Contextualism in Epistemology

ROBIN MCKENNA

1. *Contextualism in Context*

It is often said that 'it depends on the context'. In its broadest sense, contextualism in epistemology is the view that epistemic matters - whether John knows, whether Sarah's belief is justified - depend on the context. A diverse range of philosophers have defended contextualism in this broader sense: David Bloor (1991), Michel Foucault (1972), Thomas Kuhn (1970), Helen Longino (2002), Richard Rorty (1981), Ludwig Wittgenstein (1969), among others. This paper is concerned with contextualism in a narrower sense, which I'll usually just refer to as 'contextualism'. Defenders of contextualism include Stewart Cohen (1988, 1999), Keith DeRose (1995, 2009), David Lewis (1979, 1996) and Gail Stine (1976). Roughly, it is the view that the truth-conditions of sentences of the form 'S knows that *p*' or 'S is justified in believing *p*' (where S is some subject and *p* some proposition) depend on features of the conversational context in which they are uttered, such as which error-possibilities are salient, or how much is at stake.[1]

I have three aims. First, to explain what contextualism is (§1). Second, to outline the main arguments for contextualism (§2). Third, to outline the main objections (§3). I finish with avenues for future research (§4). In the rest of this section I discuss the broader relevance and origins of contextualism. We can start with three important features of the view.

First, it is primarily concerned with knowledge (or justification) *ascriptions*, i.e. with utterances of sentences like 'John knows that he has hands'.[2] Thus, it contrasts with views primarily concerned with *properties* such as knowledge or justification (for instance, Annis 1978 and Williams 1991). For instance, Longino defends 'critical contextual empiricism', on which some content A which is accepted by a community C is knowledge for C just in case A accurately represents its intended object, is supported by the data available to C and has survived critical

---

[1] While contextualists disagree about what the features are (see Blome-Tillmann 2014, Cohen 1999, DeRose 2009, Ichikawa 2011, Lewis 1996, Neta 2002 and Schaffer 2004), I set these disputes aside here.

[2] Throughout I distinguish between *uses* and *mentions* of words like 'knowledge'. When I am mentioning the word I put it in quotation marks. When I am using it I don't.

scrutiny from as many perspectives as are available in C (2002: 135-6). While Longino might be happy to add that this is also an account of the truth-conditions of sentences like 'we know the universe is expanding', the arguments she discusses are arguments for a thesis about the property knowledge, not the semantics of 'knowledge' (she appeals to the underdetermination of theory by evidence, not linguistic data).

Second, it is a view on which the context that matters is the *conversational* context, not the social or historical context. For instance, Bloor (1991) argues that questions about rationality can only be meaningfully discussed within a social context. One motivation for broader forms of contextualism is the thought that norms of rationality are social and/or historical entities. The sort of contextualism considered here doesn't speak to this motivation (but see Brister 2009, Fricker 2008 and Henderson 2009).

Third, it is a view on which the context that matters is the *ascriber's*, not the subject of the ascription. Thus, it is not a view on which questions about epistemic evaluation must be settled by looking at the (social, historical) context of those whom we are evaluating. For instance, Rorty argued that an epistemic evaluation of Cardinal Bellarmine in his dispute with Galileo about the nature of the heavens must consider his social and historical context. When we do so we see that he was justified (1981: 328-31). Another motivation for broader forms of contextualism is the thought that epistemic evaluation of a subject must be based on the norms of rationality she accepts, not the norms we accept. Contextualism in our sense doesn't speak to this motivation either.

Contextualism is best understood against the backdrop of work by philosophers like David Lewis (1980) and David Kaplan (1989) on context-sensitivity in natural languages. It is a familiar point that the truth-conditions of sentences containing certain expressions, for instance indexicals like 'I', depend on the context. The contextualist proposes that the truth-conditions of sentences containing expressions like 'know' depend on the context too. An immediate question about this view is: why is it philosophically interesting? Contextualists like Cohen, DeRose, Lewis and Stine argued that sceptical arguments trade on ignoring the context-sensitivity of terms like 'knows'. If they are right, the philosophical interest of contextualism is clear. With these remarks in place, I turn to my three aims.

2. *The View*

In this section I explain what contextualism is, and how it differs from strict invariantism, sensitive invariantism and relativism.

