

Swiss Philosophical Preprint Series

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Stanley's Three Flaws

added 11/10/2010

ISSN 1662-937X

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Module: Contemporary Epistemology

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Title of Essay: Stanley's Three Flaws

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STANLEY'S THREE FLAWS

1. Introduction

In this essay, I shall briefly present Epistemic Contextualism (EC), Invariantism and Interest-Relative Invariantism (IRI) (section 2). Then I will discuss three theses of Jason Stanley's *Knowledge and Practical Interests* (Oxford 2005). I argue that Stanley's case against Contextualism is based on a misconception of its semantic nature, that there is a disadvantage for Interest-Relative Invariantism in terms of the sceptical paradox and that Stanley's explanation of intuitions can be interpreted in favour of Contextualism (sections 3.1. - 3.3.).

2. Contextualism and Invariantism

EC, Invariantism and IRI are theories of (non-normative) epistemology about the content or truth conditions of knowledge attributing or denying statements, such as »*S knows that p*« and »*S doesn't know that p*« (S being some subject, p some proposition).

EC is the *semantic* thesis that the proposition expressed by the sentence »S knows that p at a time t« varies with respect to the context of utterance due to a context-sensitivity of the verb »know(s)«. ¹ More precisely: the word »know(s)«, uttered in a conversational-practical situation C, implicitly denotes the relation »knows with respect to the epistemic standard that governs C«. Different contexts have different epistemic standards: a subject S with a given set of evidence concerning some proposition p can thus truly be considered as »knowing p« in a low standard context of speech (e.g. coffeshop, henceforth: C_{Low}) and »not knowing p« in a high standard context (e.g. court, henceforth: C_{High}). (Contextualist theories may disagree on the number of different epistemic standards, on the parameters that determine this difference, or on what relation »know(s)« expresses in the first place.) ²

Invariantism is the denial of EC: the claim that the word »know(s)« is context-*insensitive*, expressing the same relation throughout all contexts. Since the truth conditions of the sentence »S knows that p« do thus not depend on the conversational-practical context of the attributor, it is either true in all contexts or false in all contexts. Insofar Invariantism, too, is a view about language. Again, this core thesis is open to different metaphysical accounts of what knowledge *is*: on the Traditional Invariantists' view, whether S knows that p depends – apart from the set of her beliefs – solely on truth-conducive factors about S (e.g. S's total evidence or the method that results in her believing that p). Interest-Relative Invariantism, on the other hand, holds that whether or not S knows that p is partly determined by S's practical investment in the truth or falsity of p (and her other beliefs concerning p): the greater the practical investment one has in a belief, the stronger one's evidence must be in order to know it.

A prominent advocate of IRI is Jason Stanley. He formulates the characteristic constraint of IRI as follows: If p is a serious practical question for S at t, then not-p must have a sufficiently low epistemic probability (given S's total evidence) in order for S to know p (Stanley 2005: 89).

¹ The sentence »S knows that p« is trivially context-sensitive with respect to the time of utterance. This is widely agreed, and I am discussing only the context-sensitivity of »know(s)« itself. For simplicity's sake I shall only consider the sentence »S knows that p«, implying that it refers to a given time t.

² To simplify matters I shall hereafter speak of two different contexts, C_{High} and C_{Low}. For a detailed discussion on 'what shifts', see Schaffer (2005). For a broad overview over different forms of EC, see Rysiew (2007), esp. sec. 3.3.

(Define p to be a serious practical question for S if there are alternatives to p that S ought rationally to consider in decision making (2005: 92).) In order to endorse our intuitions about knowledge attributing and denying statements, Stanley interprets (most of) the contexts that have usually been called (epistemically) high by contextualists as featuring a serious practical question and therefore requiring stronger epistemic positions. (2005: 3)

3. Stanley's case for IRI

In the remaining sections I shall discuss three related claims of Jason Stanley's *Knowledge and Practical Interests*: an objection against EC (3.1.), a defence of IRI against a possible contextualist objection (3.2.) and an attempt to formulate a coherent explanation of the intuitions IRI holds to be wrong (3.3.).

