart Cohen and Keith DeRose, Stanley tells us that it is a *core claim* of contextualism that knowledge comes in varying degrees of strength. Since Stanley does not give us bibliographical references with respect to these remarks, it is hard to see whether Cohen and DeRose have actually formulated their view in these words. If so, they have chosen a very misleading way of doing so. It is quite natural to expect a predicate to be gradable if we can truly state that the property it picks out comes in varying degrees of strength. If a core claim of contextualism really were that knowledge comes in varying degrees of strength it would therefore indeed be surprising if “know” were not gradable.

Luckily, contextualists are not committed to what Stanley takes to be their core claim. According to contextualists, a subject has to meet varyingly high standards to *count as knowing*. This is a metalinguistic claim about the application conditions of the knowledge predicate. These *standards* are gradable and so are the epistemic positions a subject must be in to meet these standards: both can be lined up along a scale in ascending order; we can line up standards from low to high and epistemic positions from weak to strong. In each case, both of Stanley's tests for gradability – modifier use and comparative construction – are satisfied: we can say that a standard is high, but not *really* high, or that someone is in a strong epistemic position, but not in a *really* strong epistemic position. Likewise, we can say that a given standard is *higher* than some other standard, or that someone is in a *better* epistemic position with respect to p than someone else.

In spite of these gradable elements, however, it does not make any more sense to say that knowledge comes in varying degrees of strength than to say that being tall enough or being sufficiently flat come in degrees. There is a gradable element to these predicates as well: relative to different standards, different heights count as tall and different degrees of flatness count as flat. We can arrange heights and degrees of flatness along a scale. And in a *derived* sense we can line up different instances of being tall enough or being sufficiently flat along a scale as well. We can say that the property of being tall enough is satisfied to a higher degree

the taller the subject is. And we can say that the property of being sufficiently flat is satisfied to a higher degree the flatter the subject is.

In the same *derived* sense we can grade knowledge relations. We can say that they are realized to a higher degree the stronger the required epistemic position is. But we should keep in mind that this is just a very loose formulation of what is really claimed. In speaking this way, we are not really grading “tall enough”, “sufficiently flat” or “know”. What we are grading are heights, degrees of flatness and epistemic positions, things that have to reach a certain degree for “tall enough”, “sufficiently flat”, or “know” to apply *simpliciter*. Strictly speaking, being tall enough and being sufficiently flat do not come in degrees. Neither does knowledge. We therefore should not expect “know” to pass Stanley’s tests for gradability.

The upshot thus far is that in certain respects, “know” functions like *modified* gradable adjectives such as “tall enough” or “sufficiently flat” rather than functioning like gradable adjectives such as “tall” or “flat”.² It is what I would like to call a *pure threshold predicate*: In each context, the obtaining standard fixes the conditions that have to be satisfied for a subject to exceed the threshold. Once the threshold is exceeded, the predicate applies. This is the only purpose the predicate has. It marks whether the threshold is surpassed or not. So the predicate is either satisfied *simpliciter* or not at all. It cannot be satisfied to certain degrees.

Gradable adjectives are more complex. They are *threshold predicates*, but *impure* ones. Context determines the standard that has to be met for them to apply *simpliciter*, but in contrast to pure threshold predicates they can also be satisfied to certain degrees. That is why we can speak of one person being taller than another, thereby indicating that the first person satisfies the tallness predicate to a higher degree than the second one. Pure threshold predicates do not admit of that: we cannot speak of one person being more tall enough or knowing something to a higher degree than another person.³

Stanley thinks that this line of thought is thoroughly mistaken and offers a brief argument against it in his book. In the remainder of this paper, I will argue that his objection is severely flawed in a variety of ways. Here is what he says:

One reaction (...) is to maintain that I have focused on the wrong model (...). Instead of “know” being analogous to “flat” or “tall”, the contextualist claim is rather that “know” is analogous to “flat *enough*” or “tall *enough*”. (...) It is not clear to me in what sense “know” is supposed to be analogous to “tall enough” (...) or even “justified enough”. There are all sorts of disanalogies (...). Most alarmingly, one standard use of these expressions is to convey that something has the property for a sufficient degree for present purposes, though it does not in fact have the property. (Stanely 2005: 43)

In accordance to this standard use, Stanley argues, we can felicitously say things like the following:

(23) He isn't tall, but he's tall enough. (ibid.: 44)

(24) I may not be justified in my suspicion, but I'm justified enough to investigate further. (ibid.)

He then goes on to argue:

If “know” is supposed to be synonymous with something like “is justified enough in one's true belief” then (...) one would expect to be able smoothly to say things like:

2

This point is also made by Halliday (2007).

³Halliday (2007: 390) makes a very similar distinction in terms of two senses of “gradability”.

(25) John isn't justified in his belief that the bank is open, but he knows that the bank is open. (ibid.)

Since this is infelicitous, Stanley concludes that

'know that p' simply doesn't behave as 'is justified enough in one's true belief that p'. These disanalogies are sufficient to undermine the plausibility of the proposal. (ibid.)