We can work with a sort of contextualism on which the truth-conditions of knowledge ascriptions depend on the epistemic standard operative in the ascriber's context (see Cohen 1999 and DeRose 2009: Ch. 1).[3] So, if Catriona says 'Morven knows that the train stops in Graz' the truth-conditions of her knowledge ascription depend on the epistemic standard operative in her context. I will answer three questions about this view:

1. What does it mean to say that the truth-conditions of Catriona's knowledge ascription depend on the epistemic standard operative in her context?
2. Is the epistemic standard operative in her context just her standard, or some other standard?
3. What are the alternatives to contextualism?

Question One

On a standard semantic framework, a sentence uttered in a context expresses a proposition that is evaluated for truth relative to the circumstance of evaluation of the context in which it was uttered (see Kaplan 1989). Some sentences express different propositions in different contexts of utterance. For instance, if Ruaraidh says 'I am tired' he expresses the proposition *Ruaraidh is tired* whereas if Catriona says 'I am tired' she expresses the proposition *Catriona is tired*.[4]

Contextualists think that sentences like containing the expression 'knows' can express different propositions in different contexts of utterance.[5] Catriona and Laurie are in separate contexts. Call the epistemic standard operative in Catriona's context E_1 and the epistemic standard operative in Laurie's E_2. If Catriona and Laurie both utter the sentence 'Morven knows that the train stops in Graz', the proposition expressed by Catriona's ascription is something like *Morven's epistemic position with respect to p is strong enough to satisfy E_1* whereas the proposition expressed by Laurie's is something like *Morven's epistemic position with respect to p is strong enough to satisfy E_2*. Thus, their ascriptions express distinct propositions. It may be that what Catriona says is true yet what Laurie says is false, or vice versa.

---

[3] Not all contextualists put things in terms of contextually shifting standards. Some talk about contextually shifting sets of alternatives (Blome-Tillmann 2014, Ichikawa 2011 and Lewis 1996). Others talk about contrast classes (Schaffer 2004) or evidence (Neta 2002). I set aside these intramural disputes here.

[4] I use italics for propositions throughout.

[5] And that they do so even if they contain no standard indexical expressions ('I' etc.). I ignore this qualification throughout.

Question Two

But what are these standards? Most contextualists think that the operative standard (or, set of relevant alternatives) need not be the ascriber's standard (see DeRose 2009: Ch. 4, Blome-Tillmann 2014: Ch. 1, Cohen 1999 and Ichikawa 2011). Following Lewis (1979), a context of utterance is a conversational situation in which speakers and their interlocutors make various conversational moves. The speakers in any conversation will have entered that conversation with the aim of distributing or receiving information, arguing their case, and so on. These aims underlie and explain the various conversational moves that the speakers make. At any point in the conversation, there will be certain things that the conversational participants all accept, whether because it's obvious they all accept them, or because they have explicitly been accepted. Call the set of things the participants accept the 'conversational score'. We can think of the epistemic standard operative in a conversation as a member of that set. Note that this standard need not be one that any participant accepts. The various participants might have been pushing for different standards, and the standard registered on the scoreboard is a compromise.

Question Three

There are three main competitors to contextualism: relativism, strict invariantism and sensitive invariantism. I introduce each in turn.

If Catriona says 'Morven knows that the train stops in Graz' there are multiple contexts in which her knowledge ascription could be assessed. Ailsa can assess it from her context, using her standards, and I can assess it from my context, using my standards. Call these contexts 'contexts of assessment'. MacFarlane (2014: Ch. 8) argues that Catriona expresses the proposition *Morven knows that the train stops in Graz*, and the truth-value of this proposition is relative to these various contexts of assessment. Thus, it may be true relative to Ailsa's context of assessment, and false relative to mine (or vice versa). On this view a single proposition is true relative to some contexts of assessment yet false relative to others. I'll call this view 'relativism' (see also Richard 2004).

On the orthodox view of the semantics of knowledge ascriptions, utterances of sentences of the form 'S knows that *p*' express the same proposition in every context. Call this view 'invariantism'. A further component of the orthodox view is that whether this proposition is true or false just depends on the sorts of things epistemologists have always talked about: evidence, the reliability of perceptual and other cognitive faculties, and the like. Call these things 'truth-conducive' factors (because they are relevant to whether our beliefs are true). Thus, whether a proposition like *Morven knows that the train stops in Graz* is true just depends on truth-conducive factors, and not at all on the context of utterance or assessment. I'll call this 'strict invariantism' (see Brown 2006, Gerken 2013, Nagel 2010, Reed 2010, Rysiew 2001 and Williamson 2000).

