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Knowledge in Context

Nikola Kompa

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Abstract My aim in this paper is to motivate and defend a version of epistemic contextualism; a version, that is, of what came to be called attributor or ascriber contextualism. I will begin by outlining, in the first part, what I take to be the basic idea of and motivation behind the version of epistemic contextualism that I favor. In the second part, a couple of examples will be presented in order to illustrate the contextualist point. Since epistemic (ascriber) contextualists commonly claim that knowledge ascriptions are context-sensitive, the third part of the paper will be concerned with the phenomenon of context-sensitivity at a more general level. A more detailed inquiry into the context-sensitivity natural language expressions exhibit will prove helpful in order to counter the objection that postulating context-sensitivity in the case of knowledge ascriptions is an *ad-hoc-maneuver*. Given that epistemic contextualism is partly an epistemological thesis, partly a linguistic thesis, the remainder of the paper will be devoted to the question of how to semantically model the kind of context-sensitivity exhibited by knowledge ascriptions. The upshot will be that there are two different ways of semantically accommodating the context-sensitivity at issue. Both call for a more or less drastic departure from epistemological and semantic orthodoxy.

KEYWORDS: Epistemic Contextualism; Nonindexical Contextualism; Indexical Contextualism; Context-sensitivity; Knowledge Ascriptions.

Riassunto *La conoscenza contestuale* – In questo lavoro intendo motivare e difendere una variante del contestualismo epistemico; una variante di cosa si è definito contestualismo delle attribuzioni o delle imputazioni. Comincerò, nella prima parte, ponendo in evidenza ciò che assumo essere l'idea di fondo e i motivi che stanno alla base della variante del contestualismo epistemico per cui propendo. Nella seconda parte saranno discussi un paio di esempi per illustrare la prospettiva contestualista. Dal momento che di solito i contestualisti epistemici (in merito alle attribuzioni) sostengono che le iscrizioni di conoscenza sono sensibili ai contesti, la terza parte di questo lavoro si occuperà in maniera più generale del fenomeno della sensibilità ai contesti. Un'indagine più dettagliata sulle espressioni del linguaggio naturale sensibili ai contesti si rivelerà utile per replicare all'obiezione secondo cui il postulato della sensibilità ai contesti nel caso delle attribuzioni di conoscenza sarebbe una *manovra ad hoc*. Poiché il contestualismo epistemico è una tesi in parte epistemologica e in parte linguistica, il resto del lavoro sarà dedicato al come modellare semanticamente il genere di sensibilità al contesto proprio delle attribuzioni di conoscenza. L'esito sarà che ci sono due diversi modi di soddisfare semanticamente la sensibilità ai contesti in discussione. In entrambi i casi è richiesta una deviazione più o meno drastica dall'ortodossia epistemologica e semantica.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Contestualismo epistemico; Contestualismo non-indessicale; Contestualismo indessicale; Sensibilità al contesto; Attribuzione di conoscenza.

N. Kompa - Institut für Philosophie - Universität Osnabrück - Albrechtstraße 28a - 49076 - Osnabrück (D) (✉)
E-mail: nikola.kompa@uni-osnabrueck.de



Epistemic contextualism

EPISTEMIC CONTEXTUALISM IS A THEORY about our epistemic practice. It is a theory about the way we ascribe knowledge to each other. It seeks to give an account of our everyday practice of ascribing knowledge; an account according to which many of the more robust ascriptions we intuitively take to be true come out true. It is, therefore, a partly epistemological, partly linguistic theory about knowledge ascriptions.¹

On the traditional model of knowledge (that can be traced back at least to Plato's *Theaitetos* and *Menon*), someone truly ascribes knowledge about *p* to a putative knower *S* if and only if *S* believes that *p*, *p* is true and *S*'s belief that *p* is justified. All three conditions on knowledge are the subject of heated debates. Yet contextualism is not so much a theory about how to spell out the different conditions on knowledge in more detail. Rather, the contextualist starting point is the observation that a given knowledge ascription may be true as uttered in one context but false as uttered in another context, due to epistemic as well as non-epistemic differences between the two contexts of ascription.

By way of explanation, the contextualist will point to a certain interest-and-purpose dependency in our practice of ascribing knowledge. Speakers seem to set the standard of knowledge differently in different contexts, depending on their respective goals, purposes, etc. The interests, goals and so on that help setting a certain standard need not exclusively be epistemic interests, though. Some of them ought to be epistemic interests, given that the standard to be determined is an epistemic standard; yet the contextualist point is exactly that other interests might play a role, too.² And a particular standard is appropriate only in view of a particular goal or purpose, only in light of certain interests and concerns. Yet different goals or purposes call for different standards. A chat in a bar imposes another epistemic standard than a hearing in a court of law. If our

goal were to avoid error at any price, it would be reasonable to set an extremely high epistemic standard. For everyday purposes, though, a lower standard might do just fine. In contexts, for example, where sceptical scenarios (such as Descartes' evil-demon scenario) are being seriously discussed, the standard for knowledge tends to be raised. We could ascribe knowledge only to those who are able to rule out that the sceptical scenarios obtain. In more ordinary contexts, on the other hand, standards for knowledge may not be quite as high. It takes less to count as someone who knows in these contexts. Yet contextualists are not committed to the view that there are exactly two standards of knowledge: high and low; for even within everyday contexts standards of knowledge tend to vary to a considerable extent. The purposes speakers pursue determine which standard they ought to apply.

