Epistemic Relativism and Semantic Blindness

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Abstract

If ordinary speakers tend to accept statements that conflict with a semantic theory, that theory is said to imply *semantic blindness*; for if the theory is true, ordinary speakers are unaware of it. Epistemic relativism has been shown to imply semantic blindness. However, we must ask: is this a problem for relativism? In this paper I argue that it is not a problem. Relativism, with the help of some psychology, predicts exactly the kind of semantic blindness that we observe. Furthermore, the specific error that relativism predicts is an instance of a common form of error that is known to occur in other areas. In the end, semantic blindness can be viewed as a confirmed prediction of epistemic relativism, and not as a challenge to the theory.

Key words Relativism, Semantic Blindness, Contextualism, Subject-Sensitive Invariantism, Relevant Alternatives

Introduction

Does Samantha know that her door is locked? Even if we know how Samantha formed the belief that it is locked, the answer to this question may not be straightforward. Willingness to say that she knows varies depending on, among other things, what is at stake. There is a tendency to employ higher standards for what counts as knowledge when the stakes are high and lower standards when the stakes are not so high. This phenomenon of variability in epistemic standards motivates the view that the truth conditions of knowledge claims depend on a contextually determined epistemic standards parameter. Theories of knowledge adopting this claim are *context-sensitive* theories of knowledge. Context-sensitive theories explain the variability in standards regarding knowledge claims.

Unfortunately, ordinary speakers do not seem to be particularly aware that knowledge has any context-sensitive standards component. If context-sensitive theories are correct, this lack of awareness of the context-sensitivity of 'knows' is puzzling. This problem, known as semantic blindness, has troubled context-sensitive theories such as contextualism and subject-sensitive invariantism for some time (Schiffer 1996; Hawthorne 2004). Context-sensitive theories must explain away semantic blindness, or they need to adopt an error theory.[1]

A new hope for context-sensitivity arrived when a retooled epistemic relativism was presented that appeared to preserve context-sensitivity without semantic blindness or an error theory (MacFarlane 2005, 2011). Making use of extra resources (assessor context and relative truth, described below), relativism explains how statements that may initially sound like denials of context-sensitivity can be consistent with a context-sensitive theory of knowledge. Thus, we need not interpret ordinary speakers as unaware of context-sensitivity. The avoidance of semantic blindness was a major selling point for the new version of relativism. Unfortunately, though relativism avoids the kind of semantic blindness that had been identified before relativism was presented, it turns out relativism suffers from its own version of semantic blindness. There exist patterns of usage that relativism can only account for by appeal to an error theory. It appears ordinary speakers are often not sensitive to changes in the parameters relativism posits (Montminy 2009; Kindermann 2011). Thus, one of the arguments for relativism, that it avoids semantic blindness, appears to be lost.

[In this paragraph, explain why there exist good error theories. If an error theory appeals to an error we independently know people make, if it is not an ad hoc addition to the theory, and if the error only manifests in confusing or obscure situations, then it is not problematic.] The purpose of the present paper is to argue that hope is not lost for relativism. While relativism does require an error theory, I argue that this is not as problematic as it might appear. An acceptable error theory follows from the nature of relativism and inquiry itself. A proper interpretation of the epistemic standards parameter, and the significance of that parameter, delivers an error theory and an explanation for why that form of error is expected. Furthermore, the error theory suggested by relativism appeals to a kind of error closely related to other errors that humans are known to be prone to. Altogether, the error theory is not an *ad hoc* rescue of relativism but a confirmed prediction of it. Relativism is not destroyed by semantic blindness.

[1]It is not my goal here to evaluate attempts on the part of contextualism and subject-sensitive invariantism to solve this problem. I merely point out that some response is required.

The case will be presented as follows: The first section describes the two main context-sensitive epistemic theories other than relativism, contextualism and SSI. The section also describes semantic blindness as it affects those theories. Section 2 describes relativism, and how it avoids the form of semantic blindness that is so problematic for contextualism and subject-sensitive invariantism. Section 3 shows that despite solving this problem, relativism faces semantic blindness problems of its own. Section 4 presents an error theory for relativism and explains why this error theory is not a serious problem for relativism. Section 5 presents an objection to the proposed error theory, along with responses.

1 Contextualism, subject-sensitive invariantism and semantic blindness

Starting at the beginning, one motivation behind context-sensitive theories is to account for low stakes/high stakes cases, of which the following is one example:

> A raised walkway traverses a swamp. If the walkway fails with a person on it, she will get swamp water on her feet. Suppose Simone just saw a dog cross the walkway without any sign that the walkway was unstable. Under these circumstances, she says to herself, "I know that the walkway is stable." Now suppose that immediately after she utters this, the swamp becomes contaminated with chemicals that will melt flesh in seconds. Simone knows with certainty the chemicals did not affect the stability of the walkway. However, the fact that she saw the dog make it across is not enough to convince her the walkway is stable. She now says, "I do not know that the walkway is stable."

Cases like this suggest that ordinary subjects have a tendency to accept knowledge attributions when the stakes are low, but to apply much higher standards when the stakes are high. Context-sensitive theories of knowledge offer an explanation for this pattern. According to such theories, epistemic standards vary with context. In the lower stakes context, Simone's claim 'I know that the walkway is stable' is true. In the higher stakes context, the claim that she does not know is true. Since ordinary speakers know the language, and in cases like these they are well-informed about the situation, the pattern of usage reflects their correctly accounting for the context-sensitivity of knowledge claims.

