How to Be a Contextualist

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1 Introduction

According to Keith DeRose, epistemological contextualism is the position that "the truth-conditions of knowledge ascribing and knowledge denying sentences (sentences of the form "S knows that p" and "S doesn't know that p"…) vary in certain ways according to the context in which they are uttered. What so varies is the epistemic standards that S must meet… in order for such a statement to be true".[1] According to the contextualist, a sentence of the form "S knows that p" does not express a complete proposition. Different utterances of the sentence, in different contexts of utterance, can express different propositions: "know" is context-dependent. Little attention has been paid to a precise formulation of the *semantic* contextualist thesis grounding *epistemological* contextualism. Many scholars refer to some kind of "hidden-indexical" theory of knowledge sentences, or claim that "know" is itself indexical. My goal is then to assess differences and similarities between "know" and context-sensitive terms in natural language—in particular pure indexicals, on the one hand, and demonstratives, on the other hand.

   This paper is structured as follows. In section 2, I briefly present a standard version of epistemological contextualism. In section 3, I sketch the contextualist response to scepticism. In section 4, I present the general semantic thesis grounding epistemological contextualism. In section 5 and 6, I examine and criticise a strategy in terms of pure indexicals. In section 7 and 8, I examine and criticise a strategy in terms of demonstratives. In the conclusion, I argue that only an accurate analysis of the different varieties of context sensitivity secures us a better understanding and a clearer evaluation of the contextualist approach, and of its response to the sceptic.

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1   DeRose (1999), pp. 187–188.

2   Contextualism in epistemology

Consider the two following scenarios, due to DeRose.

> **Case A**: It is Friday afternoon. Hannah and Keith stop in front of the bank. Hannah would like to deposit her paycheques. But she realises that the bank is too crowded. She tells Keith: "Tomorrow I will come back to deposit my paycheques". He says: "It is better to do it now. Perhaps tomorrow the bank is closed. Several banks are closed on Saturday". She replies: "I know that the bank will be open tomorrow. It is open on Saturday. I personally saw it two weeks ago".

> **Case B**: It is Friday afternoon. Hannah and Keith stop in front of the bank. Hannah would like to deposit her paycheques. But she realises that the bank is too crowded. She tells Keith: "Tomorrow I will come back to deposit my paycheques". He says: "It is better to do it now. Perhaps tomorrow the bank is closed. Several banks are closed on Saturday". She replies: "I know that the bank will be open tomorrow. It is open on Saturday. I personally saw it two weeks ago". He retorts: "You have to deposit your paycheques, because a very important bill comes due on Monday, and they have to have enough money in our account to cover it. The bank might have changed its opening days during the last two weeks. Do you really know that it will be open tomorrow?". She admits: "Perhaps I do not know. It is better to ask which days the bank is open".

According to contextualism the truth-values of knowledge attributions vary on the basis of certain characteristics of the conversational context.[2] Contextualism allows the possibility of truly asserting

(1) S knows that p

in one context and

(2) S does not know that p

in another context, identical to the previous one in all features relevant for the determination of indexicals or usual contextual expressions: different contexts call for different epistemic standards—lower or higher, weaker or stronger—that S must satisfy.

2   For *subjective* contextualism, they are the characteristics of the context of the cognitive subject, while for *attributive* contextualism they are the characteristics of the context of the attributor. I will not address the question of the difference between subjective and attributive contextualism here.

Let's go back to the two cases presented above. From a contextualist perspective, the sentence

(3) Hannah knows that the bank will be open tomorrow

is true in case A, and false in case B—taking however for granted that the three traditional conditions for knowledge are satisfied in both cases: i) it is true that the bank will be open tomorrow; ii) Hannah believes it; iii) Hannah's belief is justified.

While according to the invariantist[3], it is the strength of Hannah's epistemic status that changes, according to the contextualist, Hannah has the same epistemic position in case A and B, but there is a variation in what semantically counts as "knowing".

3 Scepticism

Contextualism has been often developed in order to face the sceptic's challenge.[4] Consider the sentence:

(4) S knows that she has hands.

If you are not a philosopher, but an ordinary person, you may truly assert that (4) is true, if S has hands, S believes it and she is in a certain epistemic position: for example, if her perceptual faculties are well functioning, and there is no special reason to believe that any potential defeater obtains. In such an ordinary context the epistemic standards are Low (or Easy).