Consequently, to ask whether someone has knowledge – knowledge simpliciter – is not a sensible question. Knowledge is something someone has or lacks only relative to an ascriber's point of view. It is something that we ascribe to someone for a particular purpose and in light of certain interests and concerns. It is not an intrinsic state of a person, not something he or she possesses independently of anyone ascribing knowledge. No particular set of beliefs or sense impressions (or any other evidence) will make someone a knower. Just as there is no particular set of qualities something has to possess for it to be interesting or tall or rich, so there is no particular set of qualities someone has to possess in order to know something. Nothing is interesting, tall or rich in itself. It is interesting, tall and rich only compared to something else and in a particular respect. And which class it will be compared to and in what respect it will be compared to members of that class has to be determined by and will vary with the interests, concerns, assumptions, etc. of those drawing the comparison. Similarly with knowledge; it, too, is in the eye of the beholder (or ascriber), as Crispin Wright aptly puts it.³

Moreover, knowledge will be ascribed to someone in order to mark a special epistemic status. The word “know” is a honorific term.⁴ Knowledge ascriptions are used «in a kind of epistemic gate keeping for communities with which the attributor and interlocutors are associated».⁵ We ascribe knowledge of *p* to someone in order to indicate that she is to be treated as an authority, as a potential informant, as someone to rely on when it comes to the question of whether *p* or not. Yet whether we want to rely on someone’s assertion to the effect that *p* depends on what is at stake, on what our interests, intentions, concerns, and purposes happen to be. Since these factors vary with context, whether someone ought to count as a knower by our standards varies accordingly. We call someone a knower if she answers to our epistemic needs. That is what makes knowledge ascriptions sensitive to context.

By way of summary, I suggest characterizing epistemic contextualism by its allegiance to the following two-part position:

(i) We ascribe knowledge to someone in order to indicate that she meets a certain epistemic standard. Which standard ascribers ought to employ depends on their interests, purposes, concerns, etc.; those may vary from one context to the next. An epistemic standard determines how good a putative knower’s epistemic situation has to be if he is to qualify as a knower in the context at hand.

(ii) A given knowledge ascription might be true as uttered in Context C1 but false as uttered in context C2, due to differences in the ascribers’ (standard as determined by their) interests, purposes and concerns.

The considerations adduced above were meant to motivate (i). Yet (i) is compatible with the claim that although epistemic standards may vary this does not affect the truth-value of knowledge ascriptions but only their rational assertibility.⁶ So (ii) does not follow from (i) but has to be argued for independently. In order to do so, the epistemic contextualist has to defend the claim that context (more specifically a contextually determined epistemic standard) plays a role in fixing the truth-value of knowledge as-

criptions. Knowledge ascriptions are context sensitive in that their truth-value varies with variations in the context of ascription. The remainder of the paper will be devoted to the question of whether and how that can be argued for.

It is worth noting right from the beginning, though, that epistemic contextualism is premised on the (metaphysical) assumption that there is no single, context-invariant epistemic standard that has to be met for a knowledge ascription to be true. The point is easily missed because commonly contextualists don’t seem to be concerned with metaphysics. Yet what motivates a contextualist treatment is exactly the insight into a certain interest-and-purpose-relativity of the discourse in question. It is to a certain extent up to the attributors to apply whatever epistemic standard it is that best serves their purpose; there are different yet equally legitimate standards. And if that is so, what other standard could be relevant to the truth of a given knowledge ascription than the one operative in the context of ascription (assuming, of course, that the participants in the discourse are sufficiently rational and well-informed)?⁷ Contextualists are not committed to a purely subjectivist position, though. And it does not follow that any standard is as good as any other either. As pointed out above, a standard is appropriate only given a particular goal or purpose. And the contextualist is eager to point out that there are different yet equally legitimate goals or purposes. Consequently, there may still be better and worse standards—given a particular goal or purpose. There is, therefore, room within a contextualist framework for a position that holds that while the purpose or goals pursued by the participants in a context determines which standard they ought to employ, the standard they in fact employ need not be the standard they ought to employ (even given their own purpose or goal). Let us now consider the contextualist framework in more detail. To begin with, we will look at some examples.

Examples

Examples such as Keith DeRose’s bank-case

or Stewart Cohen's airport-case are commonly adduced to illustrate the contextualist point. DeRose, for example, asks us to compare the following two cases:

Bank Case A: My wife and I are driving home on Friday afternoon. We plan to stop at the bank on the way home to deposit our paychecks. But as we drive past the bank, we notice that the lines inside are very long, as they often are on Friday afternoons. Although we generally like to deposit our paychecks as soon as possible, it is not especially important that they be deposited right away, so I suggest that we drive straight home and deposit our paychecks on Saturday morning. My wife says, "Maybe the bank won't be open tomorrow. Lots of banks are closed on Saturdays." I reply, "No, I know it'll be open. I was just there two weeks ago. It's open until noon."

Bank Case B: My wife and I drive past the bank on a Friday afternoon, as in Case A, and notice the long lines. I again suggest that we deposit our paychecks on Saturday morning, explaining that I was at the bank on Saturday morning only two weeks ago and discovered that it was open until noon. But in this case, we have just written a very large and very important check. If our paychecks are not deposited into our checking account before Monday morning, the important check we wrote will bounce, leaving us in a *very* bad situation. And, of course, the bank is not open on Sunday. My wife reminds me of these facts. She then says, "Banks do change their hours. Do you know the bank will be open tomorrow?" Remaining as confident as I was before that the bank will be open then, still, I reply, "Well, no. I'd better go in and make sure."⁸

And Cohen sketches the following scenario:

Mary and John are at the L.A. airport contemplating taking a certain flight to New York. They want to know whether the flight has a layover in Chicago. They overhear

someone ask if anyone knows whether the flight makes any stops. A passenger Smith replies, "I do. I just looked at my flight itinerary and there is a stop in Chicago". It turns out that Mary and John have a very important business contact they have to make at the Chicago airport. Mary says, "How reliable is that itinerary, anyway. It could contain a misprint. They could have changed the schedule since it was printed, etc". Mary and John agree that Smith doesn't really know that the plane will stop in Chicago on the basis of the itinerary. They decide to check with the airline agent.⁹

In both examples a speaker self-ascribes knowledge so that the putative knower's context and the ascriber's context merge. Consider, therefore, the following slightly modified version of an example taken from David Annis:

Case A: Susan, Tom and Ann are sitting in a coffee shop and talking about medical issues, bragging about their lay medical knowledge. Tom informs them that Polio is caused by a virus. Asked how he knows, he answers that he read it in an apothecary leaflet. Given the circumstances, Susan says: "Tom knows that Polio is caused by a virus."