Contextualism and subject-sensitive invariantism (henceforth SSI) present two natural ways of specifying the nature of the context-sensitivity of knowledge attributions. Contextualism is the view that the standards one must meet in order to count as knowing that p are determined by the *context of use*. The context of use is the context of the person making the knowledge attribution. Thus, according to contextualism 'S knows that p' uttered by U is true if and only if S meets the standards for knowledge that are at play in U's context. Thus, if lightning at the wrong moment could ruin an experiment Susan has spent years preparing and John's belief that there will be no lightning is based only on a day old weather report, it does not matter how low John's standards are. When Susan says, "John does not know there will be no lightning," it is true. By her standards, John does not know. However, if John said the same thing, it would be false, assuming his standards are low enough. The standards of the speaker are the standards that matter, according to contextualism.

On the other hand, SSI claims that the standards that a subject must meet in order to count as knowing depend on the subject's own context. Thus, according to SSI, 'S knows that p' is true iff S meets the standards for knowing that are at play in her context. In the example of Susan's experiment, Susan would be wrong to say, "John does not know there will be lightning." Her standards are not relevant when John is the subject of the knowledge claim.

Returning to Simone and the swamp, both contextualism and SSI account for the data. When mere swamp water is at issue, Simone is in a low standards context. She also is both the speaker and the subject, so according to both contextualism and SSI she knows that the walkway is stable: she meets the low standards of both subject context and context of use. However, once corrosive chemicals enter the scene, the standards rise dramatically. In the new context Simone's mediocre evidence is simply not up to standards. As both speaker and subject once again, both contextualism and SSI imply she does not know that the walkway is stable. Both theories account for the relevant data in both contexts.

1.1 Semantic Blindness

However, both theories appear to have difficulty accounting for other aspects of our use of 'knows'.[2] To illustrate, suppose as you watch the harmful chemicals flow under the walkway, you ask Simone whether her earlier statement–that she

[2]The line of objection presented here is also discussed in Schiffer (1996) and Hawthorne (2004).

knew that the walkway was stable–was correct. Most likely, she will say that her previous statement was incorrect; she did not know. This is intuitively the right answer from a high standards context, and it appears to match what people actually say. Yet according to both contextualism and SSI, this response is wrong: her previous statement was true, since her standards were lower when she uttered the sentence about herself. When she later says that her original claim was false, she is making a mistake. Apparently, she fails to recognize the context-sensitivity of knowledge claims.

To account for cases like this, it appears that both theories need to claim that ordinary speakers do not fully understand the term 'knows.' Sometimes they fail to recognize the context-sensitivity of the term. When assessing claims that, according to these theories, ought to involve lower standards, one sometimes incorrectly tries to apply one's current higher standards. The failure to recognize the context-sensitivity of 'knows' is the problem of semantic blindness. This is a problem for which both views require an error theory. This is problematic because other context-sensitive terms, such as 'I' or 'to the left of', are easily recognized as context-sensitive. When I say, "I am going home," and someone else says, "I am not going home," there is no inclination to think there is a conflict. It is obvious to everyone that 'I' refers to different people each time. The challenge for context-sensitive theories is to explain why knowledge discourse is prone to a similar error.[3]

2 Relativism to the rescue?

Unlike contextualism or SSI, relativism predicts Simone's response that her low standards knowledge claim was mistaken (MacFarlane 2005). Relativism is able to account for Simone's statements by incorporating two features not present in contextualism or SSI: *assessor context* and *relative truth*.

The first feature relativism introduces, assessor context, is the context of an agent assessing the truth value of a knowledge attribution. If U says, "S knows that p," and A considers whether that claim is true, A is the assessor and her context is the assessor context. An assessor need not actually make a knowledge attribution.

[3]My purpose here is not to assess whether contextualism or SSI has a solution to this problem. However, it is worth noting that contextualism may not have a solution. DeRose's discussion of semantic blindness contains this admission: "there must be something to the charge that if contextualism is true, we suffer from some degree of 'semantic blindness': Speakers are to some extent blind to the context-sensitivity of 'knows,' " (De Rose 2006, 321).

According to relativism, in order to determine the truth value of the claim 'S knows that p,' one needs to specify a context from which the claim is assessed. Thus, given the same attribution 'S knows that p,' I might correctly assess it as true from my low standards context, while you correctly assess it as false from your high standards context. This contrasts with contextualism, which claims that knowledge is sensitive to context of use, implying that once an utterance is made in a context of use, its truth value is fixed. It also contrasts with SSI, which claims that knowledge is sensitive to subject context, implying that a subject's context at a time fixes the truth values of any knowledge claims made about her and assessed from any other context.

The second tool that relativism employs is the concept of relative truth of a proposition. Relative truth applies to complete propositions that only have truth values relative to a value of a parameter(s). According to this view, a complete proposition can have different truth values in different circumstances.[4] Relative truth contrasts with indexicals. To illustrate, the indexical sentence 'There is a chair here' expresses a different proposition depending on what location the indexical 'here' refers to. Without a context to fix the reference of 'here', the sentence does not express a complete proposition at all. In contrast, assuming knowledge claims are subject to relative truth, the claim 'John knows that cats exist' always expresses a complete proposition. Though the proposition is complete, relative truth implies that it only has a truth value relative to a context to fix the epistemic standards parameter. To take another example, given one view of tense the tensed proposition that John is running is a complete proposition, but it only has a truth value once we specify a time parameter. If at time t John is running, the proposition is true relative to that time. If at time t' John is not running, the very same proposition is false relative to that time. For epistemic relativism, propositions regarding knowledge only have truth values relative to an epistemic standards parameter.

