CONTEXTUALISMS IN EPISTEMOLOGY

Edited by

ELKE BRENDEL AND CHRISTOPH JÄGER

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ELKE BRENDEL and CHRISTOPH JÄGER

CONTEXTUALIST APPROACHES TO EPISTEMOLOGY: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

ABSTRACT. In this paper we survey some main arguments for and against epistemological contextualism. We distinguish and discuss various kinds of contextualism, such as *attributer contextualism* (the most influential version of which is *semantic*, *conversational*, or *radical contextualism*); *indexicalism; proto-contextualism; Wittgensteinian contextualism*; *subject*, *inferential*, or *issue contextualism*; *epistemic contextualism*; and *virtue contextualism*. Starting with a sketch of Dretske's Relevant Alternatives Theory and Nozick's Tracking Account of Knowledge, we reconstruct the history of various forms of contextualism and the ways contextualists try to handle some notorious epistemological quandaries, especially skepticism and the lottery paradox. Then we outline the most important problems that contextualist theories face, and give overviews of their criticisms and defenses as developed in this issue.

1. INTRODUCTION

Contextualist approaches to epistemological concepts and problems have become extremely popular in contemporary epistemology. "Contextualism," however, is just an umbrella term for a wide variety of theories. Their common starting point is the thesis that the truth values of knowledge ascriptions (or ascriptions of epistemic justification) are *context-dependent*. This context-dependency is said to provide the key to resolving some of the most notorious epistemological quandaries, including the skeptical problem and the lottery paradox. In working out this idea, contextualist approaches begin to diverge. One major family of views has come to be called *attributor contextualism*, the most influential form of which is *semantic* or *conversational contextualism*. This approach has most prominently been advocated by Stewart Cohen, David Lewis, and Keith DeRose. The other major strain is *subject contextualism*, one of the leading proponents of which is Michael Williams. In what follows, we shall sketch some main steps in the historical development of conversational and subject contextualism and outline the core characteristics and philosophical targets of these positions. Second, we will outline some crucial problems and objections contextualist accounts face,

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and provide overviews of the defenses as well as the criticisms and alternative proposals presented in the papers in this issue.

2. RELEVANT ALTERNATIVES, TRUTH-TRACKING, AND EPISTEMIC CLOSURE

One theory of knowledge which has had a major impact on recent contextualist approaches is the so-called "Relevant Alternatives Account" first proposed by Fred Dretske in the early 1970s and further developed by Gail Stine and others.[1] According to Dretske, an epistemic subject *S* knows that *p* (at time *t*) only if *S* is in an epistemic position that allows her to eliminate all *relevant alternatives* to *p* (at *t*). A proposition *q* is an *alternative* to *p* just in case *q* entails not-*p*. Yet, according to Dretske it is not necessary, in order to know *p*, that one be able to exclude *all* the alternatives to *p*. What is required instead is merely the ability to eliminate or rule out certain *relevant* alternatives. So what makes an alternative relevant? This depends on the epistemic situation. Usually during an ordinary visit to the zoo, the possibility that the animals you take to be zebras are cleverly disguised mules is an irrelevant alternative, and it is thus not necessary that you be able to rule it out in order to know that the animals are zebras. But now suppose, for example, that it is well-known that the zoo director, in order to save money, often disguises common animals as exotic animals and occasionally puts cleverly disguised mules in the zebra paddock. In this situation, the mule alternative becomes relevant and, it would seem, you do *not know* that the animals you are looking at are zebras, unless you can rule out the possibility that they are cleverly disguised mules – even if they are in fact zebras (cf. Dretske, 1970, p. 1016).[2]

Dretske's painted-mule scenario is a situation where *local* or *restricted skepticism* – in this case skepticism about whether in some particular situation appearances are trustworthy – threatens some knowledge claim. But his account is also designed to provide an answer to *global* or *radical skeptical arguments* such as the notorious brain-in-a-vat (BIV) argument:

BIV:

(1) I don't know that I am not a (handless) brain in a vat.
(2) If I don't know that I am not a (handless) brain in a vat, then I don't know that I have hands.
(3) I don't know that I have hands.