Case B: Now suppose that the context is an examination for the M.D. degree. Tom answers as before. The examiner, call him John, expects a lot more of Tom and so concludes: "Tom does not know that polio is caused by a virus." – irrespective of the fact that Tom's evidential situation, his respective beliefs, reasons, etc., are exactly as before.¹⁰

The contextualist takes these and similar examples to show that contextual factors such as the ascribers' interests, concerns, purposes, and background assumptions help setting a certain standard of knowledge, the standard someone has to live up to in order to reasonably count as a knower (with respect to *p*) in the context at hand. The higher the standard, the better the putative knower's reasons or grounds

for believing (that *p*) have to be. Note that in the three cases above both ascriptions are about the same person and the same proposition. Yet the context relevant to fixing the knowledge ascription's truth-value is the ascriber's contexts, not the putative knower's context¹¹ (as subject-sensitive invariantism would have it). What has changed from the first ascription to the second in each case is not the situation depicted but the ascriber's take on the situation, due to changes in his/her standards, interests, concerns, or purposes. Consequently, a given knowledge ascription may be true as uttered in one context while the corresponding knowledge denial may be true as uttered in another context. That is explained by pointing out epistemic as well as non-epistemic differences between the two contexts of ascription: differences in what is at stake, in the purpose or point of the conversation, the participants' concerns, etc. As a result, contexts of utterance cannot be construed simply as locations at which utterances happen to take place. Rather, contexts have to be seen as providing information about who is speaking and to whom he is speaking but also about the participants' interest (epistemic as well as non-epistemic) and concerns, the purposes or point of the conversation etc. (for more on the notion of context in play, see below).

The examples, therefore, seem to show that knowledge ascriptions exhibit a form of context-sensitivity. Whether we correctly ascribe knowledge to someone or not is sensitive to contextual factors as there are cases in which speakers with certain interests, purposes and intentions can truly assert that person *X* knows that *p* (given that *p* is also the case), while other speakers with different interests, purposes and intentions can truly assert that *X* doesn't know that *p*. Moreover, speakers seem to be aware of varying contextual requirements governing the use of the word "know". If they weren't, the contextualist stories couldn't be told in the first place. That they can be felicitously told is evidence that speakers (implicitly at least) acknowledge different epistemic standards—relative to different goals or concerns.

Nonetheless, the context-sensitivity at issue is of a subtle kind. Presumably, the word "know" is to be held accountable for the context-sensitivity of knowledge ascriptions. Yet even competent speakers are commonly ignorant of the semantic facts postulated.¹² While they can easily be made to see the context-sensitivity of indexical expression (genuine indexical expressions being "I", "here" and "now"), for example, they fail to see any alleged context-sensitivity of the word "know". At least they fail to acknowledge any indexical-like context-sensitivity in the case of "know" as is evidenced by the fact that they tend to homophonically report on knowledge ascriptions. Compare the following two cases:

Case A: Susan: "Tom knows that the opera starts at eight". Fred who did not listen asks: "What did Susan say?" Mary reports: "Susan said that Tom knows that the opera starts at eight."

Case B: Susan: "I am hungry." Fred: "What did Susan say?" *Mary reports: "Susan said that I am hungry."

As the infelicity of the last line of the second dialogue indicates, in reporting on indexical utterances one has to accommodate the context-sensitivity of the indexical expression ("I", in the case of Mary report on Susan's utterance) and adjust one's report accordingly. Yet nothing like that seems to be required in reporting on a knowledge ascription. A speaker who reports on a knowledge ascription will commonly not have the impression that something context-sensitive (about a contextually given epistemic standard or a particular knowledge relation) has been said.

Moreover, if knowledge ascriptions were context-sensitive, speaker *A* who by employing demanding standards would deny that *S* knows that *P* and speaker *B* who by employing relaxed standards would claim that *S* knows that *P* would not really be in disagreement with each other; at least they could both be right.¹³

What is needed is an account that allows us to accommodate somewhat conflicting data:

(i) on the one hand we observe that our practice of ascribing knowledge and our use of the word “know” seems to be governed by contextually varying epistemic standards, (ii) on the other hand we observe that even competent speakers don’t seem to be aware of any indexical-like context-sensitivity of the word “know”. Consequently, much turns on how the alleged context-sensitivity of knowledge-ascriptions can be further spelled out. It has to be of a subtle, unobvious kind.

But now it might seem fairly ad hoc to postulate any such subtle, non-indexical, context-sensitivity of the word “know”. A closer look at the ways in which natural language expression can be sensitive to context and at other cases of context-sensitivity will show that most (if not all) natural language expression exhibit one version of context-sensitivity or another. So by way of reply to the objection that postulating context-sensitivity in the case of knowledge ascriptions is entirely ad hoc I will point out that natural language expressions are context-sensitive in all kinds of ways, and subtly so. I will come back to the case of knowledge ascriptions.

Context-sensitivity

Unfortunately, different things go by the name “context-sensitivity”. A fairly uncontroversial example is provided by indexical expressions like “I”, “here” or “now”, and demonstratives like “this” or “that”. Pia’s use of the word “I” has Pia and only her in its extension, while Jon’s use of the very same word has Jon and only him in its extension.¹⁴ As a consequence, the sentence “I am hungry” may be true as uttered by Pia (at t) but false as uttered by Jon (at t). Similarly, Pia’s utterance of “This is an ’82 Chateau Margaux.” may be true while Jon’s utterance of the very same sentence may well be false. That much is uncontroversial. Yet Contextualists are notorious for claiming there to be much more context-sensitivity than has traditionally been acknowledged.