3.1. Stanley's modal-embedding-objection and why it fails

One line of apparently counter-intuitive features of EC traces back to a claim of David Lewis, according to which "epistemology destroys knowledge" (Lewis 1996: 551). Fred Dretske, for instance, claims that a 'bizarre' (Dretske 2005: 19) implication of EC is that "[a]ccording to [EC], philosophers who spend time worrying about heavyweight implications (How do I know I'm not dreaming? [...]) are the most ignorant people in the world" (2005: 18). Similarly, Stanley holds the following modal embedding to be a 'counter-intuitive consequence' (Stanley 2005: 110) of EC:

- (S) Hannah doesn't know that p . But if we had been ignoring certain possibilities, then she would have known that p .

All of the above claims are motivated by the same idea: according to EC a mere shift in the context (of the *attributor*) may render a false knowledge attribution » S knows that p « true or vice-versa. But, the objection runs, it is implausible that conversational or practical contexts that have no effect on how strongly we are positioned with respect to a proposition (*and where the subject itself must not even be involved*) affect our (or her) knowledge. Since EC regards the

context of the speaker as decisive, it seems to entail just that. But this argument is based on a simple misconception of EC: the fallacy of semantic descent.

Consider the expression »being short«: a subject with a given height h may count as tall in one context (compared to relatively short people), but short in another context (compared to relatively tall people). But h itself stays the same throughout all contexts: no one becomes shorter or taller in accordance with what we compare him to.

According to EC, the same applies to »know(s)«. EC accepts that there is a context-independent, stable feature of Hannah's (the set of standards she meets with respect to a set of propositions). And in this sense, no one becomes more ignorant if a semantic context shifts – as Stanley's (S) implies. Stanley's fallacy consists in the unwarranted descent from meta-language to object-language. A contextualist (iff he considers ignoring and paying attention as determining factors of the semantic context) has to accept

(S'') »Hannah doesn't know that p « is true. But if we had been ignoring certain possibilities, then »Hannah knows that p « would be true.

(S), not being metalinguistic, confuses a change in semantics with a change in metaphysics, and no contextualist is forced to accept it.

3.2. Stanley's endorsement of scepticism and why it fails

Consider the following three sentences:

- (A) S knows that she has hands.
- (B) If S knows that she has hands, she knows that she's not a brain in a vat.
- (C) S does not know that she's not a brain in a vat.

All of the three claims seem intuitively plausible, but contradictory. At first sight, there are three possible solutions to this paradox: (i) be a radical sceptic and deny the truth of (A), (ii) deny (B) and the closure-principle (the principle that if S knows that p and competently deduces q from p ,

thereby retaining the knowledge of p throughout, she comes to know q), or (iii) claim that we *do* know sceptical scenarios like the one in (C) not to obtain. None of these answers is very attractive. EC has often been motivated by the fact that it provides a fourth solution: the denial of the genuine inconsistency of (A), (B) and (C). While a speaker in C_{High} may truly say »S doesn't know that she's not a brain in a vat« and deduce »S doesn't know that she has hands«, another speaker in C_{Low} can be right to claim »S knows that she has hands« at the very same moment.³ These sentences do not contradict each other, according to EC, since the word »know(s)« respectively refers to different relations. Inconsistency arises only within one context.⁴

Stanley acknowledges that EC offers a plausible diagnosis of the sceptical problem, and that if there is no invariantist alternative, that favours EC (2005: 125). He thus establishes an IRI-answer to the 'less interesting' (2005: 127) sceptic (according to which we have *some*, but not enough evidence against the obtaining of sceptical scenarios).⁵ But there is of course a more interesting and 'pernicious' (2005: 128) form of scepticism which claims that we have no evidence at all against the obtaining of alternative scenarios and are thus never in a position to know anything.

However, Stanley holds that in response to this radical sceptic, the contextualist does not do better, because there is no specific contextualist feature that provides a solution here (2005: 128): "[T]he advocate of IRI can mimic contextualist responses to scepticism" (2005: 129).