Strict invariantism has two components. First, there's the invariantist component: knowledge ascriptions express the same proposition in each context. Second, there's the strict component: whether someone 'knows' just depends on truth-conducive factors. One could endorse the first component without endorsing the second. On this view, whether someone knows doesn't shift with the context, but it does depend on a combination of truth and non-truth-conducive factors. I'll call this view 'sensitive invariantism'. The relevant non-truth-conducive factors are things like the subject's practical situation (see Fantl and McGrath 2009 and Stanley 2005), or a combination of her practical situation and the sorts of error-possibilities she is considering (see Hawthorne 2004).

Now that the main views are on the table, we can look at the arguments for contextualism.

3. *Arguments For*

Given the large body of literature, my aim here is modest. I will outline two arguments for contextualism, and summarise the main lines of criticism they have provoked. I start with context-shifting arguments (CSAs for short) (§3.1). I then discuss the contextualist solution to the sceptical problem (§3.2). The general moral is that it isn't clear whether the arguments for contextualism show it is preferable to alternative views.[6]

3.1. *CSAs*

Contextualists appeal to a putative general phenomenon: the appropriateness of ascribing 'knowledge' depends on the context of ascription. This phenomenon is illustrated by cases like these:

LOW: Hannah and her wife Sarah are driving home on a Friday afternoon. They plan to stop at the bank on the way home to deposit a check. It's not important that they do so, as they have no impending bills. But, as they drive past the bank, they notice that the lines inside are very long. Realising that it isn't very important that the check is deposited right away, Hannah says, 'I know that the bank will be open tomorrow. I was there just two weeks ago on Saturday morning. So we can deposit our check tomorrow morning'.

---

[6] I focus on these two arguments because they are the most prominent in the literature. For another sort of argument that appeals to the social roles of knowledge see Greco (2008), Henderson (2009) and Hannon (2013). For criticism of this argument see Gerken (2015) and Rysiew (2012).

HIGH: Same setup, but here Hannah and Sarah have an impending bill and very little in their account, so it's very important that they deposit their check by Saturday. Hannah notes that she was at the bank two weeks before on a Saturday morning, and it was open. But, as Sarah points out, banks do change their hours. Hannah says, 'I guess you're right. I don't know that the bank will be open tomorrow' (Stanley 2005: 3-4; for the original cases see DeRose 1992).

How does the argument go? The starting point is that both Hannah's knowledge ascription and her 'knowledge' denial are intuitively appropriate. A straightforward explanation of this would be that both her ascription and her denial are true. Because both would be true if the truth-conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials depended on the context of utterance, contextualism provides a straightforward explanation (see Cohen 1999 and DeRose 2009: Ch. 2).

This argument has been heavily criticised, but two sorts of criticism are worth highlighting. First, experimental epistemology can test whether folk judgements about these sorts of cases are sensitive to contextual factors. There are some studies indicating that folk judgements are sensitive to contextual factors (see DeRose 2011, Hansen and Chemla 2013, Pinillos 2012, Schaffer and Knobe 2012 and Sripada and Stanley 2012). But not all of these studies agree on the relevant factors. For instance, Sripada and Stanley's study indicates that folk judgements are sensitive to practical factors, while Schaffer and Knobe's indicates that they are sensitive to salience of error. Further, other studies indicate that there is no sensitivity to practical factors (see Buckwalter and Schaffer Forthcoming and Feltz and Zarpentine 2010), or no sensitivity to salience of error (see Buckwalter 2010).

Second, defenders of alternative views can also explain the general phenomenon.[7] For instance, following Grice (1989), we need to distinguish between a claim being *appropriate* and it being *true*. If I'm writing a job recommendation for a student, it may be *true* that she has good handwriting, but it wouldn't be appropriate to *say* that she has good handwriting. Some strict invariantists have argued that, while it may be true that Sarah knows the bank is open, in HIGH it wouldn't be appropriate to say that it is (see Brown 2006 and Rysiew 2001). Other strict invariantists have proposed psychological explanations of the general phenomenon. While the details are complicated, the rough idea is that judgements in cases like HIGH are caused by various psychological mechanisms and biases. Crucially, these mechanisms and biases are required to explain a wide range of phenomena, not just cases like HIGH (see Gerken 2013 and Nagel 2010).