Bringing the elements together, epistemic relativism states that a claim 'S knows that p' expresses a complete proposition (barring indexicals in S and p whose contents are determined by context of use) whose truth is relative to context of assessment. To assess the truth value of a knowledge claim, we need to specify the correct world, time and epistemic standards, specified in the triple <world, time, standards>. A particular utterance of 'S knows that p' uttered in context C_U is true as assessed from the context C_A iff the proposition expressed is true relative to <world of C_U, time of C_U, standards of C_A >. For example, when

[4]The classic example of relative truth is Kaplan's view of tense; see Kaplan (1989).

Larry at 3:00pm today assesses Susan's utterance, "John knows that cats exist," that she made yesterday at 5:00pm, the utterance is true iff at 5:00pm yesterday in the actual world, John's belief that cats exist met the epistemic standards set by Larry's context at 3:00pm today.

What does relativism have to say about the cases that caused trouble for contextualism and SSI? Recall, the problem case is as follows: in a low standards context Simone claims she knows the walkway is safe. Then the standards rise and she says that her previous knowledge claim was false; she did not know that the walkway was safe. Relativism can account for every aspect of this case without resorting to an error theory. First, when Simone made the claim 'I know that the walkway is safe' in the low standards context, it was true as assessed from her context at the time. Later, in the higher standards context, she assess her earlier knowledge claim, 'I know that the walkway is stable.' When she made the claim she did not meet high epistemic standards, only having the evidence of a dog on the walkway. Relativism therefore implies that assessed from the high standards context, the earlier knowledge claim is false. Simone is correct to reject her earlier knowledge claim. She makes no mistake with the original knowledge claim and none with the later retraction of that claim. Relativism accounts for all of this without an error theory. Is it therefore the solution to semantic blindness?

3 Relativism's semantic blindness problem

Although relativism has no trouble with the cases that are problematic for contextualism and SSI, semantic blindness still affects relativism. Ordinary speakers are semantically blind to the assessment-relativity of knowledge claims in some systematic ways. There are three manifestations of semantic blindness for relativism: denial of cross-context success, lack of an epistemic standards-shifting operator in ordinary language, and inability of relativism to deal with the skeptical paradox.

The first expression of semantic blindness is the refusal to credit epistemic success or accuracy to statements that are true in other contexts of assessment but not in one's own. According to relativism, if agent S is in a high standards context and agent T is in a low standards context, the claim that John knows that p can be true as assessed from T's context but false as assessed from S's context. If T says, "That claim is true," he will be correct as assessed from his own context. This is a kind of success, but if S is like ordinary agents, she will not admit that it is a success. To her, the statement is false, and T is incorrect to judge it true. End of story. She will not credit him with a context-appropriate judgment.

To illustrate, suppose Susan and John are each assessing the claim 'Pamela knows where her towel is at.' In fact, the towel is on the clothes line, and although Pamela believes it is on the clothes line, she does not have much evidence that squirrels have not taken it. The squirrel possibility is significant in Susan's high standards context but not in John's low standards context. Susan and John are looking at the towel on the clothes line, and thus meet Susan's higher standards for knowledge. John assesses the claim that Pamela knows where her towel is as true, which is correct from his context of assessment. Susan assesses the claim as false, which is correct from her context of assessment. However, when we ask John if Susan has assessed the claim correctly, the best he has to say is, "No, but she thinks she has." Susan says the same about John. Susan and John's responses to each other's assessments are intuitive, but problematic for relativism. Even though each has achieved some success in assessing the knowledge claim–i.e. they have made the correct assessments from their respective contexts–neither one is willing to ascribe epistemic success to the other. They appear to be blind to the fact that knowledge claims are sensitive to context of assessment.[5]

The second manifestation of semantic blindness for relativism is suggested by the difficulty of even stating the problem in the above example. Susan and John each achieved some success that the other refused to admit, but the kind of success they achieved does not appear to have an ordinary language term expressing it. We have the theoretical concepts *accuracy-relative-to-epistemic-context* or *correct-as-assessed-from-context*. However, these phrases are part of epistemological/linguistic theories, not part of ordinary language. Without an ordinary language means of bringing about a shift in epistemic standards, one can only use one's own context of assessment when making knowledge claims. If my standards are Σ, one struggles in ordinary language to make a claim about what is true assessed using standards $\Sigma' \neq \Sigma$. This fact suggests a blindness to assessment-sensitivity. If relativism is correct, there are facts about the assessment sensitivity of knowledge discourse that are difficult to express in ordinary language.

Adding to the difficulty, other forms of assessment-sensitivity can be expressed in ordinary language fairly easily. For example, if we accept a relativist treatment of temporal discourse, then the proposition that John is sitting only has a truth value relative to a time. If John is standing now, the proposition that John is sitting is assessed false. Yet if we are considering Susan, who yesterday assessed the proposition that John is sitting as true at a time when John was sitting, we recognize that she succeeded with her assessment. Though the proposition is false now,

[5] A similar case is presented in Montminy (2009), for similar purposes.

it was true when she assessed it, which we can express by saying, "It was true when she considered it." Tense constructions shift the time parameter by which we assess the truth of the proposition. Thus, we can very easily express the successes of agents' assessments at other times. However, there is no ready-to-hand operator that does the same for epistemic standards, which seems problematic.