To explain his idea, Stanley addresses a Lewisian version of EC (which, on Stanley's view, addresses the more pernicious challenge). Lewis holds that we can properly ignore generally ignored possibilities (like sceptical scenarios) in C_{Low} even if we have no evidence to rule it out. Hence we can usually claim to know that we have hands (Lewis 1996: 558f.). But, according to

³ It is another question whether we can ever say of someone that he knows not to be a brain in a vat. On some contextualist accounts (for example Lewis (1996)) the mere mentioning of this sceptical scenario may raise the standards such that this attribution becomes impossible.

⁴ See DeRose (1999) and (2009) for a more detailed discussion of the contextualist answer to the sceptic.

⁵ Kornblith (2000) argues that it has usually been this less pernicious sceptic that EC has addressed, but that this is philosophically futile. It is only the radical sceptic "who is making an historically important and philosophically interesting claim" (Kornblith 2000: 27).

Lewis, once we call *attention* to such an uneliminated possibility as being a brain in a vat, we can no longer properly ignore it and no longer make the above knowledge claim (1996: 559). Since Lewis is contextualist, he holds that the context of the attributor provides the truth conditions for third-person attributions. Stanley argues that the invariantist “can construe Lewis's notion of proper ignoring in terms of what the subject of the knowledge attribution may properly ignore, rather than the attributor. She can also adopt a suitably modified version of the rule of attention: what the subject is not in fact ignoring is not properly ignored by the subject” (Stanley 2005: 129). Hence, for every subject S: S knows an ordinary propositions if and only if she is ignoring sceptical scenarios.

Stanley is right: in principle, nothing prevents an invariantist from adopting Lewisian rules in that way. But to conclude that there is ‘no advantage’ (2005: 129) here for the contextualist is overly hasty. I shall mention three problems Stanley’s modified version of IRI (henceforth IRI*) will face, related to the discussion of (3.1.) and a general worry about IRI.

(1) This invariantist solution to scepticism enhances a difficulty IRI faces anyway: the enormous fickleness of knowledge it entails. Consider the following two cases.

1. During some pivotal day of a financial crisis, the shares of Hannah’s bank sway constantly up and down with a tremendous amplitude. Experts at Wall Street alternate between recommending keeping all the money in the bank (when the share price reaches the peaks) and advising to withdraw all the money (when the price is at the bottom). Hannah, ignorant of the crisis, wanted to withdraw the money today anyway to open up an account at an alternative bank. Since it is raining outside, she thinks: »I could also go tomorrow, that is: on Saturday. I was there two weeks ago on a Saturday, so I know the bank will be open tomorrow. And if it’s not, I’ll just do it next Monday.«

2. Hannah has to write an essay on scepticism. She therefore spends her day thinking about sceptical scenarios every now and then.

Suppose, in the first case, the bank will in fact be open. And note that for Stanley, a subject must not be aware of the high practical importance of a proposition p for it to undermine her

knowledge (2005: 97). Since the importance of the proposition »the bank will be open tomorrow« falls and rises with the experts' advice ignorant Hannah will have a very unstable knowledge that day: for example, knowing that it will be open at 9:10 a.m., not knowing between 11:45 a.m. and 1:10 p.m., knowing after 3:15 p.m. and so on. This is a very unnatural way to speak, hence a counter-intuitive consequence of (the ordinary) IRI. The second case illustrates that IRI* vastly increases this difficulty: it would entail that Hannah 'is knowing' that she has hands if and only if she's not thinking about her essay. Her knowledge might thus change from minute to minute, second to second. This problem surely becomes all the more pressing since English grammar does not even provide adequate means to say 'I was knowing', where such time-dependent a verb as the anti-sceptic IRI-»know(s)« would surely demand it.⁶ EC is not faced with this problem: it can account for the (metaphysical) stableness of knowledge and plausibly allow the inconstancy of semantic contexts.

(2) Since it is invariantist in the first place, IRI* implies Dretske's 'bizarre' consequences. Recall that EC does not face Dretske-problems because a shift in context is only a semantic shift: nothing (except the previous referent of »know(s)«) gets lost. But according to IRI, a subject either simply knows that p or simply does not know that p. Hence, according to IRI* philosophers (who spend a lot of time worrying about scepticism) *do* turn out to be the most ignorant people – suffering not from a semantical but a metaphysical loss.

