

Epistemology

Lecture 10: Contextualism

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Chapter I: Preliminaries

Where things stand

- Last week we looked at the debate over naturalism and the way naturalists respond to the sceptic.
- This week we consider a different approach to defeating the sceptic and to knowledge more generally, namely contextualism.

Conceptual pluralism

- A supposition that frames various epistemological discussions is that there is one concept of knowledge and one of justification.
- Indeed, the theories of knowledge and justification we looked at attempt to do justice to this supposition.
- It had already been suggested by various authors (e.g. Malcolm 1952) that there are two concepts of knowledge.

A **philosophical concept** which requires certainty.

An **ordinary concept** which is less demanding.

Conceptual pluralism (2)

- It had also been proposed that there may be various distinct concepts at play in both the philosophical and the ordinary domains.

NB: This is plurality *within* a domain.

- Indeed, similar claims had been made about all sorts of other philosophically interesting concepts including:

- * reference
- * truth
- * freedom
- * ...

NB: See Votsis (2011) 'Saving the Intuitions: Polythetic Reference'.

Contextualism and pluralism

- Contextualism is an approach that seeks to do justice to the plurality of concepts.
- It does so by placing the emphasis on the context within which a concept is uttered.
- As we will soon see, there are different ways of going about placing that emphasis.

Chapter II: Contextualism in Epistemology

The context-sensitivity of language

- All sorts of terms appear to be context-sensitive, e.g. ‘tall’, ‘flat’, ‘old’, ‘here’, ‘now’, ‘this’, ‘that’, ‘I’, ‘we’, ‘you’, etc.

Example: ‘John is tall’ might be true in some parts of the world but false in others.

- Strictly speaking, the propositions must be qualified with a contextual clause, otherwise we get contradictions.

Compare:

‘John is tall’ and ‘John is not tall’.



vs.

‘John is tall in Lilliputia’ and ‘John is not tall in Holland’.



Epistemological contextualism

- According to epistemological contextualism, 'knowledge' and 'justification' are likewise context-sensitive terms.
- Qua a context-sensitive term, knowledge expresses different propositions in different contexts.

Example:

'S knows that the person who gets the job has 10 coins' in context C_1 .

vs.

'S doesn't know that the person who gets the job has 10 coins' in C_2 .

The semantic approach

- This move reflects a semantic thesis: A knowledge sentence expresses a full proposition only relative to a standard in a given context.
- **Aim:** To elucidate the meaning of the relevant concepts and to shed light on the truth conditions of knowledge/justification sentences.

Example: Castañeda (1980).

Feldman: “... it is not true that contextualism holds that the standards for knowledge change with context. Rather, it holds that the standards for the application of the word ‘knowledge’ change” (2004, p. 24).

- This view is in direct opposition to:

Invariantism: A speaker using the same sentence expresses the same proposition regardless of the context.

The substantive approach

- **Aim:** Contextualism makes non-trivial claims about knowledge and justification that compete with other *epistemic* theories.

NB: Typically, the substantive approach endorses the semantic point.

Proponents: Annis (1978) and Williams (1991; 2001)

Annis: “Thus relative to one issue-context a person may be justified in believing *h* but not justified relative to another context” (1978: 215).

Rysiew: “... it is only in relation to the latter type of factors [i.e. contextual ones] that a proposition has any epistemic status at all... and that there is no need to suppose that the objects of epistemological inquiry have some deep structural unity which binds them all together” (2011, p. 4).

Kinds of factors

- Several factors have been proposed as fixing the standards of knowledge and justification.
- For example:
 - Information about the given environment.
 - The access subjects have to the evidence.
 - The amount of evidence vis-à-vis your interlocutor's expectations.
 - The extent of the significance of the information's accuracy.
 - The specific topic under consideration.
 - The specific doubts under consideration.

Contexts: A Classification

- The aforesaid factors are often clustered into two kinds of contexts:
 - Subject context:** Determined by factors relevant to the given putative knower, e.g. info about *their* situation, *their* access to evidence, etc.
 - Attributor/conversational/utterance context:** Determined by factors relevant to a knowledge attribution, conversation and utterance.
- The two kinds seem to line up with a distinction between a first-person and a third-person perspective.

Example: Luxury car

- *I have good reason to believe* my luxury car is parked in my garage because I left it there two minutes ago.

I would normally thus assert:

'I know my luxury car is parked in my garage'.

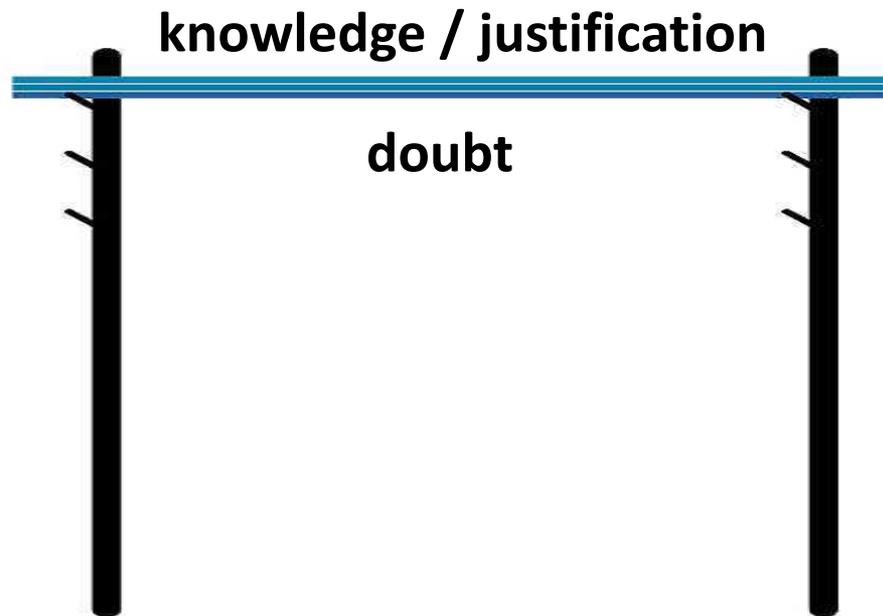
- Suppose, however, that a good friend informs me that a master car-thief is operating in my area.

