

Epistemic Contextualism: An Inconsistent Account for the Semantics of “Know”?

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Abstract. The contextualistic account for the semantic behaviour of the term “know” - a position labelled as “epistemic contextualism” - combined with the widely accepted idea that “know” is a factive verb seems to lead to a very unpleasant conclusion: epistemic contextualism is inconsistent. In Sect. 1 we first examine some aspects of the epistemological meaning of the contextualist semantics of “know”, then in Sect. 2 we sketch the problem which leads to the supposed inconsistency of epistemic contextualism and in Sect. 3 we analyse some solutions that have been proposed to solve the problem which are, in our view, unsatisfactory. In Sect. 4 we present our attempt of solution.

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1 Contextualizing “Know”: An Epistemological Point of View

Epistemic Contextualism (therefore: EC) is one of the latest landing of contemporary epistemology. Proposed in many different readings, in its more common form EC claims that the meaning of the term “know” and that of the propositions which attribute or deny knowledge - as “*S* knows that *p*” and “*S* doesn’t know that *p*” - depends upon the context in which those expressions are uttered. According to the core thesis of EC, the term “know” and the propositions that contain it show the same semantic behaviour that characterizes indexical terms or predicates as “large”, “rich” or “tall”.¹ As propositions such as “I’m here” or “My destination is near”, also an expression like “*S* knows that *p*”, if closed off by its declaration context, doesn’t express a complete and clearly determinable meaning; the practical interests and purposes of the subject who attributes knowledge, as well as the goals of the conversation in which he is involved, are in fact responsible for the arrangement of that set of conditions - *i.e.* the epistemic standard, - which details how strong must be the epistemic position of a subject *S* related to a proposition *p* in a certain context *C*, so that a knowledge ascription as “*S* knows that *p*” comes out to be true in *C*.

As an example,² suppose that Thomas is at the King’s Cross railway station of London, waiting for a train to Cambridge and wondering whether the train will arrive at

¹ DeRose (2009) pp. 166–174, Davis (2013), Kompa (2014).

² This is an adaptation of Cohen’s airport example. Cfr. Cohen (1999).

destination before 10.30 am. Beside him, a passer-by asks to Lucy - who's waiting on the platform too, - if she knows the arrival time of the train to the station of Cambridge; Lucy checks her itinerary and answers: "Yes, I know. The train will arrive at 9.30 am". Thomas, who has heard the conversation, wonders if the itinerary checked by Lucy is reliable; getting to Cambridge before 10.30 am is very important for him - at that time he have an appointment of which he cannot be late, - and since the itinerary could be misprinted, Thomas prefers not to attribute knowledge to Lucy and decides to ask for information at the tickets office.

Suppose that the arrival time of the train is 9.30 am. Now, the epistemic position of Thomas is the same of Lucy - they both share the same information: The itinerary's data. On the contrary, what distinguish the two are their respective practical interests, purposes and needs. Knowing the precise arrival time of the train is very important for Thomas and so he prefers not to attribute knowledge to Lucy; he needs something more than the itinerary's data to believe in the proposition "The train will arrive at 9.30 am at the station". On the other hand, Lucy, who doesn't have any particular reason to wonder whether the train will arrive before a certain hour and doesn't have any doubt about the reliability of her itinerary, attributes knowledge to herself about the arrival time of the train. We then have two subjects in the same epistemic position, but with different practical interests and, as it has been forecast by EC, the truth conditions of the proposition "Lucy knows the arrival time of the train" change depending upon the context of utterance. In the case of Lucy the epistemic standard is low, her itinerary is sufficient to her for attributing knowledge to herself and then in this context the proposition "Lucy knows the arrival time of the train" is true. While in the context of Thomas the epistemic standard is significantly higher, and therefore in this case the proposition "Lucy knows the arrival time of the train" is false. Then, in both cases the practical interests of the subjects have established the epistemic standard, i.e. that set of condition which, if satisfied, makes true a knowledge attribution.

EC then looks in first place as a semantic theory, which grounding on the habits of the speakers of the ordinary language, proposes to understand the meaning of the expressions that attribute or deny knowledge as we have said. Even if the formulation of EC is probably mainly due to epistemological reasons - as defeating skepticism or overtaking invariantism - the plausibility of its premises is justified not on considerations about normativity, but on evidences supplied by strengthened and spread linguistic habits exhibited by the speakers of the ordinary language. According to its supporters, the ability of EC to give a sound account for those cases - as the our set at the station, - which show a very elastic way of understanding the meaning of "know" is the main argument in favour of the theory.³

If then the role of the semantic aspects of EC is quite clear, more complex is their relation with the epistemic aspects of the theory. The epistemological meaning of the hypothesis about the context sensitivity of "know" is in fact controversial.