To begin with, note that context has to be appealed to at every stage in linguistic interpretation. Even in order to phonetically recognize

what has been said in a given utterance appeal has to be made to context because

in normal speech it is physically impossible to hear each segment: speech is just too fast. Twenty segments a second is not unlikely, but the brain cannot distinguish even half that number of separate sounds at a time.¹⁵

Word recognition is to large extent guesswork. Speakers when trying to phonetically figure out what has been said will avail themselves of whatever contextual clue they can lay their hands on. But that is just the beginning. There is also:

- ▶ Indexicality
- ▶ Demonstrative reference
- ▶ Anaphoric reference
- ▶ Definite and indefinite descriptions
- ▶ Non-sentential expressions and ellipsis
- ▶ Subtle forms of incompleteness
- ▶ Metonymy
- ▶ Homonymy
- ▶ Metaphor
- ▶ Polysemy

The list is hardly exhaustive. Yet I will leave it at that and briefly comment only on the less known phenomena on the list. So besides much-discussed cases of overt context-sensitivity such as *indexicality*, *demonstrative* and *anaphoric reference*, and *definite as well as indefinite descriptions*, there are different forms of (syntactic, semantic, maybe even pragmatic) incompleteness.¹⁶ Often, we use *non-sentential* and *elliptic assertions*.¹⁷ But we also encounter subtler forms of *incompleteness*:

- (a) Steel isn’t strong enough¹⁸
- (b) Mending this fault will take time¹⁹
- (c) Jill can’t continue.²⁰
- (d) John is tall²¹
- (e) He bought John’s book²²

All these sentences can be used to say (or communicate) different things relative to different contexts of utterance. They ask for dif-

ferent contextual completions. Sentence c, for example, can be used to say that Jill can't continue school, or that she can't continue dance classes, or university education, and so on. And John can be said to be tall for a fifth grader, or for an NBA player, etc. Also, someone who asserts sentence f may talk about the book John wrote, or the one he just bought, or the one he edited, or the one he is working on, or the one that came to be called "John's book" for whatever other reason. (That is not to deny, though, that some of the sentences have preferred or default completions.)

Another very common form of context-sensitivity is *metonymy*. We often use a term to refer not to its literal referent but to something that is saliently related to the literal referent.²³

Next, there is abundant *ambiguity* in natural languages. It comes in two varieties: as *lexical* and as *syntactic ambiguity*, the most widely discussed instances of the later being scope ambiguities as in "Everyone loves someone".

Within lexical ambiguity one may further distinguish between *homonymy* and *polysemy*. Homonymous expressions lack an encompassing reading; they

strongly resist any kind of unification. Take the case of bank. It is hard to think of the different sorts of bank as parts of a whole, or as united into a global Gestalt. We might think of a very general category to which they both belong, such as "entity", or even "location", but this is not good enough, because it does not distinguish banks from non-banks.²⁴

Homonymous expressions enjoy only finitely many, discrete, and natural readings; as opposed to stipulated precisifications. The word "fast" can mean "faster than 20 mph", but that is not a natural reading of "fast".²⁵

Polysemy, on the other hand, issues often, though not always, from lexicalizing a *metaphorical* use of a word. On encountering a new abstract or mental phenomenon, we commonly tend to conceptualize it by using familiar vocabulary on pain of having to unduly stretched

the "old meaning" in order that the word becomes applicable to the new situation (think of the political landscape or the virus contaminating your computer).²⁶ In so doing, we often borrow expressions from the concrete realm of sense experience: We are feeling *blue*, or complain about her being *cold*, *hard* or *thin-skinned*. Consequently, metaphor is a driving force behind language change, resulting, occasionally, in polysemy. Compare the following:

- (a) The janitor goes from the top to the bottom of the building.
- (b) The staircase goes from the top to the bottom of the building.
- (c) The river Ganges goes from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean.
- (d) The power of prayer goes round the world.²⁷

But one might also invoke a broader notion of polysemy according to which polysemy

is understood [...] in a broad sense as variation in the construal of a word on different occasions of use.²⁸

If understood that way, polysemy becomes even more pervasive and seems to affect (almost) all natural language expressions. The verb "walk" for example, can be used to describe a toddler's first steps, a dancer's elegant pace or an old man's cautious moves. What counts as walking depends on context; many different things might thus count.²⁹ There are as many different uses to which we may put the words of our language, as there are purposes we might pursue and interests we might have. Consequently, context-sensitivity is ubiquitous. We interpret peoples' utterances against the background of a shared system of knowledge, and in light of common purposes and concerns.³⁰

Whether something can truly be said to be circular, hexagonal or flat, for example, depends on how much laxity is permissible. Given such and such contextual requirements, only something close to being perfectly circular can be truly described as such. Given other re-

quirements, anything of roughly circular form will do. Also, whether something can be said to be interesting, helpful, good, new, exciting, legitimate, reliable, worthwhile, evident, etc. depends on the participants' standards, purposes, background assumptions, and so on and so forth. And the point generalizes even further as whether something can be said to be green, or round, or a game of baseball (or what have you) depends on the participants' interests, intentions, etc. as well. Here is an example taken from Anne Bezuidenhout:

My son comes into the kitchen from the backyard and when I ask him what he has been doing he replies: "I've been playing baseball". Is what he says true? Well, the game he was playing resembles standard league baseball games only rather remotely. There certainly is no baseball diamond in our backyard. In the game my son plays with his father and our dog in our backyard, the bases are marked by three trees that stand in a very rough diamond shape with respect to "home base", which is itself a rather poorly defined place somewhere at the fourth point of the rough diamond. The game is played only with a pitcher and a batter. When the batter makes it to the base, he leaves an "invisible man" on base and returns to bat. The dog plays in the outfield. Sometimes he returns the ball to the batter and sometimes he chases the runner round the base with the ball in his mouth, but not in any predictable way. Yet this joint activity counts as playing baseball, as playing baseball is understood in this context. So if my son was in fact playing baseball on this understanding, then what my son says is true.³¹

We call someone an F or something G in the light of certain interests and goals, to a particular purpose, and against the background of certain assumptions. And when we interpret these utterances and assess them as true or false, then we interpret and assess them in the light of these interests, purposes, and assumptions. Yet all these factors vary with context.

