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## Skepticism and Contextualism

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Contextualism has gained center stage in epistemology mainly through its way with the skeptic, from the early days of “relevant alternatives” to important recent publications. While myself accepting elements of contextualism, I will detail reservations about its use in epistemology, and in particular about its use to dispose of skepticism.

### A. Is This Epistemology?

**1**

Through metalinguistic ascent, contextualism replaces a given question with a related but different question. About words that formulate one’s original question, the contextualist asks when those words are correctly applicable. Whether the contextualist’s replacement question is relevant to the original question will depend, therefore, on whether those words are ambiguous. That the words are correctly applicable while meaning something different from

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what they mean in the formulation of a question need not be relevant to that question. To preclude such irrelevance we must require that the words of interest to the contextualist be applied without change of meaning. But even this is not sufficient, since even words that mean the same may be correctly usable with no bearing on the original question, as when the words include an indexical. 'I am now tired' is true when said by a marathoner at the finish line, but this bears not at all on the question whether I am now tired.

The *contextualist fallacy* is the fallacious inference of an answer to a question from information about the correct use of the words in its formulation. (This is not to suggest that it is inevitably fallacious to infer an answer to a question from the correctness of using certain vocabulary in whose terms that question may be posed.)

Is contextualism in epistemology guilty of the contextualist fallacy? Contextualism in epistemology concerns mainly threshold-setting mechanisms. The words involved, mainly the verb 'to know' and its cognates, mark whether one lies above a threshold along one or more dimensions. Thus one may need to be confident enough and well enough justified, and one's belief must perhaps derive from a reliable enough source, and be little enough liable to be false. In each case one's belief must lie above a certain threshold, one variably set by the context in which is used the relevant epistemic vocabulary.

Is vocabulary that is in this threshold-setting way context-dependent then any less susceptible to the contextualist fallacy than is vocabulary that is indexical or ambiguous? Regardless of whether such vocabulary is itself "indexical" or "ambiguous," it involves in any case a threshold set by the context of use.

Epistemology traditionally has inquired into the nature, conditions, and extent of human knowledge. When one reflects on such matters in the privacy of one's own thought, or when one discusses them in a journal or seminar, the relevant thresholds may differ from those set in more ordinary contexts. So the question arises very naturally once again: Supposing epistemic vocabulary to be correctly applicable in contexts that set a different threshold from that of epistemological inquiry, how relevant can that be to epistemological questions about the nature, conditions, and extent of human knowledge?

Recent epistemic contextualism features the following thesis:

EC Sentences of the form 'At  $t$ ,  $S$  knows that  $p$ ' are truth-evaluable only relative to a context of use  $C$ .

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Two people affirming the same such sentence may yet be right and wrong respectively, owing to different contexts of use.

Such contextualism has been most dramatically applied to the problem of skepticism. The contextualist is in a position (and often in a mood) to concede that in a context of philosophical reflection it is *false* to say 'I know I have a hand', while insisting that in ordinary contexts, in the home or the marketplace or the sports arena, it is *not false but true* to say that same thing and countless others like it. This application has been widely persuasive, and deserves scrutiny.

The main thesis of epistemic contextualism (EC) has considerable plausibility as a thesis in linguistics or in philosophy of language.<sup>1</sup> In applying it to epistemology, however, it is possible to overreach, or so I am here arguing. Consider next some examples.

## 2

Results in linguistics or philosophy of language about the truth-conditions of sentences like 'S knows that p' may bear on questions raised in the study, seminar room, or philosophy journal, about the nature, conditions, and extent of human knowledge; but exactly how? Even if the utterance of such a sentence is often enough true, what bearing might that have on epistemology? For all that has been shown, or so much as argued, it may be as little relevant as is (a1) to (a2) below, or (b1) to (b2).

- (a1) People often utter truths when they say "Somebody loves me."
- (a2) Does anybody at all love me?
- (b1) People often utter truths when they say "Banks hold treasure."
- (b2) Do [river] banks hold treasure?

I may worry that no-one loves me, and conclude that this may actually be true; if I then notice that people who say "someone loves me" are often right, this will not reassure me. A treasure-hunter in the Amazon, I wonder whether [river] banks often hold treasure, to which it is then irrelevant that in some other contexts people are right in saying "Banks [financial institutions] often hold treasure."