The *skeptical paradox* consists in the fact that such arguments are valid and use premises that intuitively seem true. Yet we are not willing to accept the conclusions. Dretske's original answer is, very roughly, that skeptical scenarios are *irrelevant* alternatives. If so, premise (2) in the above argument turns out to be false.

Add to this view that what counts as a relevant alternative is determined by the alternatives that are salient for the person ascribing the epistemic attitude (or lack of it) to the subject, and the position you arrive at is attributer contextualism. In his contribution to this issue, Dretske explicitly distances himself from such forms of contextualism (which he calls *radical contextualism*). Because of the deep influence his theory has had on such forms of contextualism, however, his view may well be called a kind of *proto-contextualism*.[3] We shall come back to Dretske's position below.

Another highly influential account of knowledge is Robert Nozick's "tracking" analysis.[4] The question of whether *S* knows that *p* in a given situation depends, according to Nozick, not only on *S*'s having a true belief that *p*, but also on certain counterfactual relations between *p* and *S*'s believing that *p*. In particular, two subjunctive conditionals must be satisfied: (1) If *p* had been false, *S* would not have believed that *p*; i.e., *S* knows that *p* only if, in the nearest possible worlds in which *p* is false, *S* no longer believes that *p*; and (2) if *p* were true, then *S* would have believed that *p*, i.e., in all the closest worlds where *p* is true, *S* believes that *p*. Given these conditions, *S* can know that she has hands, even though *S does not know* that she is not a brain in a vat: One of the nearest possible worlds in which *S* does not have hands is a world in which *S*, for example, lost her hands in an accident; and in this world she would not believe that she has hands. Furthermore, in all the closest worlds in which it is true that *S* has hands, *S* believes that she has hands. Since *S*'s belief that she has hands satisfies both truth-tracking conditions, it follows from Nozick's account that *S* knows that she has hands. However, *S does not know* that she is not a brain in a vat, since in the nearest possible world in which *S is* a brain in a vat (let us assume that *S* is not one in the actual world), *S* would still believe that she is not a brain in a vat. Thus our ordinary knowledge claims, as in the relevant alternatives account, can still be true, even if we don't know that the skeptical hypotheses are false.

One consequence of Dretske's and Nozick's theories is the failure of what many regard as a highly plausible epistemic principle, namely, the *principle of epistemic closure* (PEC). According to PEC, knowledge is closed under known logical entailment. PEC can be roughly stated as follows:

PEC: If *S* knows that *p* and knows that *p* implies *q*, then *S* also knows that *q*.[5]

The skeptic implicitly appeals to PEC when she argues as follows: Since we don't know that we are not brains in vats, and since we clearly know that having hands implies not being a (handless) brain in a vat, it follows that we don't know that we have hands. Since similar reasoning can be applied to any other proposition about some ordinary fact, the skeptic concludes that we don't have any knowledge of such facts.

Now, as we have already seen, Nozick's account entails that we *can* know that we have hands without knowing that we are not brains in vats, although we know that having hands implies not being a brain in a vat. Rejecting PEC also allows Dretske to avoid radical skeptical conclusions. In his classic papers on the topic, Dretske argues that PEC holds only when the entailed proposition's negation is a relevant alternative to the proposition in question. Furthermore, since, at least in everyday situations, being a brain in a vat is not a relevant alternative to having hands, we need not know that we are not brains in vats in order to know that we have hands – even though we clearly know that having hands implies not being a (handless) brain in a vat. In recent work, Dretske puts forward the view that, even in contexts where skeptical alternatives *are relevant*, rejecting an unrestricted closure principle is the appropriate response to the skeptic. With regard to "heavy-weight" implications such as the negation of skeptical hypotheses, he maintains that closure does not hold even when such hypotheses have become salient (cf. Dretske, 2004).