On the basis of this information, I may justifiably say:

'I don't know whether it is parked in my garage. I better make sure'.

Low to high standards

- In the luxury car example, acquiring information from my friend has raised the standards of knowledge and justification.



- The higher the standards the less easy to know/attribute knowledge.

Example: In epistemology classrooms, the standards are pretty high.

Advantages: Scepticism

- Contextualists offer a novel reply to the sceptic.
- Recall these three propositions:
 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 correct but they form an inconsistent set.

Reactions:

- * The Sceptics drop 1.
- * Nozick and Dretske drop 2.
- * Most anti-sceptics (like Moore) drop 3.
- * Contextualists drop either 1 or 3 depending on context.

Advantages: Scepticism (2)

- Recall that in substantive contextualism, context fixes the epistemic standards. These are higher in sceptical scenarios.
- Thus, they drop either 1 in sceptical scenarios and 3 otherwise.

‘I don’t know I’m not a brain in a vat’ is true *when uttered* because it ushers in a **sceptical context**.

‘I know I have two hands’ is *true* in **ordinary contexts**, unless of course a sceptical context has been ushered instead.

Objections: Absurd consequences

- A person who asserts knowledge that P , may, when questioned whether (s)he can rule out alternatives, deny knowledge that P .

Example:

“ A: Is that a zebra?

B: Yes, it is a zebra.

A: But can you rule out its being merely a cleverly painted mule?

B: No, I can't.

A: So, you admit you didn't know it was a zebra?

B: No, I did know then that it was a zebra. But after your question, I no longer know.” (Yourgrau 1983, p. 183).

Objections: Scepticism intact

- Contextualism doesn't really help with the *epistemic* (vs. merely *semantic*) fight against scepticism.

“Without an account of how we can know by ordinary standards that radical skeptical hypotheses are false, the contextualist's reassurances are apt to ring hollow... The challenge of full-blooded skepticism shows that... direct engagement with epistemology is still required for a philosophically satisfying resolution” (Pyn 2016, pp. 6-7).



Contextualists typically identify the following two kinds of contexts:

object context and
conversational context

utterance context and
subject context

attributor context and
subjunctive context

subject context and
contributor context



Semantic contextualism holds that...

Chapter III (Special Topic): Perspectivism

Perspectivism – the history

- Perspectivism (sometimes: ‘perspectivalism’) goes back at least to Nietzsche ([1882] 2001).
- Having said this, depending on how we construe perspectives, the view may arguably go as far back as the pre-Socratics.
- Protagoras, in particular, denounced objectivity with the famous phrase ‘man is the measure of all things’.
- This last view is most ordinarily branded as a form of relativism.

Perspective – the concept

- Traditionally associated with vision, it denotes how the appearance of things changes according to the relative position of the observer.
- It is commonly assumed that not only vision but also all the other sensory modalities are *perspectival* in nature.
- Moreover, advocates of the view commonly assume that *knowledge* and more generally *concepts* are likewise perspectival.

Its relation to other views

- What is of relevance here is that it is not always easy or possible to distinguish perspectivism from views like relativism.
- Versions of conventionalism, constructivism, contextualism and relativism make remarkably similar and even identical claims to it.
- It depends on how narrowly or broadly we understand the notions.
- That is, it depends on what counts as a perspective, a convention, a construction, a context and a basis for relativisation.

A silly form of perspectivism

- Giere: “In common parlance, a perspective is often just a point of view in the sense that, on any topic, different people can be expected to have different points of view. This understanding is usually harmless enough in everyday life, but it can be pushed to the absurd extreme that every perspective is regarded as good as any other... [such a view] *degenerate[s]* into a silly relativism” (2006, p. 13).
- That all perspectives are equally good, regardless of their content and the purpose for which we use them, is demonstrably absurd.

Example: A stomach ache that a doctor has diagnosed as being caused by a bacterial infection won't be treated by any odd remedy.

An innocent form of perspectivism

- For any target system Φ (with $n \geq 2$ features) there exist different representations, each of which encodes different features of Φ .
- This, in and of itself, is an innocent (and trivial) form of perspectivism.
- Provided the representations are accurate, each one helps us attain a more complete view of the target system.
- In other words, the representations are *complementary*. This means that there is no conflict between such representations.

Sinister forms of perspectivism...

- These are discussed in Votsis (2012). Here's an example:

“For any target system Φ there exist genuinely rival representations, each of which encodes the same feature(s) of Φ equally well according to core standards of evidence evaluation” (p. 103).
- Some such rival representations have been offered over the years but none that can really be true at the same time.

The End