The final manifestation of semantic blindness for relativism arises from the skeptical paradox. The skeptical paradox starts with the fact that each of the following three claims appears true when considered on its own:

1. I know that I have hands.

2. If I know that I have hands, then I know that I am not a handless BIV.

3. I do not know that I am not a handless BIV.

However, these claims form an inconsistent set. The paradox is not just that these claims are inconsistent, but also that when we first consider the claims together, it is not clear which one is false and why. This is a paradox. An adequate solution to the skeptical paradox must explain which statement is false and why, as well as why there seemed to be a paradox in the first place (Kindermann 2011; Schiffer 1996).

Kindermann (2011) argues that relativism fails the second task of explaining why the statements lead to a paradox. If knowledge claims are in fact assessment relative, we should have been able to recognize all along that there was no paradox. Whenever we considered the paradox in a high standards context, we should have seen that claim 1 was false, dissolving any appearance of paradox. Whenever we considered it from a low standards context, we should have seen that 3 was false, dissolving any appearance of paradox. Yet 1-3 do appear to present a paradox, which suggests that we are blind to the assessment-relativity of knowledge claims.

In sum, the problem of semantic blindness for relativism is that ordinary language users appear to lack reflective awareness of assessment-sensitivity of knowledge claims. Knowledge claims are not so rare that ordinary speakers should be ignorant of this, especially given that other forms of context-sensitivity are obvious to ordinary speakers.

Below, I present a two-pronged response to this problem. First, I argue that given the motivation and meaning of relativism, we should expect some semantic blindness. This is the error theory. The second prong of my response is that there are methods that allow ordinary speakers to express the most important truths

expressible in assessment-relativity terminology even assuming the error theory. Thus, relativism implies we are subject to an entirely expected and unproblematic error, which ultimately does not affect the ability to recognize and express important truths.

4 Dealing with semantic blindness

Relativism faces the task of providing an error theory. However, this is not necessarily a problem for relativism. Some error theories are compelling and not a significant cost. General relativity requires an error theory to explain why our intuitive notions of space and time conflict with it. However, this conflict follows from the nature of general relativity and human psychology. The error theory is a confirmed prediction of general relativity+psychology, so the error theory is not a great cost. On the other hand, some error theories are a significant cost. David Icke believes that humans have magical abilities and live in higher dimensions, and that the ruling elites on Earth are reptiles. This requires an error theory to explain how we are ignorant of our magical powers and the fact that our leaders are reptiles. Icke's error theory is the *ad hoc* explanation that the world-leading reptiles are shape-shifters who can appear human, and they suppress our magical abilities and perceptions. This is a significant cost to his theory. The question is whether relativism requires an error theory like general relativity's or like David Icke's.

The error theory for relativism starts from a more detailed account of the epistemic standards parameter. Based on this account of epistemic standards, we can explain why semantic blindness is exactly what we should expect. This explanation allows us to deal with the skeptical paradox. In addition to the other evidence in favor of it, this puts relativism closer to general relativity than to Icke's shape-shifting reptiles.

4.1 The epistemic standards parameter

Epistemic standards determine how strong an agent's epistemic position must be before she qualifies as having knowledge. The nature of epistemic standards thus warrants some attention. We can flesh out some of the detail and structure of epistemic standards by employing the framework of relevant alternatives.[6] The

[6]Note: other defenders of epistemic relativism, such as MacFarlane (2005; 2011) and Egan (2007), do not present the theory in terms of relevant alternatives. Most epistemic theories can

relevant alternatives framework is characterized by the following elements:

Relevant alternatives Relevant alternatives to p are centered possible worlds that in a context must be ruled out to establish that p.

Incompatibility Evidence is incompatible with an alternative just in case the centered subject does not have that evidence in that alternative.[7]

Rule out Ruling out an alternative is rejecting the alternative on the basis of evidence that is incompatible with the alternative.

Knowledge S knows that p iff S has ruled out every alternative to p that is relevant in the assessor context.

Within the relevant alternatives framework, knowledge that p does not require evidence that logically guarantees that p is true, it only requires evidence to eliminate a restricted set of alternatives. In this framework, the epistemic standards of a context are determined by the set of relevant alternatives in that context. The more alternatives one needs to rule out to know that p, the higher the standards.

The relevant alternatives in a context also constitute the space of epistemic possibility in that context. The relevant alternatives that have not yet been ruled out are the alternatives that might be true, in an epistemic sense, from that context.[8] That is why they must be ruled out before one can know that p: the presence of alternatives that are not ruled out means that another proposition might be true. For example, suppose it is a relevant alternative that there are smokeless fires in the basement of your house. Standing outside the house, your evidence does not rule out all the fire alternatives, so from your context there might be fires in the house.

On the other hand, the relevant alternatives that have been ruled out are the possibilities that might have turned out to be true (in an epistemic sense), but did not. They are the alternatives that could not be true, but only because evidence has ruled them out. Without the evidence, they might be true. For example, suppose the only relevant fire alternatives are ones such that huge flames are billowing out

be formulated in terms of relevant alternative, though not all (Cohen 1988). I do not assume that other defenders of relativism would accept this characterization, though I believe it is fruitful.