That is not meant to refute contextualism. Most especially am I not questioning EC. I am not even asserting that EC is flat-out

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irrelevant to the nexus of concerns constitutive of epistemological reflection. However, the comparison with (a1)/(a2) and (b1)/(b2) does make one wonder just how those pairs differ from the following:

- (c1) People often utter truths when they say "I know there are hands."
- (c2) Do people ever know that there are hands?

(C2 is presented as a question we might pose in philosophical reflection, in a philosophy journal or conference. I mean the question *whether people ever know there are hands*, to be distinguished from the interrogative sentence 'Do people ever know there are hands?'.)

What is more, none of (a1), (b1), or (c1) entails its primed correlate below:

- (a1') People often utter truths when they say that somebody loves me.
- (b1') People often utter truths when they say that banks hold treasure.
- (c1') People often utter truths when they say that they know there are hands.

From c1, therefore, it is not even clearly inferrable *that people are ever right when, in ordinary contexts, they claim to know things*. This will not follow if only because it will not follow that people ever do claim, in an ordinary context, that they *know* things, as opposed to making utterances of the form "I know such and such."

The contextualist line deriving from EC hence does not much support, for us philosophers, the claim *that people do in ordinary contexts after all know things*. Nor does it even much support the claim that speakers are often enough right when they *say* that people know things. This limits the epistemological interest and relevance of EC-contextualism, however interesting and important it may remain as a thesis in linguistics.

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The word 'love' seems both multiply ambiguous and context-dependent. It can connote selfless good will, or, alternatively, sexual attraction; and if the former, the standards may vary contextually, with varying demands of selflessness. In one con-

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text, with one meaning—e.g., where Mother Theresa is considered for sainthood—one might wonder how much real “love” there is in the world. That sexual attraction abounds is then of doubtful relevance. Given the real content of one’s question in that context, how relevant can it be that “I love you” said by the sexually aroused is guaranteed to be true?

An interrogative may thus be context-dependent because it contains an indexical or an ambiguous expression. In neither case need the question posed by using that interrogative bear on the question posed by using it in another context. Are there other forms of context-dependence for which cross-contextual relevance is more likely? Consider a *univocal* word “love” whose correct attribution will depend on variable features of the context of attribution. “There is much love in the world” may then be true in contexts other than our own present context, but in a way that might still bear on *our* question “whether there is much love in the world.” In some sense we are at least discussing the “same sort of issue.” We are wondering whether there exists a high measure of a certain desideratum, to which the answer is that while that high measure of it may never be found, lesser measures are found occasionally. The important thing is that at least we are discussing the same “it.” (This is in contrast to cases of ambiguous or indexical expressions.)

Contextualism gains epistemic relevance if the pertinent contextual variation concerns only the required measure of a certain shared desideratum. Epistemic contextualism may be relevant to epistemology, after all, if there is a pertinent dimension—e.g., epistemic justification—whose heights we may never reach, not to the satisfaction of skeptics, while we do attain lesser levels often enough in ordinary life.

What is more, the way from A’s correctly uttering “S knows that p” to A’s correctly saying that S knows that p may be smoothed if such utterances are to be assessed relative to contexts arrayed in a single dimension. The way is thus *smoothed* perhaps, but not legitimated beyond all reasonable doubt. Just compare the move from the premise that A has correctly *uttered* “S is tall” to the conclusion that A has *said* that S is tall. Is *that* move legitimate? An NBA basketball coach complains of Tom Rucuit that he “is short.” Has he then *said* that Tom is short and has he thereby spoken truly? Plausibly he has, given Tom’s height of six feet, yet when a passerby in the street considers Tom “not short” he has equally plausibly *said* of Tom that he is not short, and seems also right, with equal plausibility. Contradiction. The

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move from utterance to saying remains questionable, then, even if the relevant contextual variations *are* threshold variations along a single dimension, namely head-to-heel length.