Different forms of context-sensitivity may be traced back to different sources, though. And one need not treat all subtle forms of context-sensitivity as cases of polysemy in the broad sense. To see that, let us come back to the case of indexical expressions ("I", "here", "now") for a moment. What does the context-sensitivity of indexical expressions consist in? According to a venerable characterization due to Arthur Burks:

[...] the meaning of a token of a non-indexical symbol is always the same as the meaning of the type to which it belongs. The case is different with an indexical symbol, however, for the spatiotemporal location of a given token of such a symbol is relevant to the meaning of that token: "now" means two different things when it is uttered on two different days. Since the meaning of the type to which any symbol belongs (whether indexical or non-indexical) is always the same, it follows that the meaning of a token of an indexical symbol is different from the meaning of the type to which it belongs.³²

In more contemporary jargon, the point may be put thus: A sentence (type) is context-sensitive if and only if different token of it can have different truth-values, owing to difference in the respective contexts of utterance. More generally, an expression type is context-sensitive if and only if different token of it can have different extensions (a declarative sentence's extension being its truth-value).

■ Indexical vs. nonindexical contextualism

Still, there are two places at which context-sensitivity might enter the picture. According to a view famously held by David Kaplan,³³ the overall import of a linguistic expression breaks down into two components: the expression's character and its content. Both can be construed as functions, the character of an expression being a function from the context of utterance into the expression's content, the content being a function from possible circumstances of evaluation into the extension of the expression

(the truth value, in the case of sentences) in the respective circumstances. The character determines content as a function of context. The content in turn determines truth-value as a function of circumstances of evaluation. What is a context, and what are circumstances of evaluation?

From this point of view, context is a package of whatever parameters are needed to determine referent, and thus content, of the directly referential expressions of the language.³⁴

A circumstance will usually include a possible state or history of the world, a time, and perhaps other features as well. The amount of information we require from a circumstance is linked to the degree of specificity of contents, and thus to the kinds of operators in the language.³⁵

David Lewis distinguishes in a similar vein between a context and an index, thereby emphasizing the two roles context has to play.³⁶ It has to supply the denotations to indexical and other obviously content-sensitive terms in a sentence, thereby helping to determine the utterance's content (what has been said, or the proposition expressed— I am using these two phrases synonymously here). Yet it also has to provide a list of features (an index, in Lewis' terminology) on which the truth of the whole utterance may depend, thereby helping to determine the utterance's truth-value. Much ink has been spilled on the question of which features may be relevant to truth (and it is a hotly contested issue in contemporary philosophy of language). Lewis himself was well aware of the problem:

I emphasized that the dependences of truth on context was surprisingly multifarious. It would be no easy matter to devise a list of all the features of context that are sometimes relevant to truth in English. In [General Semantics, N.K.] I gave a list that was long for its days, but not nearly long enough.³⁷

So context may affect truth-value in various ways. Now recall the characterization of con-

text-sensitivity given above, according to which a sentence is context-sensitive if and only if different tokens of it may differ in truth-value, owing to differences in the respective contexts of utterance. Given the Kaplanian/Lewisian framework, context can affect truth-value (extension) either directly by affecting which content has been expressed or indirectly by providing circumstances of evaluation with features on which the utterance's truth-value may depend. In the indexical case, context directly affects content. If Pia were to say: "I am hungry", she would, presumable, have expressed something like the following content: that Pia is hungry (at t). In other cases of context-sensitivity, it is less clear whether context directly affects content. A much-discussed case is the case of taste predicates. Consider the following dialogue (if that is what it is):

Jon: "Licorice is tasty."

Pia: "Licorice is not tasty at all."

Pia and Jon may both say something true, it seems. But at least on the linguistic surface, Pia contradicts what Jon says. Enter: Context-sensitivity. They can both say something true because the sentence used is context-sensitive. But does context affect content? Does Jon, for example, express the proposition *that Licorice is tasty to him*, or *that it is pleasing to his taste* or any such proposition in which explicit reference is made to the speaker?

Or does he rather express the proposition *that Licorice is tasty*, yet that proposition in turn has to be evaluated relative to circumstances of evaluation comprising – among other features – also his taste? Both options are available to the contextualist. Context-sensitivity could enter the picture at two different levels; either via context directly or via circumstances of evaluation/index. Which option the contextualist chooses determines whether she is (what came to be called) an Indexical or a Nonindexical Contextualist.³⁸ One may be an Indexical Contextualist concerning one type of expressions (predicates of personal taste, for example) and a Nonindexical Contextualist

concerning another type of expressions (predicates of moral evaluation, for example).

But let us finally come back to the case of knowledge ascriptions. The Indexical and the Nonindexical Contextualist with respect to knowledge ascriptions will agree that all factors needed to fix the truth-value of a knowledge ascription are supplied by the context of utterance. They differ in their underlying conception of content or proposition expressed, though. According to the Indexicalist context supplies a certain epistemic standard that somehow becomes part of the proposition expressed in a knowledge ascription. He favors an 'opulent' conception of content. A speaker, call him John, who says something like "Tom knows that the opera starts at eight" will thereby express the content that Tom knows that the opera starts at eight relative to a certain epistemic standard or that Tom knows_{S_{John}} that the opera starts at eight, where *know_{John}* is a particular concept of knowledge denoted by John's use of the word "know". Another speaker, by uttering exactly the same sentence (and talking about the same person, Tom and the same time, t) will express a different content. He will express something to the effect that Tom knows relative to his (the speaker's) epistemic standard or falls under his favored concept of knowledge. The Indexical Contextualist emphasizes that there is much more and also subtler context-sensitivity at the level of content than one might have thought. People express different contents by means of the same sentence.