In this passage, Stanley makes a variety of very dubious moves, the most dubious of which is that he distorts his opponent's proposal considerably in the course of the passage I have just quoted. The proposal he explicitly considers at first – and which is in fact what I (and Halliday 2007) have argued for – is that know is in many ways *analogous* to “tall enough”, “flat enough” or – for all I care – “justified enough”. This claim is then distorted to the claim that “know' is *synonymous* with something like 'is justified enough in one's true belief”, which is a very different claim. Synonymity requires substitutability. Analogies don't. That “is justified enough” cannot be substituted by “knows” in the exemplary sentences is therefore not decisive at all against the proposal at issue.

The important question is: is the infelicity of (25) problematic for the actual proposal, according to which there are important *analogies* between “know” and “tall enough”? Not as far as I can see. The claim that there are important, or even crucial, analogies between two things in *some* respects can hardly be criticized on the basis of the finding that there are disanalogies between the two things in *other* respects. The proposal at issue is that gradability is not to be expected in the case of “know” because “know” - like “tall enough” - is a pure threshold predicate. This does not imply that there are no *disanalogies* between the terms. It is therefore strange that “[i]t is not clear to [Stanley] in what sense 'know' is supposed to be analogous to 'tall enough’” solely on the basis of the fact that “[t]here are all sorts of disanalogies”.

Nevertheless, there is one very legitimate worry left to answer. I am not sure whether this worry is actually what guides Stanley's criticism, but I take it to be the most promising way to attack the view I have presented: the worry is that the disanalogies that can be observed between “know” on the one hand and “tall enough” and “sufficiently flat” on the other arise from the very property that I have postulated to be analogous between them. If that were the case – if what I have claimed to be analogous between “know” and “tall enough” indeed gave rise to a behaviour of “tall enough” that cannot also be observed in the case of “know” - then, of course, this would strongly count against the postulated analogy between them. As I will show, however, this is not the case.

The property I have identified as analogous between “know” and “tall enough” is that both are pure threshold predicates. That means that the predicate either applies *simpliciter* or not at all, and whether or not it applies depends on whether or not a contextually determined threshold for its application is surpassed or not. Hence, the question we need to turn to is whether *their being pure threshold predicates* gives rise to the fact that “tall enough”, “sufficiently flat”, and “justified enough” can be combined with a denial of “tall”, “flat”, or “justified” - a denial, that is, of their underlying unmodified predicates?

The answer is straightforward: there are lots of pure threshold predicates whose attribution cannot felicitously be combined with a denial of their underlying unmodified predicates. Just consider “*very* tall”. It clearly is a pure threshold predicate, but nevertheless it is infelicitous to say “He's very tall, but he's not tall”. The same goes for “absolutely flat”, and “highly justified”. It also goes for covertly modified predicates such as “excellent” and “vanished”, which I take to be roughly equivalent to “extremely good” and “completely gone”, respectively. In all of these cases, the context determines a threshold above which the predicates apply. None of them is gradable, and none of them can be felicitously combined

with a denial of their underlying unmodified predicates. If something is absolutely flat, it is also flat. If something is highly justified, it is also justified. If something is excellent, it is also good. If something is vanished, it is also gone.

Now, if the scale on which “know” marks a certain threshold is a scale of better or worse epistemic statuses – or of higher or lower justification – but “know” requires an excellent, very good, absolute, extremely good or simply a high level of justification, then it is not to be expected that “know” can occur in statements such as “He knows, but he’s not justified”. The threshold for “know” can never be lower than the threshold for “justified”, just as the threshold for “very tall” can never be lower than the threshold for “tall”. In this respect, pure threshold predicates can differ: the threshold for “tall enough” can be – and often is – lower than the threshold for “tall”, as the felicity of Stanley’s statement (23) shows. But this is not a consequence of “tall enough” being a pure threshold predicate. Rather, it is once more an independent feature of *some* pure threshold predicates. I therefore conclude that the disanalogy Stanley observes between “know” and “tall enough” does not arise from the feature that I have identified as analogous between the two. As a consequence, the disanalogy does not cast doubt upon the claim that they have this feature in common.

What my discussion has shown is this: Stanley is right. “Know” is not gradable, whereas some contextsensitive adjectives such as “tall” are. But none of the consequences Stanley draws from this finding follow from it. First, and most importantly, it does not follow that “know” is not a context-sensitive term. As I have shown, the contextualist is not committed to the gradability of “know” in the first place. Secondly, Stanley’s finding that “know” is not gradable does not threaten the analogy between “know” and gradable adjectives. It shows that they are not analogous with respect to gradability, all right. But this is perfectly compatible with the line of thought typically endorsed by contextualists. The analogy they stress is the sensitivity to standards which obtains in both cases. And this sensitivity to standards has nothing to do with gradability, as clearly non-gradable but nonetheless standard-sensitive expressions – pure threshold predicates such as “tall enough”, “very flat”, “highly justified”, and “excellent” - show. Third, and finally, Stanley’s finding does not cast doubt upon a core claim of contextualism. It might cast doubt upon the claim that knowledge comes in degrees. But this claim is not more than a distortion of an essential thesis of contextualism. It is a loose and misleading formulation of the claim that *what is required for “know” to apply* comes in degrees. This is what contextualists are committed to. But as other cases of pure threshold predicates show, this does not commit them to the gradability of “know” either.

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References

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