

Contextualism

Introduction (1)

- Standards of knowledge and justification.
Thus far, we've been assuming that these standards are universal (and invariant).
- Contextualism denies this assumption. Instead, it holds that standards of knowledge and justification vary with context.
- Analogy from language:
context-sensitive terms: 'tall', 'flat', 'old', 'here', 'that', 'now', etc.
- According to the epistemological contextualist, 'knowledge' and 'justification' are likewise context-sensitive terms.
- Prominent Advocates: K. DeRose, M. Williams, D. Lewis, and S. Cohen.

Introduction (2)

- Different kinds of contexts:
 - subject or personal context
 - attributor context
- Different factors suggested as determining the standards:
 - significance of the accuracy of information
 - the topic
 - doubts under consideration
 - ...
- For simplicity, we will focus on the context of utterance where one or more of the above factors determine the standards.

Introduction (3)

- Luxury car example:

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

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

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

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

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

Contextualism meets Scepticism

- According to Contextualism, the standards required to deserve the label ‘knowledge’ or ‘justification’ are higher in sceptical scenarios than in ordinary (i.e. everyday) scenarios.
- The sceptical puzzle:
 1. I know I have two hands
 2. If I know I have two hands, then I know I’m not a brain in a vat
 3. I don’t know I’m not a brain in a vat

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

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

Contextualist Solution (1)

- The sceptical puzzle (REPEATED) :
 1. I know I have two hands
 2. If I know I have two hands, then I know I'm not a brain in a vat
 3. I don't know I'm not a brain in a vat
- Contextualists: Which one do they drop?
 - they accept closure, so they keep 2.
 - if they drop 1, they become sceptics.
 - if they drop 3, they become standard anti-sceptics.

Question: What makes them unique then?

Answer: They drop either 1 or 3 depending on the context.

Contextualist Solution (2)

- Mixed Strategy:
 - Accept sceptical conclusions: “I don’t know I’m not a brain in a vat” is *always true when uttered* because it always ushers in a *sceptical context*.
 - Accept non-sceptical conclusions: “I know I have two hands” is *often true in ordinary contexts*.
 - What happens to the anti-sceptical argument?
 1. I know I have two hands
 2. If I know I have two hands, then I know I’m not a brain in a vat
∴ I know I’m not a brain in a vat
- DeRose: Premise 1 is false in this context.
Cohen: Premise 1 is true, but the context shifts as we move through the argument.

Objections

- Yourgrau: Contextualism leads to absurdities. A person who asserts knowledge that P, may, when questioned whether (s)he can rule out possible alternatives, deny knowledge that P.
- Sosa: Contextualism might be an *insight in linguistics*, but it doesn't contribute to the *epistemological* fight against scepticism.
- Craig: Knowledge seems to require more stability than the contextualist requires. If standards change regularly, how can we make sense of information gained in different contexts?
- Stroud: Scepticism is a view that throws doubt on all (or nearly all) knowledge claims. Merely stipulating that in some (i.e. ordinary) contexts we have knowledge, does not make scepticism go away.

Food for Thought

- Is the claim that the terms ‘knowledge’ and ‘justification’ are context-sensitive a genuinely epistemological claim?

Reading

- K. DeRose ‘Solving the Sceptical Problem’, in Kim and Sosa (eds.) *Epistemology: An Anthology*.