The Nonindexicalist has a different take on the matter. According to the Nonindexicalist, context does not affect the proposition expressed (or only to the extent that the knowledge ascription contains obviously indexical expressions). She favors a "slender" conception of content. The proposition expressed by a knowledge ascription, for example, does not contain an epistemic standard or any such thing. For when a speaker makes a knowledge claim of the form "X knows that p", he will not have the impression of having said something about epistemic standards. And that is because he did not say anything about epistemic stand-

ards. Yet the proposition is true or false only relative to circumstances of evaluation that comprises not just the world and time of context (as on the traditional Kaplanian model) but also an epistemic standard, and maybe a standard of taste and a moral standard as well. There are more parameters relative to which a given proposition has to be evaluated as true or false than one might have thought. Consequently, Nonindexical Contextualists emphasize that there is more context-sensitivity at the level of evaluation than one might have thought.

Both accounts face serious objections; their various merits and drawbacks are subject of heated debates.³⁹ As mentioned before, Indexical Contextualism makes speakers "semantically blind".⁴⁰ Even competent speaker are commonly not aware of having used a context-sensitive term (the word "know") in making a knowledge ascription. Also, according to Indexical Contextualists disagreement between two speakers as to whether a third person knows something comes out as merely verbal disagreement, for the one does not deny what the other one asserts as they express different contents by means of the word "know". Whether Nonindexical Contextualism is better suited to account for disagreement is a very controversial issue, though.⁴¹ Moreover, the Nonindexical Contextualist is committed to a relativized notion of propositional truth: propositions are not true or false *simpliciter* but only as evaluated relative to circumstances of evaluation. That is not to everyone's liking as it calls for a drastic departure from semantic and truth-theoretic orthodoxy.⁴²

Ought one to be an Indexical or rather a Nonindexical Contextualist concerning the case of knowledge ascriptions then? That depends. Both accounts seem to be able to accommodate certain cases. So instead of trying to adjudicate between the two positions let's consider which account successfully handles what cases. Those cases in which the fact that one speaker says something true by making a particular knowledge ascriptions while another speaker also says something true by making the corresponding knowledge denial is best explained on

the assumption that both speakers employ different concepts of knowledge (and so express different things by means of the word “know”) are aptly modeled by an indexicalist semantics.

In most cases discussed in the contextualist literature such as the examples given at the beginning, however, this is usually not the issue. (To the extent to which the examples given at the beginning are representative, this gives one a reason to favor Nonindexical Contextualism over Indexical Contextualism.) Speakers might agree on the meaning of the word “know” and still make different ascriptions. In these cases, therefore, ascribers seem to employ different standards; standards, that is, for how much it takes to qualify as a knower in the context in question. Consequently, these cases are best modeled along Nonindexicalist lines. So whether one favors Indexical or Nonindexical Epistemic Contextualism depends on whether one construes cases in which speakers make different knowledge ascriptions (to a particular person) as being grounded in differences in their meaning of the word “know” or in differences in the epistemic standard employed. Both cases may occur. Therefore instead of seeing both semantic models as competing with one another one might more aptly see them as complementing each other.

Summary

I take the account sketched here to be a plea for epistemic pluralism and epistemic modesty much in the spirit of Sandkühler’s *Kritik der Repräsentation*.⁴³ Epistemic Contextualism is a theory about how epistemic practice is affected by our interests and concerns; and about how those concerns may be subject to contextual variation. It is pluralist in that it denies that there is a single, absolute epistemic standard someone has to meet in order to qualify as a knower. Rather, we ascribe or deny knowledge to someone in light of our interests, concerns, assumptions, and to a particular purpose. Knowledge is something we possess or fail to possess only relative to an ascriber’s context. Knowledge ascriptions are context-sensitive.

And the point generalizes as context-

sensitivity is a ubiquitous phenomenon of natural language. It affects knowledge ascriptions but many other expressions, too. Firstly, there is much more context-sensitivity at the level of content than has traditionally been acknowledged. Often, we use expressions in subtly different ways; we may express different things when we use words such as “knowledge” or “justice” or “truth”. In these cases, we express different propositions by means of these words. Not all context-sensitivity has to take the form of indexicality; though. Most context-sensitivity is of a more subtle kind.⁴⁴

But secondly, there is also much more context-sensitivity at the level of evaluation than has traditionally been acknowledged. We have to figure out what a speaker has said in an utterance; but we also have to evaluate it as true or false. There is a difference between what it takes, say, to be rich and how much it takes to be rich. Much of what we say isn’t true or false as it stands but stands to be evaluated as true or false in light of our interests, concerns, and to a particular purpose. The table, for example, may reasonably count as being flat in light of certain interests and goals but not in light of others. And Mary may be rich enough for some purposes but not for others. The sentences “The table is flat” or “Mary is rich” may be true as uttered in some contexts but not in others.⁴⁵ And speakers may differ over the question which epistemic, moral, aesthetic standard or which standard of wealth etc. to apply. John might be in a good enough epistemic position for present purposes, but not for others.

Contextualists are united in emphasizing the vast context-sensitivity of natural language. It is, they insist, an expedient we could not do without. It allows us to use a finite vocabulary to converse about an in principle infinite array of situations. That is a case of what Jon Barwise and John Perry call the efficiency of language.⁴⁶ Our expressions can be made to fit all the various situations we encounter and all the different interests and concerns we might have almost perfectly. They can be adjusted, modulated, if need be; and need there is. Fortunately, language answers to our needs.⁴⁷

Notes

¹ Some philosophers claim that it is mainly (or even exclusively) a semantic theory; for a more detailed discussion see P. RYSIEW, *Epistemic Contextualism*, in: E. ZALTA (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 edition) URL <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/contextualism-epistemology/>

² See J. STANLEY, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005.

³ See C. WRIGHT, *Contextualism and Scepticism: Even-Handedness, Factivity and Surreptitiously Raising Standards*, in: «The Philosophical Quarterly», vol. LV, n. 219, 2005, pp. 236-262, here p. 237.

⁴ See M. WILLIAMS, *Problems of Knowledge*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001, p. 11.

⁵ D. HENDERSON, *Motivated Contextualism*, in: «Philosophical Studies», vol. CXLII, n. 1, 2009, pp. 119-131, here pp. 119-220.