[7]The definitions of 'relevant alternative' and 'incompatibility' are based on the usage in Lewis (1996).

[8]See Egan (2007) and Egan, Weatherson, & Hawthorne (2005) for arguments that epistemic modals such as 'might' are assessment-sensitive.

of the front windows of your house. You are looking at the front of your house and see no flames, thus ruling out those alternatives. Thus, you know that there is no fire in the house. Yet since those fire alternatives are relevant, it could have turned out that there was fire in the house. Luckily, it turned out otherwise, as you established by looking at the house. However, you only establish it by possessing evidence that holds down all the relevant alternatives.

Finally, the irrelevant alternatives are alternatives that could not have turned out to be true, in an epistemic sense. In other words, they do not need to be taken seriously, because the context itself rules these out without the need for evidence. For example, in an everyday context, when I am planning to go downstairs, I do not need to marshal evidence to demonstrate that the lobby of the building is not teeming with velociraptors. Even though it is strictly speaking compatible with my evidence that there are velociraptors, I do not need evidence to rule it out.

Relevant alternatives play a role in the cognitive project of determining how the world is. Cognizers must narrow the range of possibilities that might (epistemically) be true. The goal is to establish correct answers to questions, thereby securing a firm basis for understanding the world. Establishing the correct answer to a question is achieved by ruling out alternatives until the only alternative that might be true is the correct one.[9] As we have seen, the set of possibilities that might be true or might have turned out to be true is the set of relevant alternatives in a context of assessment. This means that according to relativism a context of assessment determines what it takes to establish the truth.

Epistemic standards also determine when someone has formed a true belief merely by luck, or on the other hand when someone is being overly cautious by searching for more evidence for p after successfully establishing that p. As for luck, if a person has a true belief that p but has not ruled out all the relevant alternatives, she could have turned out to be wrong given her evidence. She has a true belief only because of luck. To illustrate, suppose you are working security for a building, and the presence of muggers in the alley behind the building is relevant in your context. Bill is not working security, and this part of town is so safe the possibility of muggers is irrelevant in his context. You and Bill are both standing near the alley and have the same evidence about the alley, which fails to rule out the presence of muggers. From your context, there might be muggers in the alley, so you would only cautiously enter the alley and would not want to let Bill do so without checking. Even if Bill is not ignoring dangers that might be

[9]This is implied by several accounts of the semantics of questions, including Karttunen (1977), Groenendijk & Stokhof (1982) and Ginzburg (1995).

actual (as assessed from his context), you still correctly judge, assessed from your context, that Bill might get mugged. If he enters the alley without any concern, from your context he was lucky to avoid a mugging.

In the other direction, paranoid overcautious belief-formation occurs when someone has ruled out every relevant alternative to p, but refuses to believe that p until they can rule out further, irrelevant, alternatives. Imagine Jack is in a context where the possibility that there is a bomb on a bus is a relevant alternative to the proposition that the bus is safe, but it is not relevant in our context. Assessed from his own context, it would be absurd for Jack to conclude that the bus is safe without first searching for a bomb. However, we would rightly view Jack's insistence that we need to search every inch of the bus for a bomb as a waste of time. Assessed from our context, it is false that there might be a bomb on the bus. More than that, it could not have turned out that there was a bomb on the bus: no world where a bomb ends up on the bus is relevant. We don't need any evidence to rule out the presence of a bomb in our context. Jack is being paranoid and wasting effort, and his refusal to credit the rest of us with knowledge that the bus is safe is unduly cautious, assessed from our context.[10]

Fundamentally, our cognitive lives are governed by the goal of establishing how the world is, and the success of that goal depends on our context. Since context sets what might be true and what might have turned out to be true, this has to affect how we understand the cognitive success–or lack thereof–of others. If, given our evidence, p might be true, then we must judge that someone else with the same evidence might discover that p. To think otherwise would be to deny that p might be true. If it is true that q could not have turned out to be true, then we must judge that someone concerned to rule out q is wasting effort. To react otherwise would be to admit that q might be true, or at least might have turned out to be true. This is the nature of epistemic standards.

4.2 Diagnosis

There appears to be something odd going on, and relativists must diagnose it or lose credibility. It appears relativism must admit to error, but fortunately not all

[10]The bomb on the bus example might appear forced, and there is good reason for that. When we encounter someone who is genuinely concerned that a dangerous alternative might be true, we tend to view that alternative as relevant. Thus, a more likely scenario would be that we find Jack searching for a bomb, at which time the bomb alternative becomes relevant for us as well. Further complications for this example are discussed in section 5.1.

error theories are bad. There are some features that make them more acceptable. These are three that are important for the current topic:

1. There is evidence, apart from rescuing the theory, that errors of this kind occur.

2. The theory itself (perhaps with acceptable facts) implies this kind of error; it is not an ad hoc addition to the theory.

3. The error in question only manifests itself in obscure and/or confusing situations.

We can illustrate why these kinds of error are less problematic.

First for 1 suppose you claim that people understand credences as probability functions, but their judgments about credences exhibit base rate neglect. This would not be a problem, because base rate neglect is a well-established form of systematic error people are subject to.

For 2, general relativity in many ways does not match our intuitive ideas about space and time, but given our perceptual and mental limitations, the theory itself implies that we should not be able to tell the difference.