The issues of greatest interest in epistemology seem thus independent of contextualism. What helps make the contextual relevant to epistemology is the “shared desideratum” that survives shifts in context from the study to the ordinary world, giving rise to questions we may discuss with no metalinguistic detour. For example:

Does epistemic justification come in degrees, so that, even if unable ever to attain the heights demanded by skeptics, we still do attain lesser (but still considerable) levels (often enough)?

And there is still a further worry. Do the arguments of skeptics really concern only the attainment of some apex along a dimension of epistemic justification? Or do the most powerful and interesting skeptical arguments concern rather whether we can ever progress *to any distance whatever* from the nadir of justification? If the latter, then again, now in a different way, contextualist considerations may have limited relevance against the skeptic.

Our concept of knowledge involves various dimensions each admitting a threshold: (a) “belief”: how sure must one be? (b) “justification”: how much rational support is required for one’s belief? (c) “reliability”: how reliable are one’s operative sources or faculties? (d) “safety”: how easily might one have been wrong; how remote is any possible belief/fact mismatch? The new contextualism’s distinctive contributions concern mainly our threshold-setting mechanisms. This issue is illuminated by such contextualism, whose light here is not dimmed even if, as I contend, the more important questions in epistemology concern rather the identity and nature of the relevant dimensions within which the thresholds must be set.

If I here and now wonder

(a) whether people know anything about the external world,

I am not wondering

(b) whether it is ever right to say, “People know something about the external world.”

If the latter question is not irrelevant to the former, moreover, it must be in virtue of some features of “knowledge” that distinguish it from indexical or ambiguous expressions. I do not myself

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dismiss question (b) as irrelevant to question (a), although it gives me pause that the passerby's truth that "Tom is not short" does seem irrelevant to the NBA coach's question "whether Tom is short." Even if our beliefs do not attain desired levels along certain dimensions, they may attain lower levels, which may be not irrelevant to our original desire. How significant is it, however, whether or not our use of the expression 'know' in other contexts demands only lower levels for its correct attribution? To me the more interesting point is that we do at least attain those lesser levels along the same dimension(s), whether or not the expression "knows" is in other contexts correctly applicable on that basis. Most interesting of all is this question: What are the appropriate dimensions along which a belief must be assessed in determining whether it qualifies as knowledge. What are the dimensions that we care about when we want our beliefs to give us knowledge, when we want to know things?

Remarkably, none of those questions seems affected by the meta-linguistic ascent of contextualism. Suppose it is not only the threshold setting that changes as we shift contexts of attribution between the ordinary and the philosophical. Suppose shift in context brings with it also variation in whole dimensions. Whether a belief qualifies as "knowledge" in either of those contexts, the ordinary and the philosophical, would then seem irrelevant to whether it qualifies in the other, as irrelevant as is the position of an item on one dimension to where it lies on an independent dimension.

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## OBJECTION

Is the foregoing unfair to contextualists? Contextualists do not just propose thesis EC. They go on to make more detailed claims about what specific contextual factors affect the setting of the relevant threshold(s). And these further claims may give their views important relevance to epistemology, in at least two ways. First, the fuller contextualist theory may yield results as to how the vocabulary of knowledge is correctly applicable in our context of philosophical inquiry, in which case we would after all be able to descend semantically (or anyhow linguistically) for outright answers to our questions. Moreover, as epistemologists we do have some interest in the use of epistemic vocabulary even in ordinary, nonphilosophical contexts.

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### REPLY

Terminological and territorial disputes are dreary, and to be avoided if avoidable, so I do not claim that contextualism is not at all epistemology and is entirely devoid of epistemological interest. I have claimed only that its interest is "limited" in specified ways.

Moreover, I do not consider EC to be the whole content of contextualism but only a thesis "featured" by contextualism. When I air doubts about the epistemological relevance of contextualism, in fact, I target fuller forms of contextualism, and I have in mind something specifiable as follows.

Quite often contextualism is thought to show that even if we fail to know about ordinary matters in philosophical contexts, such as whether one has hands, we do often enough know those same matters in ordinary contexts. But this simply does not follow from the contextualist position, even though the advocates of contextualism speak as if it does. Why does this matter?