⁶ See K. DEROSE, *Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense*, in: J. GRECO, E. SOSA (eds.), *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, Blackwell, Oxford 1999, pp. 187-205.

⁷ Nonetheless, as DeRose rightly points out: «What is vital to see here is that there is nothing in contextualism to prevent a speaker's context from selecting epistemic standards appropriate to the subject's practical situation, even when the subject being discussed is no party to the speaker's conversation – which is good because speakers often do select such standards when their conversational purpose call for it» (K. DEROSE, *The Ordinary Language Basis for Contextualism and the New Invariantism*, in: «The Philosophical Quarterly», vol. LV, n. 219, 2005, pp. 172-198, here p. 189).

⁸ K. DEROSE, *Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions*, in: «Philosophy and Phenomenological Research», vol. LII, n. 4, 1992, pp. 913-929, here p. 913; see also J. STANLEY, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, cit., pp. 3-5.

⁹ S. COHEN, *Contextualism and Scepticism*, in: «Philosophical Issues», vol. X, n. 1, 2000, pp. 94-107, here p. 95.

¹⁰ See D.B. ANNIS, *A Contextualist Theory of Epistemic Justification*, in: «American Philosophical Quarterly», vol. XV, n. 3, 1978, pp. 213-219, here p. 215.

¹¹ See, e.g., J. FANTL, M. MCGRATH, *Evidence, Pragmatics, and Justification*, in: «The Philosophical Review», vol. CXI, n. 1, 2002, pp. 67-94; J. HAWTHORN, *Knowledge and Lotteries*, Oxford

University Press, 2004; J. STANLEY, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, cit.

¹² See S. SCHIFFER, *Contextualist Solutions to Scepticism*, in: «Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society», vol. XCVI, 1996, pp. 317-333; W.A. DAVIS, *Are Knowledge Claims Indexical?*, in: «Erkenntnis», vol. LXI, n. 2-3, 2004, pp. 257-281; W.A. DAVIS, *Contextualist Theories of Knowledge*, in: «Acta Analytica», vol. XX, n. 1, 2005, pp. 29-42; W.A. DAVIS, *Knowledge Claims and Context: Loose Use*, in: «Philosophical Studies», vol. CXXXII, n. 3, 2007, pp. 395-438; J. MACFARLANE, *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and its Applications* (forthcoming).

¹³ That is the problem of (lost) disagreement that has been the subject of much debate recently. See, e.g., M. KÖLBEL, *Faultless Disagreement*, in: «Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society», vol. CIV, 2003, pp. 53-73; P. LASERSON, *Context Dependence, Disagreement, and Predicates of Personal Taste*, in: «Linguistics and Philosophy», vol. XXVIII, 2005, pp. 643-686; I. STOJANOVIC, *Talking About Taste: Disagreement, Implicit Arguments, and Relative Truth*, in: «Linguistics and Philosophy», vol. XXX, 2007, pp. 691-706; J. MACFARLANE, *Relativism and Disagreement*, in: «Philosophical Studies», vol. CXXXII, n. 1, 2007, pp. 17-31; J. MACFARLANE, *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truths and Applications*, cit.

¹⁴ For a qualification see G. NUNBERG, *Indexicality and Deixis*, in: «Linguistics and Philosophy», vol. XVI, n. 1, 1993, pp. 1-43.

¹⁵ J. AITCHISON, *Words in the Mind: An Introduction to Mental Lexicon*, Blackwell, Oxford 2003, p. 227.

¹⁶ For a more detailed exposition see N. KOMPA, *Contextualism in the Philosophy of Language*, in: K. PETRUS (ed.), *Meaning and Analysis: New Essays on H. P. Grice*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2010, pp. 288-309.

¹⁷ See, e.g., R.J. STANTON, *What assertion is Not*, in: «Philosophical Studies», vol. LXXXV, n. 85, n. 1, 1997, pp. 57-73.

¹⁸ See K. BACH, *Semantic Slack*, in: S.L. TSOHATZIDIS (ed.), *Foundations of Speech Act Theory: Philosophical and Linguistic Perspectives*, Routledge, London-New York 1994, pp. 267-291, here p. 268.

¹⁹ See R. CARSTON, *Thoughts and Utterances: The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication*, Blackwell, Oxford 2002, p. 26.

²⁰ See E. BORG, *Minimal Semantics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, p. 228.