(3) IRI* respects the sceptical challenge only in first person cases, where it coincides with EC. Faced with a sceptic, Stanley has to maintain that most other subjects know a sceptical scenario not to obtain (while ignoring it). But this is certainly no less dogmatic. The sceptic does not particularly care about the interlocutor, but about *all subjects*. And since Stanley grants that dogmatically to withstand the sceptic is unwarranted in first-person knowledge claims, it is only plausible to admit the unwarrantedness of third-person knowledge claims too. In this respect, there is a specific *contextualist* feature that dissolves the dilemma of (A), (B) and (C). Denying the inconsistency of these three claims allows EC to take the sceptic (more) seriously: no one

⁶ However, it can be argued that all the theories have counter-intuitive implications. (See Williamson (2005), Hawthorne (2004) for a critique of EC's charity.)

meets the standards he installs (but we can still refer to other standards). There is no way for IRI to copy this move, taking the sceptic seriously while maintaining (A), because an invariantist is forced to maintain the thoroughgoing inconsistency of (A), (B) and (C).

So there are problems that IRI* faces and that EC can avoid. Are there, on the other hand, arguments against Lewis' solution of the (radical) sceptical paradox that do not jeopardise IRI*? A possible objection is that Lewis himself falls short of taking the sceptic seriously. The sceptic "who is making a historically important and philosophically interesting claim" (Kornblith 2000: 27) does not just care about a particular context or standard in which no one counts as »knowing«. Rather, in claiming $\neg(A)$ he holds that there are possibilities we cannot eliminate and, of course, that we can *never properly ignore* an uneliminated possibility. Hence Lewis, too, is in a substantial sense very dogmatic.

However, this argument leads us back to the beginning. If a sceptic just insists on a strong reading of »know(s)« (that we can *never* know any uneliminated possibility not to obtain) and resists the ordinary-language foundations of EC, there is no advantage for Lewis here. But neither is there a disadvantage: IRI* is in light of this sceptic no less dogmatic (and the ordinary IRI cannot withstand anyway).

I conclude therefore, that – whether or not a Lewisian EC is the ultimate solution of the sceptical challenge⁷ – Stanley is wrong: there is a certain advantage for EC over IRI*.

3.3. Stanley's explanation of intuitions and why it fails

IRI does not fit our intuitions in cases involving a knowledge denial by a speaker in C_{High} concerning a subject in C_{Low} that meets the low- but not the high-standards of knowledge. Stanley hence tries to give an explanation for why this denial seems appropriate and true

⁷ Sosa (2004) argues that the (meta-)linguistic nature of EC prevents it from objecting to any scepticism at all. I am aware of that, but think that there are good contextualist responses to Sosa (see, e.g. Cohen 1999: 79f.).

although (according to IRI) it is literally false. In this last section I shall discuss this explanation.

Stanley's thesis is, that "the purpose [a speaker in C_{High}] has in asking someone else whether or not p is true lies in finding out whether, if that person had the interests and concerns [the speaker] does, that person would know that p " (2005: 102). Since this is what he "really want[s] answered" (2005: 103), the attributor is "not really worried about that person's own interests and concerns" (2005: 102). But Stanley goes on: "even when those in High Stakes situations are not interested in using others as sources of information, their denials of knowledge to others are still interpretable as denials of the counterfactual ['if S had the interests and concerns I have, S would know that p ']" (2005: 103f.).

Stanley is not explicit about when and how often we follow this account – for example if we follow it in C_{Low} as well.⁸ But in fact, both in C_{High} and C_{Low} it sounds very odd to refer to the subject's practical or conversational situation. Consider the following cases:

X: Hannah is really interested in geography. She knows the capital of all South American countries.

Y: Are you sure she's not – at this very moment – booking a flight to Paraguay, wondering whether Asunción or Montevideo was the capital, so that the matter is extremely important for her?

X: Hannah is really interested in geography. She usually knows the capital of all South American countries. Well, I cannot say whether she knows it *now*, since she is writing an epistemology essay and maybe – at this very moment – questioning the existence of the outer world again, especially of South America.