---

[7] I focus on strict invariantist explanations. For sensitive invariantist explanations see Hawthorne (2004: Ch. 4) and Stanley (2005: Ch. 5). For criticism of those explanations see DeRose (2009: Chs. 2-3, 7). For a relativist explanation see MacFarlane (2009: Ch. 8).

While debate about CSAs has reached an advanced stage, it is unclear which view has come out on top. The experimental work canvassed above is inconclusive. While strict invariantists, sensitive invariantists and relativists have given accounts of our general phenomenon, those accounts face their own problems (for problems with contextualism see §4). The appeal to pragmatics has been extensively criticised (see Blome-Tillmann 2013, DeRose 2009: Ch. 3 and Dimmock and Huvenes 2014). The appeal to psychological mechanisms is a promising hypothesis, but more empirical work is required before we can conclude that these mechanisms actually cause our judgements (for further work see Alexander et. al. Forthcoming and Gerken and Beebe Forthcoming). If we want reason to accept or reject contextualism, we should look elsewhere.

3.2. *Scepticism*

Contextualists claim they can solve the sceptical problem (see Cohen 1988, DeRose 1995, Lewis 1996 and Stine 1976). We can focus on this argument for scepticism:

1. I don't know that I'm not a handless brain in a vat.
2. If I don't know that I'm 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.[8]

This argument is valid and can be run for any proposition we ordinarily take ourselves to know which is such, if I were a handless brain in vat, it would be false. This covers most of our ordinary empirical knowledge. So, to avoid scepticism, we need to deny one of the premises. But the first premise looks plausible (if I were a handless brain in a vat, things would seem no different). And if I don't know that I'm not a handless brain in a vat, how could I know that I have hands, given that it follows from my having hands that I'm *not* a handless brain in a vat?[9] So the second premise looks plausible too.

Because the argument is so compelling, we can impose two constraints on an acceptable response (see Cohen 1988). First, the response must explain why we found the argument compelling in the first place. If the argument involves an elementary error, why do we find it so compelling, even after reflection? Second, the response must explain why, even though it's true

---

[8] While contextualists focus on this argument (see DeRose 1995), there are other sceptical arguments. For discussion see Cohen (1998) and Pritchard (2005).
[9] The closure principle underlies this point. The principle says (roughly) that, if you know that p, and you know that p entails q and come to believe q on this basis, then you know that q. DeRose (1995) argues for this principle. Dretske (2005) and Nozick (1981) argue against.

that I know that I have hands (and perhaps that I know that I'm not a handless brain in a vat), in certain contexts - in particular, the context of responding to the argument we're considering - it's inappropriate to just respond by saying 'I know that I have hands'.

The contextualist solution to scepticism is appealing because, prima facie, it gives us everything we want. The contextualist says that the second premise is true in all contexts. She also says that, in some contexts – contexts where sceptical hypotheses are up for discussion – the first premise is true. So, in those contexts, the conclusion is true. When the standards are high, I neither 'know' that I have hands nor that I'm not a handless brain in a vat. But, in other contexts – contexts where sceptical hypotheses are not up for discussion – the first premise is false. So, in those contexts, the conclusion does not follow. When the standards are low, I may well 'know' that I have hands, and that I'm not a handless brain in a vat. Where the sceptic goes wrong is in thinking that a conclusion she reaches in her sceptical context applies in non-sceptical contexts. This solution satisfies our two constraints. First, it is inappropriate to claim to 'know' that one has hands when responding to the sceptic because one's claim is false. Second, it isn't obvious that knowledge ascriptions are context-sensitive, which is why we find the sceptical argument compelling.

This, I hope, goes some way to explaining why the contextualist solution to scepticism is attractive. But there are problems. First, there is a range of viable anti-sceptical strategies in the literature (see, among others, Coliva 2010, Pritchard 2012 and Wright 2004). So why go contextualist? This point is bolstered by the next two problems.

Second, many have worried that contextualism concedes too much to the sceptic (see Fogelin 2000). This worry is especially pressing for Lewis's (1996) version of contextualism, on which doing epistemology changes the context such that one no longer satisfies the contextual requirements for 'knowing'. But the worry applies more generally. The sceptic is someone who, in her conversational moves, is pushing for standards such that 'knowing" requires meeting exceptionally high standards. But does the sceptic inevitably succeed in pushing for these standards, as Lewis seems to have thought, or can other conversational participants resist? If the sceptic inevitably succeeds, the contextualist concedes far too much to the sceptic. As soon as she runs her sceptical argument, she triumphs. If the conversational participants can resist, then the simple contextualist response to the sceptical problem can't be quite right. For one, in situations where one resists, any inappropriateness in claiming to 'know' can't be because one doesn't satisfy the contextual standards. For another, if the contextualist says resistance is always acceptable, it is unclear what remains of the contextualist response to scepticism. So we are owed an account of when resistance is acceptable, and when it isn't. In short, the contextualist owes us a more complicated story (for a story see Blome-Tillmann 2014: Ch. 1).