Whether or not we want to regard skeptical hypotheses as relevant alternatives, the main problem with Dretske's and Nozick's accounts is that rejecting PEC is a high price for solving the skeptical problem. PEC is after all a highly plausible principle of knowledge acquisition. DeRose contends that not knowing that we are handless brains in vats, while at the same time knowing that we have hands, is an "abominable conjunction" and an "intuitively bizarre result" (DeRose, 1995, p. 201). Conversational contextualism, championed by Cohen, Lewis, and DeRose, attempts to solve the skeptical problem by appealing to the context-sensitivity of knowledge claims without giving up closure.[6]

3. CONVERSATIONAL CONTEXTUALISM

The main claim of conversational contextualism (henceforth: CC) is that the sentence "*S* knows that *p* (at *t*)" can be true in one

conversational context and false in another – for the same subject *S* and the same proposition *p* (and the same time *t*).[7] According to CC, it is always the context of the *speaker* that determines the truth conditions for a given utterance of "*S* knows that *p*." CC is therefore a version of attributor contextualism. Except in cases of self-ascriptions of knowledge, the subject's conversational context plays no role in determining the truth conditions for "*S* knows that *p*."

But how does a knowledge-ascriber's context determine the semantic standards of a knowledge claim, and what induces context changes? According to CC, the raising and lowering of standards is determined by *conversational features*. If the speaker's attention is drawn to an error-possibility that has not yet been considered for a proposition *p*, the standards are then raised. In particular, this means that the mere *mentioning* of some error-possibility *e* makes *e* salient which, in turn, causes a shift from a lower-standards context (where *e* need not be ruled out) to a higher-standards context (where *e* must be ruled out). Even if an epistemic subject *S* meets the standards for knowledge put in place by a low-standards context where an error-possibility *e* to *p* is not salient, "*S* knows that *p*" may still turn out to be *false* in a higher-standards context where *e* is salient, if *S* cannot rule out *e*. As we will see, a number of contributors to this issue object to the idea that context changes are solely induced by conversational features.

One main goal of CC is to give a satisfying response to the skeptical challenge while nevertheless explaining skepticism's intuitive appeal. To put it in terms of relevant alternatives: Since in *everyday situations* the skeptical possibility that we are brains in a vat is an irrelevant alternative to our belief that we have hands, we don't have to rule out this skeptical hypothesis in order to know that we have hands. But there might be situations where skeptical possibilities are relevant alternatives to our ordinary knowledge claims – for example, in the context of a philosophy seminar on epistemology. Since we cannot rule out the possibility that we are brains in vats, we cannot know *in these situations* that we have hands. So, on the one hand, the skeptical challenge is met, because our ordinary knowledge claims remain true as long as we are in a context of everyday life. On the other hand, the appeal of our skeptical intuitions is explained, since in philosophical contexts where skeptical possibilities are relevant, our ordinary knowledge claims turn out to be false.

The contextualist thesis can also be described by saying that knowledge claims are *indexical*. This, it is contended, provides a semantic explanation for the apparent fact that sentences of the form "*S* knows that *p*" can have different truth values in different

contexts. According to CC, the semantics of other indexical expressions – like "flat" – can serve as a model for understanding the indexicality of knowledge claims. Whether the assertion "*X* is flat" is true depends on the standards of flatness determined by the context of utterance. Similarly, whether or not the ascription "*S* knows that *p*" is true depends on the epistemic standards put in place by the knowledge-ascriber's context. But the contextualist's indexicality thesis has been challenged. For example, in his contribution, Wayne Davis contends that there is compelling linguistic evidence against the indexicality of knowledge claims. The contextualist must also explain why competent speakers who can identify assertions that are uncontroversially indexical find it difficult to recognize the presumed indexicality of knowledge claims.[8]