⁸ Stanley holds that a knowledge attribution from a speaker in C_{Low} to a subject in C_{High} (who meets the low but not the high-standards) is intuitively wrong. However, I don't (and a lot of people do not) share his intuitions here.

X: The fact that the bank is open tomorrow is less important for Hannah than it is for me. I think Hannah knows that it will be open, since she was there with me on a Saturday two weeks ago – but I don't know it.

The explicit reference to Hannah's own context is very unnatural (and in the third case even somehow paradoxical). I think we can thus – plausibly, therefore probably also in line with Stanley – summarize his explanation thus: when saying »S does (not) know p« (hereafter »P₁«) we quite generally mean »S does (not) know p *where she in our context*« (hereafter »P₂«) – and what we mean is true, but what we literally say is false.

So Stanley's psychological thesis seems quite intuitive. But note how close this explanation comes to the contextualist's thesis that it is the context of the attributor that determines the truth conditions of a knowledge claim. If Stanley admits that we usually use »P₁« to say P₂, the difference between EC and IRI on this crucial matter boils down to the fact that EC allows our 'actual concerns' to shape the *literal meaning* of the knowledge attributions (P₁ = P₂),⁹ whereas on Stanley's account the literal meaning of »S knows that p« diverges from the intended *speaker-meaning* (P₁ ≠ P₂).

The phenomenon is common: there are a lot of utterances where the literal use of a sentence diverges from the intended speaker-meaning. Think of the following cases: (i) S believes that the word 'jejune' means brilliant, while it actually means meagre and unsatisfying. She may say »Mozart's 'Piccolomini' is jejune«, thereby meaning that the Mass is a work of genius. (ii) S mistakes the song that is currently on the radio to be Mozart's 'Piccolomini' (while it is Beethoven instead). Hence by saying »Mozart's 'Piccolomini' is wonderful« S intends to praise Beethoven. (iii) Ironically commenting someone's piano playing by the sentence »just like Mozart«, S means that someone is not a very gifted pianist. (iv) Finally, the queen of the night in Mozart's 'magic flute' says: »Hells Revenge cooks in my heart.«¹⁰ Et cetera.

⁹ See, e.g. DeRose (2009): 231. I take it for granted that sentences have something like a 'literal meaning'. This thesis could be questioned, but I think it is very plausible.

¹⁰ URL: www.aria-database.com/translations/magic_flute.txt (17.11.2009)

There is a general pattern in all of the above instances: what the speaker means to say is normally expressed by a different sentence, and the sentences (or words) he uses commonly express a different meaning from what he intends them to say in this particular case. This, I have argued (in line with Stanley), is not true for ordinary third-person knowledge attributions and denials: if there is a divergence between different ways of use at all, surely in an overwhelming majority of cases we use »P₁« to say P₂ – and sometimes it seems we cannot even express P₁ without uttering something slightly paradoxical. I claim that according to any plausible theory of meaning this data entails that the sentence »P₁« just expresses the proposition P₂, that there is no divergence between intended and literal meaning here – hence precisely the contextualist thesis. Stanley fails to justify his distinction. He must either deny the psychological thesis that we are ‘not really worried about that person's own interests and concerns’ or the broad thesis that the general use of a sentence »p« together with the intention with which competent speakers generally utter »p« determines its meaning, hence its truth conditions. But neither of these alternatives, I claim, is very likely to succeed.¹¹

4. Conclusion

In this essay I have critically discussed three interrelated claims of Jason Stanley's. First, I have argued that Stanley's modal-embedding-objection is based on a fallacy of semantic descent. Secondly and *contra* Stanley, I think that there is an advantage for contextualism in terms of the sceptical paradox. Thirdly, Stanley's explanation of our intuitions – if taken seriously and plausibly extended to all third-person knowledge claims – fails to account for the divergence of intended and literal meaning and hence implies the contextualist's thesis. I conclude that all of the three issues Stanley raised can be taken both to defend EC and to make a strong case against his version of IRI.

¹¹ For a related discussion of use and truth-condition, see DeRose (1999), (2002) and (2009). Still DeRose's account differs in various ways from mine, since he does not discuss *intention* or *speaker-meaning*.

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