- ²¹ See J. STANLEY, *Semantics in Context*, in: G. PREYER, G. PETER (eds.), *Contextualism in Philosophy: Knowledge, Meaning, and Truth*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005, pp. 221-253, here 223-224.
- ²² See F. RECANATI, *The Pragmatics of what is said*, in: «Mind and Language», vol. IV, n. 4, 1989, pp. 295-329.
- ²³ For discussion and some examples see, e.g., F. RECANATI, *Literal Meaning*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 26; E. BORG, *Minimal Semantic*, cit., p. 175; G. NUNBERG, *Indexicality and Deixis*, cit., p. 26.
- ²⁴ W. CROFT, A.D. CRUSE, *Cognitive Linguistics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 115.
- ²⁵ See M. PINKAL, *Logik und Lexikon – eine Semantik des Unbestimmten*, W. De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1985.
- ²⁶ See, e.g., R. KELLER, I. KIRSCHBAUM, *Bedeutungswandel: Eine Einführung*, W. De Gruyter, Berlin 2003; J. AITCHISON, *Words in the Mind: An Introduction to Mental Lexicon*, cit.
- ²⁷ J. AITCHISON, *Words in the Mind: An Introduction to Mental Lexicon*, cit., p. 59.
- ²⁸ W. CROFT, A.D. CRUSE, *Cognitive Linguistics*, cit., p. 109.
- ²⁹ See J.M. MORAVCSIK, *Meaning, Creativity, and the Partial Inscrutability of the Human Mind*, CSLI Publications, Stanford 1998, pp. 35-36.
- ³⁰ See J. SEARLE, *Background of Meaning*, in: J. SEARLE, F. KIEFER, M. BIERWISCH (eds.), *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics*, Reidel, Dordrecht 1980, pp. 221-232, here pp. 226-227.
- ³¹ A. BEZUIDENHOUT, *Truth-Conditional Pragmatics*, in: «Philosophical Perspectives», vol. XVI, 2002, pp. 105-134, here p. 106. See also, e.g., C. TRAVIS, *On What is Strictly Speaking True*, in: «Canadian Journal of Philosophy», vol. XV, n. 2, 1985, pp. 187-229; C. TRAVIS, *Meaning's Role in Truth*, in: «Mind», vol. CV, n. 419, 1996, pp. 451-466; C. TRAVIS, *Pragmatics*, in: B. HALE, C. WRIGHT (eds.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language*, Blackwell, Oxford 1997, pp. 87-107. This example is loosely inspired by J.M. MORAVCSIK, *Meaning, Creativity, and the Partial Inscrutability of the Human Mind*, cit.
- ³² A.W. BURKS, *Icon, Index, and Symbol*, in: «Philosophy and Phenomenological Research», vol. IX, n. 4, 1949, pp. 673-689, here p. 681.
- ³³ See D. KAPLAN, *Demonstratives. An Essay on the Semantics, Logic, Metaphysics, and Epistemology of Demonstratives and Other Indexicals*, in: J. ALMOG, J. PERRY, H. WETTSTEIN (eds.), *Themes from Kaplan*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1989, pp. 481-563.
- ³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 591.
- ³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 502.
- ³⁶ See D. LEWIS, *Index, Context, and Content* (1980), in: D. LEWIS, *Papers in Philosophical Logic*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, pp. 21-44. He defines the two-place relation of a sentence's being true at a context as follows: «Let us say that sentence \underline{s} is true at context \underline{c} iff \underline{s} is true at \underline{c} at the index of the context \underline{c} » (*ivi*, p. 31).
- ³⁷ *Ivi*, p. 30.
- ³⁸ See J. MACFARLANE, *The Assessment Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions*, in: T. SZABO GENDLER, J. HAWTHORNE (eds.), *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005, pp. 197-233; J. MACFARLANE, *Relativism and Disagreement*, cit.; J. MACFARLANE, *Nonindexical Contextualism*, in: «Synthese», vol. CLXVI, n. 2, 2009, pp. 231-250; N. KOMPA, *Nonindexical Contextualism – an Explication and Defence*, in: S. TOLKSDORF (ed.), *Conceptions of Knowledge*, de Gruyter, Berlin-New York 2012, pp. 329-349 2012. Richard distinguishes in a similar vein between expressive relativism and truth relativism (M. RICHARD, *When Truth Gives Out*, cit.). Kölbel speaks of indexical relativism and genuine relativism (M. KÖLBEL, *Faultless Disagreement*, cit.). See also M. KÖLBEL, *Introduction: Motivations for Relativism*, in: M. GARCÍA-CARPINTERO, M. KÖLBEL (eds.), *Relative Truth*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, pp. 1-38; F. RECANATI, *Moderate Relativism*, in: M. GARCÍA-CARPINTERO, M. KÖLBEL (eds.), *Relative Truth*, cit., pp. 41-62.
- ³⁹ See, e.g., K. DEROSE, *Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense*, cit.; J. STANLEY, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, cit.; J. MACFARLANE, *The Assessment Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions*, cit.; J. MACFARLANE, *Nonindexical Contextualism*, cit.; J. MACFARLANE, *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and its Applications*, cit.; N. KOMPA, *Nonindexical Contextualism – an Explication and Defence*, cit.
- ⁴⁰ See S. SCHIFFER, *Contextualist Solutions to Scepticism*, cit.; W.A. DAVIS, *Are Knowledge Claims Indexical?*, cit.; W.A. DAVIS, *Contextualist Theories of Knowledge*, cit.; W.A. DAVIS, *Knowledge Claims and Context: Loose Use*, cit.
- ⁴¹ See, e.g., M. KÖLBEL, *Faultless Disagreement*, cit.; J. MACFARLANE, *Relativism and Disagreement*, cit.
- ⁴² for a more detailed defense of *Nonindexical Contextualism* see N. KOMPA, *Nonindexical Con-*

textualism – an Explication and Defence, cit.

⁴³ See H.-J. SANDKÜHLER, *Kritik der Repräsentation. Einführung in die Theorie der Überzeugungen, der Wissenskulturen und des Wissens*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 2009.

⁴⁴ See, e.g. W. CROFT, A.D. CRUSE, *Cognitive Linguistics*, cit.

⁴⁵ We may, for example, dispute or negotiate whether someone ought to count as rich in the context at hand. Moreover, as Mark Richard points out: «My statement, that Mary is rich, is as much an invitation to look at things in a certain way, as it is a representation of how things are» (M. RICHARD, *Contextualism and Relativism*, in: «Philosophical Studies», vol. CXIX, n. 1-2, 2004, pp. 215-242, here p. 226; see also M. RICHARD, *When Truth Gives Out*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, pp. 99-103). The speaker suggests to his audience that being rich be so understood that Mary might reasonably thus count in their

shared context. Those party to the conversation may either go along – that would be a case of what David Lewis called accommodation (see D. LEWIS, *Scorekeeping in a Language Game*, in: «Journal of Philosophical Logic», vol. VIII, n. 3, 1979, pp. 339-359) or they may differ. Often, we say what we say not in order to describe the world as being a particular way but in order to say something that will successfully guide our actions in light of the goals we pursue.

⁴⁶ J. BARWISE, J. PERRY, *Situations and Attitudes*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1983, p. 5; see also N. GOODMAN, *Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, Hackett, Indianapolis 1976, p. 80; J.L. COHEN, *A Problem About Ambiguity in Truth-Theoretical Semantics*, in: «Analysis», vol. XLV, n. 3, 1995, pp. 129-134, here p. 132.

⁴⁷ I am very grateful to two anonymous readers for the journal who have given the paper a very careful reading; their suggestions did much to improve it.