Finally, many have worried that contextualism is irrelevant to the sceptical problem (see Kornblith 2000). The contextualist says that, while we don't 'know' according to the high

standards operative in sceptical contexts, we do 'know' according to the lower standards operative in more standard contexts. But this doesn't engage with the sort of radical sceptic who argues that we don't 'know' according to any standards because, epistemically speaking, all beliefs, whether true or false, are on a par. To the extent that sceptical arguments (brains in vats, regress arguments, etc.) are intended to establish this conclusion, the problem with them has little to do with contextualism.

4. *Arguments Against*

In this section I'll present three objections to contextualism. The first concerns the linguistic evidence for the context-sensitivity of the expression 'knows' (§4.1). The second concerns the way that the expression 'knows' behaves in certain contexts (§4.2). The third concerns the knowledge norm of assertion (§4.3). The general moral is that, while contextualism faces serious problems, contextualists have a range of plausible responses at their disposal.

4.1. *Linguistic Objections*

Some contextualists have proposed that 'knows' is analogous to gradable adjectives like 'tall' or 'flat' (see DeRose 1995 and Cohen 1999).[10] A gradable adjective like 'tall' makes implicit reference to a contextually provided scale of height (see Kennedy 1999). Similarly, one might think that 'knows' makes implicit reference to a contextually provided epistemic standard, where we can think of particular epistemic standards as points on a scale, much as particular heights are points on a scale.

However, Stanley (2005: Ch. 2) has argued that 'knows' isn't gradable.[11] First, unlike 'knows', gradable adjectives accept various degree modifiers (completely/very/quite) and comparative constructions. Consider:

1. x is flatter than y
2. x is completely/very/quite flat

---

[10] Some, but not all. For instance, Lewis (1996) appeals to quantifiers.
[11] More precisely, 'knows' in the sense of 'knows *that*' isn't gradable. In its other senses 'knows' is gradable ("S knows Tom better than R", "S knows how to ride a bike better than R", etc.) and accepts clarifying devices ("S knows Tom fairly well", "S knows how to ride a bike fairly well", etc.).

3. *S completely/very much/quite knows that p[12]
4. *S knows that p more than y

Second, 'knows' doesn't accept clarifying devices. Compare and contrast:

5. x is roughly flat
6. x is approximately flat
7. *x roughly knows that p
8. *x approximately knows that p

Consequently, 'knows' isn't analogous to gradable adjectives.

While this objection only targets versions of contextualism that posit an analogy between 'knows' and gradable adjectives, Stanley (2005: Ch. 3) provides other linguistic arguments against contextualism (fur further linguistic arguments see Kompa 2002, Hawthorne 2004: Ch. 2 and Richard 2004). For instance, he argues that this generalisation provides inductive reason to think that 'knows' isn't context-sensitive:

MULTIPLE OCCURRENCES: Since semantic context-sensitivity is traceable to an individual element (although that element may be unarticulated), multiple occurrences of that element in a discourse can mean different things.

A wide range of context-sensitive expressions behave as the generalisation predicts:

9. Every sailor waived to every sailor.
10. That mouse is tall, but that elephant is not tall.
11. That table is flat, and Holland is flat.
12. This is heavier than this.

Once any ambiguity is resolved, it's easy to read (9)-(12) in such a way that the various context-sensitive expressions ("every", "tall", "flat", "this') mean different things. But contrast (9)-(12) with (13)-(15):

13. If they have hands, most non-epistemologists know that they have hands, but, even if they have hands, no epistemologist knows that she does.
14. Morven knows that she has hands, but she doesn't know that she's not a handless brain in a vat.

---

[12] I've used '*' to indicate ungrammaticality.

15. If the bank is open on Saturdays, I knew that the bank is open on Saturdays, but now that you mention the possibility that it has changed its opening hours, even if it is open on Saturdays I don't know that it is.

Even once any ambiguity is resolved, it's not easy to read (13)-(15) in such a way that different occurrences of 'knows' mean different things.