What does the sceptic do? She mentions a sceptical hypothesis (like the brain in a vat hypothesis), and so confers relevance to it, compelling us to consider it. She changes the context: now we are in a sceptical context. S's position is not judged good enough anymore: the standards are High (or Tough[5]), and so in this case we may say that (4) is false. In order to state you know something, you must rule out the sceptical hypothesis. But, you cannot: therefore we must admit the triumph of scepticism.[6]

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3   The term is due to Unger (1984).
4   Cf. Dretske (1970), (1971) and (1981), Unger (1986), Cohen (1987), (1988) and (1998), DeRose (1995) and (1996), Lewis (1979) and (1996), Vassallo (2001), Williams (1991) and (1999) for contextualist approaches to skepticism. Cf. Schiffer (1996) and Stroud (1996) for criticisms of these approaches.
5   The terms "Easy" and "Tough" are due to Schiffer (1996).
6   Cf. Nozick (1981).

Once we are back in more ordinary conversational contexts, we apply more relaxed standards and realise that we can truly attribute knowledge to ourselves and to the others. In DeRose's words: "As soon as we find ourselves in more ordinary conversational contexts, it will not only be true for us to claim to know the very things that the sceptic now denies we know, but it will also be *wrong* for us to *deny* that we know these things".[7] The fact that the sceptic employs high standards in her context cannot show at all that we do not satisfy the weaker standards of ordinary contexts. So there is not any contradiction between saying that we know and that we do not know: the sceptical negation of knowledge is perfectly compatible with ordinary knowledge attributions.

4   Context dependence

Broadly speaking, the semantic thesis grounding epistemological contextualism is that a sentence of the form (1) does not express a complete proposition. Different utterances of (1), in different contexts of utterance, can express different propositions. If we fill in the gaps by appealing to low epistemic standards in case A, (3) will be evaluated as expressing a true proposition; if we fill in the gaps by appealing to high epistemic standards in case B, (3) will be evaluated as expressing a false proposition.

Little attention has been paid to a precise formulation of the semantic contextualist thesis grounding epistemological contextualism.[8] Many scholars refer to some kind of "hidden-indexical" theory of knowledge sentences (like Schiffer[9]), or claim that "know" is itself indexical (like Schiffer and Brower[10]). My goal is then to assess differences and similarities between "know" and indexical expressions in a natural language. Here I will confine myself to a negative point, criticising two strategies in terms of indexicality: pure indexicals, on the one hand, and demonstratives, on the other.

Before starting, I wish to say one word to clarify my overall project. We will see that contextualist supporters of the different semantic theories of context dependence agree on the semantic value of (1) in the different contexts—that is, on its truth-conditions. The disagreement,

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7 Cf. DeRose (1999), p. 194.
8 With the noteworthy exceptions of Schiffer (1996), Stalnaker (2004), Stanley (2004), Partee (2004) and DeRose forthcoming.
9 Schiffer (1996), p. 327.
10 Schiffer (1996), p. 327 and Brower (1998), p. 648.

then, does not concern the semantic interpretation of (1), but the features of the context which have a bearing on its semantic interpretation—and in particular the semantic mechanisms explaining how context affects its semantic interpretation. The distinction between semantic values and what in the context makes it the case that an utterance has the semantic value it has, is an instance of a well-established distinction within semantics between *descriptive* and *foundational* semantics.[11]

5   Indexicals: strategy

A strategy in terms of some kind of indexicality seems plausible. Indexicals are referential expressions depending, for their semantic value, on the context of utterance. Context determines a contextual parameter that fixes the value of an indexical expression: "know" is an indexical expression like "I", "here" or "now". The interpretation of a sentence containing an indexical depends on the characteristics of the context in which it is uttered: the interpretation varies with the context of use. The sentence

(5) I am French,

for example, is true if uttered by Claudine (who is a French), while it is false if uttered by Claudia (who is an Italian). Language conventions associate with an indexical a rule (a Kaplanian *character*) fixing the reference of the occurrences of the expression in context. The semantic value of an indexical (its *content*, its truth conditional import) is thus determined by a conventional rule and by a contextual parameter, which is an aspect of the utterance situation.[12] The character of an indexical encodes the specific contextual co-ordinate that is relevant to the determination of its semantic value: for "I" the relevant parameter will be the speaker of the utterance, for "here" the place of the utterance, for "now" the time of the utterance, and so on.