For 3, in linguistics, theories of syntax predict that the sentence 'The dog the cat the mouse the door blocked fled bit died,' is grammatical. Yet, the sentence is incomprehensible. This is not a good reason to reject the theory, however, for the sentence has quadruple nesting of clause structures. We can explain the failure to understand the sentence in terms of there are claims about embedding, but people cannot parse certain sentences. They become confused. But this is because they are difficult, it is not a problem for the theory.

We will find that the error relativists must admit has all three of these properties, suggesting that it is not a problem for the theory.

The known, independently identifiable kinds of error that agents fall into regarding knowledge attributions include:

1. Failure to distinguish between closely related and rarely explicitly used forms of evaluation (these are usually just implicit in how we think, but we are not good at doing it explicitly).

2. Confusing framework relative truths with universal truths.

3. Complications.

There is good reason to think that we make these kinds of errors whether relativism is true or not, and that if relativism is true, we should expect them to be reflected there. It does not show that there is a problem.

[They are the kind of errors and distinctions that are hard to make explicit without a pretty sophisticated set of skills. Especially if there is nothing particularly practical at stake. In the case of playing a game and keeping track of what the other player can infer about hidden pieces, there is a clear motivation to do it. Here, it is not so clear how this would happen.]

The epistemic standards from a context determine the space of epistemic possibility from that context. Admitting that truth can be assessed according to different standards is thus to admit that other spaces of epistemic possibility are admissible. Take a knowledge claim "John knows that p" that assessed from our context is false, but that is true assessed from A's context. Then the claim "As assessed from S's context, John knows that p," is true. In making this claim we are stating that, although John does not know that p, in other contexts the opposite is true. One has to grant a form of legitimacy to what is true from other contexts, even if this legitimacy is not truth (assessed from your context). We can diagnose the difficulty in the above cases as follows: without a fairly sophisticated set of theoretical concepts, people cannot reliably distinguish between granting legitimacy to other epistemic standards and adopting those standards as their own.

Consider a statement involving shifting standards: "Assessed from S's context, it might have turned out to be the case that p." In order for one reliably to deal with such a statement, one must be able to track the distinction between making claims about other epistemic standards and making epistemic modal claims. Ordinary agents unfamiliar with epistemology and linguistics do not have a firm grasp of this distinction. Saying that there is another context–one that you might find yourself in–where p might be true, is easily confused with saying that it might be the case that p might be true. Assuming S4 modal logic, the latter implies that it might be the case that p. And if it might be the case that p, then p must be relevant. One has inadvertantly assimilated another's relevant alternatives into one's own. If intuitive modal judgments are consistent with the S4 axiom, which they seem to be, this error is quite natural and easy to make. Due to this confusion, accepting truths about other epistemic standards can seem like adopting those standards as one's own.

The result is a perceived threat to the epistemic goal of learning about the world. By perceiving context-shifting claims as epistemic modality claims, it can appear that any admissible set of relevant alternatives must be our current set of relevant alternatives. If an alternative is admissible, then it might be true that

it might be true, so it might be true. We assimilate the other standards to our own. This leads to the mistaken conclusion that anything goes. In one context, smokeless fires might exist in the house, in another it is false that they might. Without the distinction between epistemic modality and context-relativity, it looks like we have to assimilate both. There is no way to make progress while stuck in this confusion. Thus, agents are motivated to deny direct, explicit statements of context-relativity, even though their judgments are otherwise in accord with it.

The type of error posited here is similar to other errors that humans run into routinely. It is a member of a larger class of inabilities to draw relevant distinctions. I will explain two examples: a difficulty people have with evolutionary biology, and the second is a difficulty in sorting out moral responsibility.

The difficulty for evolutionary biology that parallels the error theory above is the inability to distinguish between biological fitness and choice-worthiness. This gives rise to the mistaken idea that evolutionary biology could somehow justify the choice-worthiness of selfishness by claiming that it was biologically adaptive to some of our ancestors. This confusion leads some people to fear evolution because they think it defends these attitudes, and it leads other people to embrace it because they think it justifies their selfishness. Neither is correct.

Humans have similar difficulty sorting out moral culpability. When one realizes that one could have prevented a bad event, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that one is morally responsible for that event, even when one is not. Everyday reasoning does a poor job distinguishing between moral blameworthiness and counterfactual dependence. To illustrate, imagine you are about to take a flight to visit your parents, and your original plan is to take a taxi to their house from the airport. However, at the last minute you decide you would rather have your parents pick you up so you can spend more time with them. On the drive to pick you up, your parents are in a fatal car accident. If you had taken a taxi, your parents would probably still be alive. Despite the fact that you are not to blame for their deaths, the feeling of responsibility is almost impossible to dispel.[11]

Thus, the form of semantic blindness that relativism must admit follows a general pattern of failure to make complicated distinctions at a theoretical level. Furthermore, this follows from the nature of the epistemic standards parameter and the level of understanding that we can credit to ordinary people. The error theory is not an *ad hoc* rescue. Now to deal with the skeptical paradox.

[11]This error is at least recognized as an error by many people, but it is difficult.

4.3 Skeptical paradox

[To lessen the impact: Many people have the Moorean response, which is acceptable according to relativism (this does not mean the standards employed are right, but this is possible given the right beliefs). On the other hand, many people draw the skeptical conclusion. This is the other admissible response. Thus, the only thing we need to explain is why many people, but not even close to all, view this as a paradox.]