While these linguistic objections don't *prove* that 'knows' isn't context-sensitive, they put the burden of proof onto the contextualist. But contextualists have taken up this challenge and offered sophisticated responses to the linguistic objections (see Blome-Tillmann 2014: Ch. 4 and Schaffer and Szabo 2013). The debate is very much alive.

4.2. *Disagreement*

Many have argued that disagreement causes problems for contextualism (see MacFarlane 2014: Ch. 6, Richard 2004 and Williamson 2005). Consider these conversations:

16. Ailsa: I know that the animal in the cage is a zebra.
    Laurie: No, you're wrong. You don't know that it's a zebra because you can't rule out the possibility that it's a mule cleverly disguised to look like a zebra.
17. Context 1   Niall and Cormac are at the zoo.
                   Niall: Do you know what animal that is?
                   Cormac: I know that it's is a zebra.
    Context 2:   Niall is telling Laurie about his trip to the zoo.
                   Laurie: What animals did you see?
                   Niall: We saw a zebra.
                   Laurie: How do you know that it was a zebra?
                   Niall: Cormac told me it was because it had black and white stripes.
                   Laurie: Cormac's wrong, he doesn't know that. How could he rule out the possibility that it was a mule cleverly disguised to look like a zebra?

These conversations seem natural. But, by the contextualist's lights, assuming Ailsa and Cormac meet the standards in their respective contexts, they weren't wrong about anything. This makes it hard to explain Laurie's and Cormac's uses of the disagreement marker "you're wrong". So, though some aspects of our linguistic practice seem to support contextualism, other aspects cast doubt on it.

While this objection casts doubt on contextualism, it is unclear what to take from it. Some argue that it gives us reason to adopt a sort of relativism (see MacFarlane 2014: Ch. 8 and Richard 2004). Others have argued that it gives us reason to adopt a sort of invariantism, whether strict or sensitive (see Williamson 2005). Contextualists have responded by positing extensive *semantic blindness* (see Cohen 1999 and DeRose 2009: Ch. 5). If competent speakers were sometimes blind to the context-sensitivity of knowledge ascriptions that would explain the disagreement data. But it does so by just denying its relevance to views about the semantics of knowledge ascriptions. This makes one wonder what the principled difference between the disagreement data and the data provided by cases like LOW and HIGH is supposed to be. This worry has prompted some contextualists to take a different approach (see McKenna 2014; for a response to criticisms of contextualist appeals to semantic blindness see Montminy 2009).

4.3. *Assertion and Context*

Williamson (2000: Ch. 11) argues that knowledge is the norm of assertion. For our purposes we can phrase the knowledge norm of assertion as follows:

ASSERTION: S is in a strong enough epistemic position to assert *p* iff S knows *p*.

DeRose (2009: Ch. 3) appeals to the knowledge norm of assertion in arguing *for* contextualism. But Hawthorne (2004: Ch. 2) argues that ASSERTION causes problems for contextualism. To see the problem, we can start by noting that DeRose has to modify ASSERTION to make reference to contexts. DeRose suggests this modification:

ASSERTION*: S is in a strong enough epistemic position to assert *p* iff 'S knows *p*' is true in S's context (2009: 99).

Imagine Sarah is deciding whether to go into the bank to cash her check now or come back tomorrow (Saturday). There's no rush to cash the check, and Sarah has good evidence that the bank is open tomorrow (she remembers it being open on previous Saturdays). Sarah decides to come back tomorrow. Hannah is making the same decision. While Hannah has the same evidence as Sarah, it is imperative that Hannah cashes her check before Monday. Hannah goes in to cash her check. According to the contextualist, Sarah can truly say that both of them 'know', whereas Hannah can truly say that neither of them 'know'. But, according to ASSERTION*, Sarah is in a strong enough epistemic position to assert, whereas Hannah isn't. So the following are true:

18. Hannah: Sarah doesn't know that the bank is open, but she's in a strong enough epistemic position to assert that the bank is open.

19. Sarah: Hannah knows that the bank is open, but she isn't in a strong enough epistemic position to assert that the bank is open.

There are two problems here. First, (19)-(20) sound a little odd. A common contextualist rejoinder is that they only sound odd because we are sometimes blind to the context-sensitivity of 'knows' (see Blome-Tillmann 2013 and DeRose 2009: Ch. 7). Second, ASSERTION* sits uneasily with one of the underlying ideas behind ASSERTION, which is that there is a single epistemic status – knowledge – which plays the central normative role in epistemology. If the contextualist is right, there are as many 'knowledge statuses' as there are contexts of utterance. Whether contextualism can be reconciled with the normative role of knowledge is an open question.