Another main goal of CC is to provide a solution to the *lottery paradox*. Let us assume that *S* bought a ticket in a fair lottery and that the chances of this ticket winning are very low – 1:10,000,000. If *S* is the lucky winner, she will get 10 million dollars. Although there is overwhelming statistical evidence for the belief that *S*'s ticket will lose, many people share the intuition that *S* nevertheless does not know that her ticket will lose. Let us assume furthermore that, given *S*'s meager income and her lack of rich relatives, *S* claims to know that she will never be a multi-millionaire. Now we have a problem: *S*'s knowing that she will never be a multi-millionaire seems to imply her knowing that she will not win the lottery – which contradicts the intuition that *S* fails to know that she will lose.[9]

Cohen, in particular, maintains that CC provides a solution to this version of the lottery paradox on the grounds that CC explains the widespread intuition that *S* does not know that she will lose:[10] In ordinary-standards contexts the sentence "*S* knows that she will never be a multi-millionaire" is true, and so is the sentence "*S* knows that her ticket will lose." But once we think about the lottery and the chance (however slight) her ticket has of being drawn, this remote possibility becomes salient and creates a context in which the standards for knowledge are so high that "*S* knows that she will lose the lottery" is false. Thus according to CC there only *seems* to be a paradox, because of an unnoticed context change from one knowledge claim to the other. But in the case of the lottery paradox as well, the contextualist solution has been attacked. For example, Peter Baumann and John Greco challenge the assumption that the salience of chances of error can explain the intuition that *S* does not know that her ticket will lose. We shall outline their criticisms as well as Cohen's reply below.

4. OBJECTIONS TO CONVERSATIONAL CONTEXTUALISM

One of the most general objections to CC is that, since it is a theory about the semantics of knowledge ascriptions, it is an exercise in the philosophy of language, rather than an epistemological position that provides insight into the nature of knowledge. This "meta-linguistic ascent objection" has been put forward and developed at some length by Ernest Sosa (2000).[11] DeRose, however, notes that to the extent that contextualism engages in the philosophy of language, it undeniably deals with issues that are of utmost importance to epistemology (1999, p. 188).

Another very popular objection to CC has already been touched upon: It seems counterintuitive to maintain that, simply by mentioning skeptical hypotheses (or drawing attention to them in some other way), we can deprive a person of her everyday knowledge. Moreover, critics have argued, it is just not true that people simply withdraw or object to knowledge claims when they are confronted with skeptical hypotheses. As Richard Feldman has illustrated (Feldman, 1999, p. 100): Suppose you are at a cocktail party and participate in a debate about the healthiest diet. Some people offer arguments for the view that it is healthy to eat lots of carbohydrates, others argue in favor of protein. After a while you chime in with the remark: "But at least I know this: I'm no brain in a vat!" According to CC, this assertion should provoke dissent, for in the contextualist's view the mere mention of the BIV hypothesis (even in claiming to know that it is false) raises the epistemic standards. Thus your claim should be greeted at least with considerable epistemic suspicion. But this is not what happens. You may produce strange looks, but outside the philosophy classroom you will hardly succeed in provoking dissent with knowledge claims to the effect that some outlandish skeptical scenario does not obtain. (We concede that to some extent people's reactions may also depend on how many cocktails they have already consumed.)

Objections along these lines, which can generally be classified as objections regarding the *dynamics of context shifts*, come up in several papers in this issue, such as in those of Antonia Barke, Wayne Davis, Fred Dretske, Mylan Engel, and Frank Hofmann. For example, both Davis and Engel charge that contextualism predicts – falsely – that when elevated skeptical standards are in force we will find ourselves converting to skepticism. In fact we don't. Indeed, no one reading the papers in this volume (we hope) will cease to believe that there is an external world, that she has hands,

and that she is not a brain in a vat. Engel also claims that skeptical arguments tend to lose their force once we become familiar with them. If this is true, it shows that there is another kind of epistemic dynamic which needs explaining and which contextualism cannot account for.