Relativism implies that, assessed from any given context, either the handless BIV alternative is relevant and we do not know that we have hands or the handless BIV alternative is irrelevant and we know that we are not BIV's. The paradox is dissolved. All that remains is to explain why it appeared puzzling in the first place.

An explanation first requires a description of the nature of the paradox. First, when presented with any one of the three statements by itself ('I know that I have hands,' 'If I know that I have hands, then I know that I am not a handless BIV,' and, 'I do not know that I am not a handless BIV.') we tend to accept it as true. The trouble comes when we confront the statements together, realizing that they are inconsistent. Many claim the paradox is that we have simultaneous semantic intuitions that each statement is true.[12] However, this is a problematic understanding of the situation. An agent's semantic intuitions regarding the applicability of a predicate are most clearly at work when that agent has a clear grasp of the underlying facts and on that basis decides whether the predicate applies. In contrast, skeptical arguments are meant to draw attention to error possibilities that one has previously ignored. These arguments attempt to alter an agent's understanding of the underlying situation. Normally, one never considers the possibility that apparent perception of one's own hands is an illusion. When this possibility is taken seriously, it challenges the basis on which one previously accepted knowledge of the existence of one's hands. This is not conducive to viable semantic intuitions.

It is better to say the paradox is that it is tempting to reject 'I know that I have hands' as the odd one out, but we do not want to accept this conclusion. It is a conclusion we implicitly consider false whenever we claim to know anything about the external world. The error theory described above explains both why it is difficult to deny this conclusion and why it appears disastrous. The reason we feel compelled to deny our hand knowledge is that we are sufficiently competent with 'knows.' In high standards contexts it is true that we do not know that we

[12]This is how Kindermann (2011) describes the case. There is a similar description in Cohen (1988, p. 113).

have hands, and taking the skeptical scenario seriously puts us in a high standards context (or makes us believe we are in one, which would still explain our reaction).

On the other hand, the skeptical conclusion appears disastrous because when we are in a high standards context, we tend to refuse to consider lower standards epistemically legitimate. Thus when we are tempted to accept skepticism, we feel as though all knowledge claims made and assessed from all contexts are threatened. We refuse to concede any kind of epistemic success to those who meet lower epistemic standards than our own. Since no one can meet skeptical standards, we therefore feel that accepting the conclusion of the skeptical argument destroys any chance of future epistemic success. This is a difficult conclusion to accept. The error theory offered above shows why we are tempted to draw these conclusions from the skeptical paradox.[13]

Once we formulate and accept relativism, though, understanding the details and distinctions involved, we are no longer led into the trap of thinking that skeptical contexts are so disastrous. We can recognize that when we take skepticism seriously, we do not know that we have hands, or much of anything for that matter. However, if our beliefs are true in lower standards contexts, we can have plenty of knowledge, as assessed from those contexts.[14] Relativism thus has a complete response to the paradox. With that, the final difficulty of semantic blindness is dealt with.

We now have an error theory and a solution to the skeptical paradox that emerge from considering the significance of the epistemic standards parameter. The error theory is a natural outgrowth of relativism and matches other errors we are prone to. This makes the error theory more like the general relativity error theory than Icke's shape-shifting lizards.

5 Objection and response: Expressive power

[This is not really a separate objection. These responses should happen first to lessen the impact of the lack of a term. We are not completely blind. The belief

[13]This treatment of the paradox differs from the response Kindermann (2011) offers on behalf of relativism. His suggested explanation is that we assess 'I do not know that I am not a BIV' using high standards, but mistakenly apply low standards to 'I know that I have hands'. As he notes, this response requires one person to employ two standards at once without realizing it. My response lacks this implication.

[14]This does not mean that we have only conditional knowledge. It means that from a skeptical context, the conditional knowledge claim is as far as we can go in ascribing success to lower standards contexts.

operator does in fact operate on the parameter, so it exists. Then, we have ways to express the other things.]

Despite explaining why we should expect semantic blindness, there is a difficulty for the error theory: it appears to leave us helpless to plan for future epistemic success. We will find ourselves in different contexts with different epistemic standards at various times in the future. To prepare to succeed in assessing knowledge claims in future contexts, we need to be aware of the truths about knowledge as assessed from those contexts. Semantic blindness apparently implies that ordinary agents cannot even express truths about other contexts. This would leave ordinary subjects unable to engage in epistemic contingency planning. Complicated or not, our language should have the resources to express truths necessary for contingency planning, and we should all have developed the skill of using them.

Compare the epistemic standards parameter with the time and world parameters. The value of being able to shift the time parameter is that it allows us to deal with what was true or will be true. It helps us establish regularities, draw inferences from experience, and keep track of things that are true based on what probably has not changed from the past. The value of shifting the world parameter is that it allows us to say what would, could or must be true. This allows us also to engage in contingency planning and consider various possible explanations of phenomena. The ability to shift the time and world parameters is central to figuring out what is true and what will be true. Despite the complexities of temporal and metaphysical modality (witness the philosophy and linguistics literature on these topics), ordinary agents can deal with them.

The value of shifting epistemic standards parameters is to discuss what it takes to establish the truth of a proposition when various epistemic standards are in play. Even with the error theory, it is difficult to accept that ordinary speakers have no way to express these truths.