5. *The Future?*

While contextualism has increased in sophistication over the last decade, the *point* of the view has perhaps become lost in the process. With this in mind, here are some avenues for research:

1. Contextualists have focused on a narrow range of epistemic terms: 'knowledge", "justification" and "evidence". What about terms like "rational", or the (epistemic) "ought"? The orthodoxy in linguistics is that modals like "ought" are context-sensitive (see Kratzer 2012). Can contextualists make use of this?

2. How does contextualism in our sense relate to broader forms of contextualism? Many have worried that broadly contextualist views collapse into relativism, or are somehow incompatible with 'mainstream' epistemology. Many have worried that contextualism in our sense lacks epistemological interest (isn't it 'just an account of some linguistic data'?). Bringing the views closer together might deal with both sets of worries.

3. I have said that contextualists are primarily interested in ascriptions of 'knowledge'', not in the property knowledge. But, unless semantics can float free from metaphysics, the two can't be neatly separated. What does the contextualist say about the property knowledge?[13]

University of Vienna
Universitätsstrasse 7 (NIG), 1010 Wien
rbnmckenna@gmail.com

References

Alexander, J., Gonnerman, C. and J. Waterman. Forthcoming. Salience and epistemic egocentrism: an empirical study. In *Advances in Experimental Epistemology*, ed. J. Beebe. Continuum.

Annis, D. 1978. A contextualist theory of epistemic justification. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15: 213-219.

Blome-Tillmann, M. 2013. Contextualism and the knowledge norms. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 94: 89-100.

Blome-Tillmann, M. 2014. *Knowledge and Presuppositions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bloor, D. 1991. *Knowledge and Social Imagery* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.

Brister, E. 2009. Feminist epistemology, contextualism, and philosophical skepticism. *Metaphilosophy* 40: 671-688.

Brown, J. 2006. Contextualism and warranted assertibility manoeuvres. *Philosophical Studies* 130: 407-435.

Buckwalter, W. 2010. Knowledge isn't closed on Saturday: a study in ordinary language. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 1: 395-406.

Buckwalter, W. and J. Schaffer. (Forthcoming). Knowledge, stakes, and mistakes. *Noûs*.

Cohen, S. 1988. How to be a fallibilist. *Philosophical Perspectives* 2: 91-123.

Cohen, S. 1998. Two kinds of skeptical argument. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58: 143-159.

Cohen, S. 1999. Contextualism, skepticism, and the structure of reasons. *Philosophical Perspectives* 13: 57–89.

Coliva, A. 2010. *Moore and Wittgenstein: Scepticism, Certainty, and Common Sense*. Palgrave Macmillan.

DeRose, K. 1992. Contextualism and knowledge attributions. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52: 913-929.

DeRose, K. 1995. Solving the skeptical problem. *Philosophical Review* 104: 1-52.

DeRose, K. 2009. *The Case for Contextualism: Knowledge, Skepticism and Context*. Oxford: Clarendon.

DeRose, K. 2011. Contextualism, contrastivism, and x-phi surveys. *Philosophical Studies* 156: 81-110.

Dimmock, P. and T. Huvenes. 2014. Knowledge, conservatism, and pragmatics. *Synthese* 191: 3239-3269.

Dretske, F. 2005. Is knowledge closed under known entailment? The case against closure. In *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, ed. M. Steup and E. Sosa, 13-26 .Blackwell.

Fantl, J. and M. McGrath. 2009. *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Feltz, A. and C. Zarpentine. 2010. Do you know more when it matters less?. *Philosophical Psychology* 23: 683-706.

Fricker, M. 2008. Scepticism and the genealogy of knowledge: situating epistemology in time. *Philosophical Papers* 37: 27-50.

Fogelin, R. 2000. Contextualism and externalism. *Philosophical Issues* 10: 43–57.

Foucault, M. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Trans. A. Sheridan. New York: Pantheon.

Gerken, M. and J. Beebe. Forthcoming. Knowledge in and out of contrast. *Noûs*.

Gerken, M. 2013. Epistemic focal bias. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 91: 41-61.

Gerken, M. 2015. How to do things with knowledge ascriptions. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 90: 223-234.