Sentences containing "know" are considered in the same way as sentences containing indexicals. The truth of (1) then, "is relative to the attributor's context, but the notion of truth is preserved by treating knowledge claims as having an indexical component".[13] The character of (1) may be expressed as "S knows that p relative to standard N", while its content would be, in case A, "S knows that p relative to stand-

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11   Cf. Stalnaker (1997), p. 535; cf. Bianchi (2006).
12   Cf. Kaplan (1977).
13   Cf. Brower (1998), p. 648.

ard Low" and, in case B, "S knows that p relative to standard High".[14]
Now, what happens in the sceptical case? The character of (4) is con-
stant: "S knows that she has hands relative to standard N". The con-
tent varies with the context of the attributor and, in particular, with the
epistemic position he requires for the cognitive subject. If he is not a
philosopher but an ordinary person, he may truly say that (4) is true, if
S knows it relative to standard Low. Of course, in a philosophical con-
text such a position is not judged good enough: in this case he may say
that (4) is false. Again it is claimed that the way in which the truth-
conditions of (4) vary with context is not different at all from the way
in which the truth conditions of (5) vary with context.

Let's further examine the analogy between "know" and indexicals.
The meaning of an indexical expression is a *function* from contextual
factors (such as speaker, place and time of the utterance) to semantic
values. By applying the functional conception to examples (1) and (3),
we generalise the idea that the conventional meaning of "know" is a
function. The function will have the following disjunctive form:

> "know" = *know relative to standard x* if "know" (in context A) or
> *know relative to standard y* if "know" (in context B) or *know relative
> to standard z* if "know" (in context C) or *know relative to standard w*
> in all the other cases,

where, for example, context A is an everyday context with no urgent
practical concerns, B is an everyday context with urgent practical con-
cerns, C is a sceptical context, etc. This approach has the valuable ben-
efit of maintaining a stable conventional meaning associated with
"know": there is only one function associated with the predicate, and
all its different values depend on the different arguments the function
takes (context A, B, C, etc.).

6   Indexicals: objection

In my opinion we must reject the functional strategy: it is, in fact, con-
ceivable to obtain for (3) in context A the interpretation of "know"
which is normally obtained for (3) in context B. Let us see. Once the
context of utterance is fixed, the linguistic rules governing the use of

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14   Cf. Schiffer (1996), pp. 326–328. According to DeRose, the character of (1) is
roughly the following: "S has a true belief that p and is in a *good enough* epistemic
position with respect to p". Its content is "how good an epistemic position S must
be in to count as knowing that p", and this shifts from context to context: cf.
DeRose (1992), p. 922.

the indexicals determine completely and automatically their reference, no matter what the speaker's intentions are. If, for example, Claudia utters (5) with the intention of referring to Catherine Deneuve (if, for example, she believes she is Catherine Deneuve), she will nonetheless express the (false) proposition *Claudia is French*. Analogously, according to the indexical strategy, it is the context to fix the epistemic standards—no matter what the knowledge attributor's intentions are. If Paul, the knowledge attributor, utters (3) in context A, with the intention of expressing the proposition

> *Hannah knows that the bank will be open tomorrow relative to standard High,*

he will nonetheless express the proposition

> *Hannah knows that the bank will be open tomorrow relative to standard Low.*

In other words, there is no way for him to express, in a context where there are no particular practical concerns, that Hannah knows something according to high standards—which is a very common case (we may suppose, for example, that, in context A, Hannah has recently checked the opening hours of the bank for some other reasons).

7   Demonstratives: strategy

In the case of an analogy of "know" with a demonstrative, the situation is quite different: a difference, to my knowledge, never correctly underlined. In particular, Schiffer's critique to hidden-indexicality does not account for that difference, which I view as a mistake.[15]

Demonstratives can take an indefinite number of senses depending on the context of use. The meaning of a demonstrative, like "she" in the sentence

(6) She is French,

by itself does not constitute an automatic rule to identify the referent of the expression in a given context. The semantics of "she" cannot unambiguously determine its reference: if, for instance, in the context of utterance of (6) there is more than one woman, the expression "she" can equally identify any woman. In Kaplan's theory, demonstratives (expressions like "he", "she", "this", "that", etc.) are given a different

15 Cf. Schiffer (1996), pp. 326–328.

treatment from the indexical one. According to Kaplan, the occurrence of a demonstrative must be supplemented by a *demonstration*, an act of demonstration like pointing, or "the speaker's directing intention". There is no automatic rule of saturation: the semantic value of a demonstrative is fixed according to the speaker's directing intentions.[16] The reference of "I" is the object satisfying, in a given context, the condition coded in its own character: "'I' refers to the speaker"; while the rule associated with a demonstrative is "an occurrence of 'she' refers to the object the speaker intends to refer to".[17]