As I will not argue, we do in fact have ways of expressing these truths. However, we do not express them by making claims about truth-relative-to-epistemic-standards. We have other means. Ordinary language has resources for epistemic contingency planning, but these resources do not include the ability to make claims about knowledge relative to a context of assessment. I will describe three ordinary language methods of dealing with other contexts: practical advising, logical vocabulary and belief vocabulary.

5.1 First method: Practical advising

First of all, although ordinary agents are reluctant to admit that lower epistemic standards are epistemically legitimate, they are able to recognize when lower standards are practically legitimate. Uncertainty carries a practical cost, and taking steps to rule out further alternatives is likewise costly. From a high standards context, one can recognize that for some agents, the cost of operating according to high standards is outweighed by the practical benefit of certainty and the ability to stop inquiry. The clearest example is when agents must make pragmatically important decisions within a short deadline.

For example, a scientist is aware of a remote possibility of error in an experiment. She is currently working on a way to rule that error out, but everyone pretty much expects the error possibility is false. While working out the details of the proposed experiment, her nine year old son asks if she knows the result of the original experiment are true, since he wants to include it on a science fair poster. Even though the possibility of error is relevant in her context, it would be a waste of effort on her son's part to hedge the statements on his poster over so small a chance of error. Thus, she claims to know that the result is accurate.

The first way in which we can engage in contingency planning, then, is to recognize that in other contexts, epistemic failure (assessed from your current standards) is outweighed by practical expedience. Thus, we have this limited sense of taking other epistemic contexts into account, and judging some form of success from less stringent standards.

5.2 Second method: Logical vocabulary

If a knowledge claim 'S knows that p' can accurately be assessed as true from context C, this reveals a relationship between the evidence that S has and the alternatives that are relevant in C. In particular, it tells us that S's evidence establishes that p given the relevant alternatives of C. Furthermore, S must actually have made the inference from her evidence to p, via a grasp of the fact that alternatives are ruled out. The success that S has achieved, expressed in a context-neutral way, is to have ruled out some particular range of alternatives. The ability to express the ruling-out relation is the second method by which we can engage in contingency planning.

An alternative is ruled out by evidence that is incompatible with the alternative, and thus, ruling out is a logical relation between evidence and alternatives. We can express this fact in context-neutral terms by referring to the range of al-

ternatives that are relevant from the other context, and noting that they are all ruled out except for the truth. This allows one to engage in contingency planning. We can express this by saying, "If those were the only possibilities, the evidence would be enough to establish that p." This only requires the language of incompatibility and the ability to grasp the kinds of alternatives that might be relevant in other contexts.

Thus, ordinary language has the resources to engage in contingency planning. It can express inferences in other contexts, working out what would be the right conclusion, who would have knowledge and who would not given various sets of alternatives. This covers the ways in which those in other contexts are successful; they have successfully ruled out a certain set of alternatives, and we can perfectly well express that.

5.3 Third method: Belief vocabulary

The final class of facts that we could express in terms of assessment-relativity, should such resources exist in the language, is how the epistemic situation appears from other contexts of assessment. If we know another agent's context of assessment, or what she takes her context to be, this can give us insight into the kinds of inferences she is likely to make. It can allow us to understand in more detail why she thinks that some claims are established and some are not, and why she thinks some knowledge claims are true and some are false. For example, if we know that Roger does not take the presence of bombs to be a relevant alternative to bus safety, we can understand why he is willing to ride the bus without ruling bombs out. And we can understand why he is willing to ascribe knowledge of bus safety to some people who obviously have not ruled bombs out. We can understand his assessments of the knowledge claims of others as well.

We do have means of expressing this. All of these facts can be captured with the language of propositional attitudes, especially belief. Belief captures what an agent takes herself to have established. Her beliefs reflect what she takes to be established by her own evidence, and her beliefs about whether other people know reflect her take on what is established by other people's evidence.

Also, the belief operator acts on the epistemic standards parameter.[15] Suppose that I say, "John believes that Susan knows that she is in Tucson." The semantics of 'believes that' dictates that my claim is true just in case Susan meets the standards of knowledge in every world consistent with John's beliefs. Which

[15]This claim is made and defended in some detail in Brogaard (2008).

standards for knowledge must she meet in those worlds? To capture the content of 'John believes that Susan knows that she is in Tucson,' she must meet whichever standards John is employing. My standards cannot be the relevant ones, for then I would be making the claim that John believes that Susan meets my standards for knowledge, which is plainly not what I mean by the sentence. The standards she must meet in each world are those that John employs. The S-believes-that operator effects a shift in epistemic standards parameter to S's epistemic standards. This provides evidence that the parameter exists in ordinary language and can be operated on in ordinary language.

Together with logical vocabulary, belief vocabulary allows us to express in ordinary language facts that are captured by an epistemic shifting operator in theoretical language. The fact that our theoretical language possesses such an operator while ordinary language does not fails to demonstrate that ordinary language lacks the ability to express important facts. It just shows that it cannot express them directly. Semantic blindness does not prevent us from expressing many of the relevant truths that relate to other epistemic standards.

Conclusion

Relativism faces its own problem of semantic blindness, but when examined in detail, this does not pose a serious threat to relativism. Given the phenomena motivating context-sensitive theories in the first place, and a detailed understanding of epistemic standards, semantic blindness of the form relativism posits is exactly what we should expect. It is a prediction of the theory and does not rely on anything *ad hoc*. Relativism is not undone by semantic blindness, and may be favored by it if other theories cannot overcome their semantic blindness problems.

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