Consider inquiry into the nature, conditions, and extent of any of the following commodities: freedom, happiness, survival (personal identity through time), and justice. And compare inquiry into the social behavior of ants, which someone could of course conduct with no less brilliance and burning curiosity. It would be quirky, however, to care about ants' enjoying a social life. This is in contrast to our philosophical commodities, each of which we want not only to understand but also to possess.

Such "philosophical" desires are each expressible in terms also used variously as we vary contexts of use. More, we may find that when applied to ourselves in common life these terms are often correctly applied. If we could then conclude that the commodity itself is possessed ordinarily whenever the corresponding term is in ordinary life applied correctly, that would of course be relevant to our nexus of relevant concerns. Unfortunately, to draw such a conclusion would be fallacious, an instance of the contextualist fallacy.

From much discussion with undergraduates and ordinary folk, I am convinced that the term 'know' and its cognates are sometimes so used as to make it true that the medievals just "knew" that the earth was flat (a view confirmed by the OED). In some ordinary contexts if someone is very sure that *p*, that makes it true to say that they "know" that *p*. Can that be relevant to our concern to understand the nature, conditions, and extent of this philosophical commodity that we constantly pursue, sometimes at great cost: namely, knowledge? Surely not. Nor should we con-



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clude that at least in some ordinary contexts our medieval predecessors may be said to have enjoyed the knowledge that the earth is flat. That some sophomores call it “knowledge” hardly suffices to make it so, even if the attribution is correct in their context, by their definition.

That is the specific respect in which I have aired doubts about the relevance of contextualism to epistemology, relevance which I hold to be limited in ways overlooked through incautious and faulty formulations.

We have special reasons for resisting conceptual change in philosophy, reasons that do not apply generally in intellectual inquiry, as for example in scientific inquiry. Some things we care little about, as with the social behavior of ants (n.b.: the behavior itself, by contrast with knowing about it, explaining it, etc.), but others are of greater moment. And philosophy has no monopoly on desired commodities. (Recall the coach’s desire for height in his recruits.) Moreover, cases vary in respect of how much of an original desire can survive conceptual change. Increasing knowledge about whales eventually required reconceptualization and re-categorization, in the light of intellectual desiderata of simplicity and explanatory power. Such conceptual change found little resistance from any special desire for the existence of fish or for our eating fish. Any such desire was still smoothly and sufficiently catered to after the change, so that under the new dispensation enough of the old desire, or something close enough to it, could survive unscathed.

Our desires for philosophical commodities tend to be different in that respect. Occasionally it has been argued that this is not so, that we could reconceptualize and still retain all that really matters in our original concern. The most famous recent case is Parfit’s argument that what matters in survival is certain causal relations that fall short of guaranteeing survival itself. Error theorists about the evaluative and the normative might also be content to drop the relevant evaluative or normative concepts in favor of replacements less divergent from reality.

My point is simply this. If the lower thresholds of ordinary contexts are relevant to our concerns in a philosophical context wherein the threshold is set higher, this is not something that goes without saying. It has to be considered, and perhaps argued, case by case. Some cases will turn out the way it turns out for the NBA coach who wants someone “tall,” to whose concern it would be quite irrelevant that people easily surpass the threshold set by second graders. On the other hand, someone who wants happi-

ness and love in the world would presumably be led by the same nexus of concerns to prefer the absence of misery and hatred, even when his most preferred commodities are not attained. Suppose knowledge is like that: suppose that, working from the same nexus of concerns, we wish for beliefs that are at least somewhat well justified and somewhat safe and somewhat assured, and we prefer such beliefs to those that fall below them in those respects, and we prefer this even in cases where we fall short of wished-for heights of assuredness, safety, and rational justification. If so, then the fact that "knowledge" is correctly applicable in line with the lower ordinary thresholds is indeed relevant to the nexus of concerns that includes our desire for the epistemic heights. The case of knowledge is then unlike that of the NBA coach, and more like that of the advocate of love and happiness. But the relevance of the contextualist theses about the correctness of applying the "knowledge" vocabulary in ordinary contexts is then contingent on the satisfaction of the special conditions that distinguish cases relevantly, and put on one side the NBA coach and on the other the advocate of love and happiness. Just what these conditions might be is a matter that goes beyond contextualism and still seems less than clear and distinct.