In the same way, we could say that there is a variable hidden in the syntactic structure of the predicate "know" (a variable for the epistemic standard): we must specify that variable for every occurrence of the predicate, in every context, in order to have complete truth conditions. The rule associated with (1) would then be: "S knows that p relative to standard N". "Relative to standard N" is now a free variable for epistemic standard: the variable must be saturated according to the context, but there is no automatic rule of saturation, no function from a contextual parameter to a semantic value. Its value depends on the knowledge attributor's intentions. Let us examine again the two possible contexts for (3): in case A the set of truth conditions is: *Hannah knows that the bank will be open tomorrow relative to standard Low*— and (3) is true. In case B, the set of truth conditions is: *Hannah knows that the bank will be open tomorrow relative to standard High*—and (3) is false. But now the interpretation of "know" as a demonstrative, and not as an indexical, offers a way out from the puzzle mentioned in § 6. Suppose again we are in context A this time modified: in this context there are no particular practical concerns, but Hannah happens to know that the bank will be open tomorrow according to high standards (she has recently checked the opening hours of the bank for some other reasons). Now Paul, the knowledge attributor, may utter (3) in context A, with the intention of expressing the proposition

> *Hannah knows that the bank will be open tomorrow relative to standard High,*

and succeed in expressing it. The variable hidden in the syntactic structure of the predicate is not automatically fixed by the context (as for

16 There are only constraints on possible referents: "he" refers to a male individual who is neither the speaker nor the addressee, "she" to a female individual who is neither the speaker nor the addressee, and so on.

17 See Kaplan (1977) and (1989); cf. Bianchi (2001), pp. 74–76 and Recanati (2004), pp. 56–57.

indexicals like "I"), but saturated according to Paul's directing intentions.

8 Demonstratives: objection

The analogy between "know" and demonstratives seems promising; but there is a powerful argument against it. As many contextualists have pointed out, in every context there is only one epistemic standard: the epistemic standards for "know" do not shift within a single sentence. Failure to respect such a rule amounts to the formation of what DeRose's calls *Abominable Conjunctions* – sentences such as

(7) S does not know she is not a bodiless brain in a vat, but S knows she has hands.[18]

Moreover, not only the contextual parameter corresponding to epistemic standards cannot shift within a clause, but also, once standards have been raised, it is not possible to lower them again in the next sentence.[19] The context-dependence of the predicate "know" seems not to be tied to the expression itself, but to the whole discourse. This is not the case of many contextual expressions[20]—and in particular this is not the case of demonstratives: demonstratives shift internal to a single sentence, as in

(8) She is French and she is not French

(uttered with two different demonstrations, or two different referential intentions): the interpretation of the relevant contextual parameter can change within a sentence. Note that while demonstratives do allow for shifts within a clause, indexicals do not: the sentence

(9) I am French and I am not French

is contradictory, while (8) is not. Relative to this particular feature, pure indexicals like "I" behave as "know" does.[21]

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18 Cf. DeRose's (1995), p. 28.
19 Cf. Lewis (1979), p. 247: "the rule of accommodation is not fully reversible. For some reason, I know not what, the boundary readily shifts outward if what is said requires it, but does not so readily shift inward if what is said requires that".
20 Cf. Stanley (2004) pp. 134: "Contextualists typically speak as if there is one contextual standard in a context for all context-sensitive expressions in a discourse... But this is not in general a good description of how context-sensitive expressions work. Rather, the context-sensitivity is usually linked to the term itself, rather than the whole discourse".
21 Neither Stanley nor Partee in her comments acknowledge this fact.

9   Conclusion

In this paper I have focused on the semantic issues raised by epistemological contextualism. My general aim is to provide a better formulation of the semantic thesis grounding epistemological contextualism—arguing that only an accurate analysis of the different varieties of context sensitivity secures us a better understanding and a clearer evaluation of the contextualist approach, and of its response to the sceptic. I have confined myself to a negative point, criticising two strategies in terms of indexicality: I have underlined differences and similarities between "know" and indexicals, on the one hand, and demonstratives, on the other. In so doing, I have identified a crucial question: while "know" does not allow for changes in the epistemic standards within a sentence, some contextual expressions appeal to different contexts in different parts of the same sentence. Those remarks are a strong argument against the postulation of an indexical element in ascriptions of propositional knowledge, and suggest adopting a strategy in terms of absolute context-dependent adjectives like "flat"[22], or in terms of standards of precision, drawing on David Lewis and Barbara Partee's proposals.[23]

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22 *Contra* Stanley (2004).
23 Cf. Lewis (1979) and Partee (2004).

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