The contextualist has two main replies to such worries. First, as especially Cohen has argued (see for example Cohen, 1999), the contextualist can incorporate an *error theory* into his account. According to an error theory, competent speakers are often unaware of, or systematically misled by, the context-sensitivity of knowledge ascriptions. We shall return to this topic below. Another answer the contextualist can offer is that attacks from such quarters are anyway misconstruing his project. His project, he might say, is *not* primarily the description of what happens if actual epistemic subjects encounter skeptical hypotheses. Instead, the issue is one of *normative epistemology*, and thus his proposal should not be evaluated with regard to people's actual feelings and reactions toward skepticism. However, suppose there *is* agreement that some knowledge claim which in different circumstances is true has, under the pressure of skeptical arguments, become false. Then we are still left with the question of how those inflated standards can be lowered again. The only way of regaining knowledge would seem to be to ignore, or forget, the skeptical possibilities that have become salient. But it is unclear whether, and if so in which way, this could happen. How exactly can we find our way back into epistemic naïveté? Do we reenter low-standards contexts as soon as we leave the philosophy classroom? And are we dragged into high standards again once we return from our coffee break or the cocktail party?

Lewis (1979, 1996), DeRose (1995) and Cohen (1999) are well aware of this problem. Nevertheless, the objector claims, they underrate its critical potential and are confronted with a problem of the type "paradox of epistemic laziness." According to Lewis (1996, p. 222), on the contextualist view, epistemology turns out to be an "investigation that destroys its own subject matter." Indeed, but the reverse side of the coin is that, the more epistemically blind we are, the more we know. Ignoring skeptical arguments puts us in a better epistemic position than we would be in if we engaged in critical reflections about our everyday knowledge claims. Yet, as Hofmann notes in his paper: Should not knowledge, however exactly one may want to analyze it, at least be construed as an *achievement*?

Let us now look more specifically into the main topics of the papers in this volume. In "Externalism and Modest Contextualism," Fred **Dretske** notes approvingly that CC is inspired by a relevant alternatives account of knowledge. However, he rejects the direction in which proponents of CC have been steering with his account. The contextualist is committed to the view that once skeptical hypotheses are mentioned, we have moved to a context in which it is true to say that a given subject *never knew* the ordinary propositions that conflict with the skeptical hypotheses. In general, Dretske argues, *S*'s knowledge could apparently only be sheltered by insulating *S* from ever thinking about skepticism. Yet, *if* skepticism is false, isn't it false in the philosophy classroom as well as in the grocery store? The general worry here is that contextualism is conceding far too much to the skeptic. Why are skeptical arguments so appealing? In a way, the contextualist answer is straightforward: Skepticism is *true* for all of us who have thought about skeptical arguments. Worse than that, according to CC, skepticism is even true for all of us whose knowledge claims have been subjected to skeptical contemplations *by others*. This, one may feel, is not a good resolution of skeptical problems. Dretske then prescribes what he thinks can cure such maladies: rejecting closure.

Dretske links this point to his overall externalist account of knowledge, which is cashed out in terms of a detailed theory of information. However, in his paper "Skepticism, Information, and Closure: Dretske's Theory of Knowledge," Christoph **Jäger** argues that, at least with regard to ordinary empirical propositions and their antiskeptical consequences, Dretske's information-based externalism is in fact incompatible with his rejection of closure. Two of the most central and most influential features of Dretske's epistemology appear to be mutually exclusive. On Dretske's theory, *S* knows of some perceptual object (or source of information) that it exemplifies a certain property, if and only if there is some signal which carries the relevant information and which, in virtue of carrying that information, causes *S*'s belief that the object has that property. Furthermore, a signal is said to carry the information that *p* only if the probability of *p*, given the signal, is 1. But then, Jäger shows, on Dretske's theory the relation of a signal's carrying the information that *p is* closed under logical entailment. Second, Jäger draws on an embellished version of the closure principle and suggests a causal interpretation of the epistemic basing relation for Dretske's account. He then shows that, given these assumptions, Dretske is committed to the view that, with regard to the propositions in question, also *knowledge* is closed