Greco, J. 2008. What's wrong with contextualism?. *Philosophical Quarterly* 58: 416-436.

Grice, H. P. 1989. *Studies in the Way of Words*. Harvard University Press.

Hannon, M. 2013. The practical origins of epistemic contextualism. *Erkenntnis* 78: 899-919.

Hansen, N. and E. Chemla. 2013. Experimenting on contextualism. *Mind and Language* 28: 286-321.

Hawthorne, J. and J. Stanley. 2008. Knowledge and action. *Journal of Philosophy* 105: 571-590.

Hawthorne, J. 2004. *Knowledge and Lotteries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Henderson, D. 2009. Motivated contextualism. *Philosophical Studies* 142: 119-131.

Ichikawa, J. 2011. Quantifiers and epistemic contextualism. *Philosophical Studies* 155: 383-398.

Kaplan, D. 1989. Demonstratives: an essay on the semantics, logic, metaphysics, and epistemology of demonstratives and other indexicals. In *Themes from Kaplan*, eds. J. Almog, J. Perry and H. Wettstein, 481-586. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Kennedy, C. 1999. *Projecting the Adjective: The Syntax and Semantics of Gradability and Comparison*. New York: Garland.

Kompa, N. 2002. The context sensitivity of knowledge ascriptions. *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 64: 1-18.

Kratzer, A. 2012. *Modals and Conditionals: New and Revised Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kuhn T. 1970. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lewis, D. 1979. Scorekeeping in a language game. *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8: 339–59.

Lewis, D. 1980. Index, context, and content. In *Philosophy and Grammar*, eds. S. Kanger and S. Öhman, 79-100. Reidel.

Lewis, D. 1996. Elusive knowledge. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74: 549-567.

Longino, H. 2002. *The Fate of Knowledge*. Princeton University Press.

MacFarlane, J. 2014. *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and its Applications*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McKenna, R. 2014. Shifting targets and disagreements. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 92: 725-742.

Montminy, M. 2009. Contextualism, invariantism and semantic blindness. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 87: 639-657.

Nagel, J. 2010. Knowledge ascriptions and the psychological consequences of thinking about error. *Philosophical Quarterly* 60: 286-306.

Neta, R. 2002. S knows that p. *Noûs* 36: 663-681.

Nozick, R. 1981. *Philosophical Explanations*. Harvard University Press

Pinillos, Á. 2012. Knowledge, experiments and practical interests. In *Knowledge Ascriptions*, eds. J. Brown and M. Gerken, 192-219. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pritchard, D. 2005. The structure of sceptical arguments. *Philosophical Quarterly* 55: 37-52.

Pritchard, D. 2012. *Epistemological Disjunctivism*. Oxford University Press.

Reed, B. 2010. A defense of stable invariantism. *Noûs* 44: 224-244.

Richard, M. 2004. Contextualism and relativism. *Philosophical Studies* 119: 215-242.

Rorty, R. 1981. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton University Press.

Rysiew, P. 2001. The context-sensitivity of knowledge attributions. *Nous* 35: 477-514.

Rysiew, P. 2012. Epistemic scorekeeping. In *Knowledge Ascriptions*, eds. J. Brown and M. Gerken, M., 270-293. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schaffer, J. and J. Knobe. 2012. Contrastive knowledge surveyed. *Noûs* 46: 675-708.

Schaffer, J. and Z. Szabo. 2013. Epistemic comparativism: a contextualist semantics for knowledge ascriptions. *Philosophical Studies* (2): 1-53.

Schaffer, J. 2004. From contextualism to contrastivism. *Philosophical Studies* 119: 73-104.

Sosa, E. 2000. Skepticism and contextualism. *Philosophical Issues* 10: 1-18.

Sripada, S. and J. Stanley. 2012. Empirical tests of interest-relative invariantism. *Episteme* 9: 3-26.

Stanley, J. 2005. *Knowledge and Practical interests*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Stine, G. 1976. Skepticism, relevant alternatives, and deductive closure. *Philosophical Studies* 29: 249-261.

Williams, M. 1991. *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Williamson, T. 2000. *Knowledge and its Limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Williamson, T. 2005. Contextualism, subject-sensitive invariantism and knowledge of knowledge. *Philosophical Quarterly* 55: 213-235.

Wittgenstein, L. 1969. *On Certainty*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe and D. Paul. Oxford: Blackwell

Wright, C. 2004. Warrant for nothing (and foundations for free)?. *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 78: 167–212.