Contextualism
Introduction (1)

• Standards of knowledge and justification. Thus far, we’ve been assuming that these standards are universal (and invariant).

• Contextualism denies this assumption. Instead, it holds that standards of knowledge and justification vary with context.


• According to the epistemological contextualist, ‘knowledge’ and ‘justification’ are likewise context-sensitive terms.


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Introduction (2)

• Different kinds of contexts:
  - subject or personal context
  - attributor context

• Different factors suggested as determining the standards:
  - significance of the accuracy of information
  - the topic
  - doubts under consideration
  - …

• For simplicity, we will focus on the context of utterance where one or more of the above factors determine the standards.

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Introduction (3)

- Luxury car example:

  I *know* my luxury car is parked in my garage because I left it there two minutes ago.

  I can thus assert “I *know* my luxury car is parked in my garage”

  **Suppose:** A good friend informs me that a master car-thief is operating in my area.

  On the basis of this information, I may justifiably say: “I don’t know whether my car is parked in my garage. I better make sure”.

  **NB:** Standards of knowledge and justification changed. My friend’s information raised the standards.
Contextualism meets Scepticism

- According to Contextualism, the standards required to deserve the label ‘knowledge’ or ‘justification’ are higher in sceptical scenarios than in ordinary (i.e. everyday) scenarios.

- The sceptical puzzle:
  1. I know I have two hands
  2. If I know I have two hands, then I know I’m not a brain in a vat
  3. I don’t know I’m not a brain in a vat

**Puzzle:** All three seem intuitively sound, but they form an inconsistent set. At least one has to be dropped.

- The Sceptics drop 1.
- Nozick and Dretske drop 2.
- Most Anti-Sceptics (like Moore) drop 3.

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Contextualist Solution (1)

• The sceptical puzzle (REPEATED):
  1. I know I have two hands
  2. If I know I have two hands, then I know I’m not a brain in a vat
  3. I don’t know I’m not a brain in a vat

• Contextualists: Which one do they drop?
  - they accept closure, so they keep 2.
  - if they drop 1, they become sceptics.
  - if they drop 3, they become standard anti-sceptics.

Question: What makes them unique then?
Answer: They drop either 1 or 3 depending on the context.
Contextualist Solution (2)

• Mixed Strategy:
  - Accept sceptical conclusions: “I don’t know I’m not a brain in a vat” is *always true when uttered* because it always ushers in a *sceptical context*.
  - Accept non-sceptical conclusions: “I know I have two hands” is *often true in ordinary contexts*.

• What happens to the anti-sceptical argument?
  1. I know I have two hands
  2. If I know I have two hands, then I know I’m not a brain in a vat
     \[\therefore\] I know I’m not a brain in a vat

DeRose: Premise 1 is false in this context.
Cohen: Premise 1 is true, but the context shifts as we move through the argument.

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Objections

• Yourgrau: Contextualism leads to absurdities. A person who asserts knowledge that $P$, may, when questioned whether (s)he can rule out possible alternatives, deny knowledge that $P$.

• Sosa: Contextualism might be an insight in linguistics, but it doesn’t contribute to the epistemological fight against scepticism.

• Craig: Knowledge seems to require more stability than the contextualist requires. If standards change regularly, how can we make sense of information gained in different contexts?

• Stroud: Scepticism is a view that throws doubt on all (or nearly all) knowledge claims. Merely stipulating that in some (i.e. ordinary) contexts we have knowledge, does not make scepticism go away.

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Food for Thought

- Is the claim that the terms ‘knowledge’ and ‘justification’ are context-sensitive a genuinely epistemological claim?
K. DeRosa, "Solving the Sceptical Problem", in Kim

Reading