Keith DeRose supported the neutrality of EC - understood as a semantic theory, - in respect to its various possible epistemological interpretations.⁴ For example, it is

³ DeRose (2009) pp. 47–79.

⁴ *Ivi.* p. 21.

possible to be a contextualist and to endorse - at the justification level - foundationalism, coherentism or even an another intermediate option between the two, because EC would be compatible with both and with their possible intermediate versions. Or perhaps we could also built a contextualist theory which is compatible with different versions of the theory of the relevant alternatives or the theory of the conclusive reasons. But even if EC can be understood in many ways, it's still not very clear how we should regard, by a peculiar epistemological point of view, a knowledge attribution as "*S* knows that *p*" when is considered true in a certain context. For DeRose, when a proposition as "Lodewyk knows that the pheasant's head is blue" is considered true in a certain context - and then when Lodewyk's epistemic position satisfies the standard which is at stake in his knowledge attributor context, - it seems that we can say that Lodewyk "counts as knowing" the proposition at issue.⁵ The use of this quite ambiguous expression is probably due to the fact that for EC there isn't knowledge simpliciter, but a subject always knows only relatively to a specific set standard. For EC - at least in the view that DeRose seems to endorse, - the truth of a knowledge attribution as "*S* knows that *p*" shouldn't suggest that *S* "posses" knowledge; knowledge indeed cannot be characterized as a more or less broad set of proposition "in possess" of the epistemic subject, but it should be described as a condition or as a status of a subject. In this way, the epistemic subject, to whom now is attributed knowledge in a context, now is denied in another, doesn't risk to see his knowledge vanishing and reappearing suddenly - a phenomenon this which seems very unattractive as well as implausible. To change is just the relation between his epistemic position and the epistemic standard that varies depending on the context of attribution. At the same time two different subjects could attribute and deny knowledge to Lodewyk about a certain proposition *p*, but this would not affect his epistemic position; unaware of the evaluations expressed upon him, Lodewyk could in fact quietly still attributing or denying knowledge to himself on the basis of his own epistemic standard.

Compared to DeRose, Stewart Cohen seems to be more interested in the epistemic aspects of EC than in the semantic ones. As a contextualist he endorses the idea that knowledge is in part determined by the social context⁶ and supports one of the main claims of EC - i.e. that it's possible that two speakers attribute and deny knowledge at the same time to a subject about the same proposition *p* without any contradiction. Wondering then which context has to be considered to evaluate the epistemic performance of a subject, Cohen gives a first answer: Is the one of the social group which the subject belongs to. However, from this first answer follows a significant consequence: If the relevant context is the one of the social group which the subject belongs to, then we find ourselves with an "indefinite number of concepts of knowledge":

Is "knowledge" then ambiguous between various concepts each based on a different standard? This would entail an indefinite number of concepts of knowledge. It would also entail that, were our reasoning powers to improve or decline, our concept of knowledge would change.⁷

⁵ *Ivi.* p. 187.

⁶ Cohen (1987).

⁷ *Ivi.* p. 15.

So Cohen introduces attributor contextualism:

A better way to view matters is to suppose that attributions (or denials) of knowledge are indexical or context sensitive. The standards that apply are determined by the context of attribution.⁸

But even so, the problem isn't solved. Now we have an indefinite number of contexts of attribution that determines an indefinite number of epistemic standards which defines as many meanings for "know" and concepts of knowledge. In this article and in its later works, however, Cohen seems to have lost interest in this question; what seems pivotal for him is perhaps the epistemic agility that is granted by EC, an agility which is necessary to EC to propose interesting solutions to well-known epistemological problems. Cohen seems then to endorse a reading of EC which is alike the one of DeRose: When a subject *S* is an object of a knowledge attribution about a proposition *p*, in the context of the knowledge attributor, *S* counts as a knower of *p*.⁹

The admission of an "indefinite number of concepts of knowledge" seems a result hardly evadable for EC, which is then forced to concede some room to relativism - but how much is debated, - to support one of its main thesis - i.e. that it's possible that two speakers attribute and deny knowledge at the same time to a subject about the same proposition *p* without any contradiction. A thesis that certainly represents one of the finest and more interesting aspect of EC, to which contextualists should not renounce, otherwise they would fall in those problems in which invariantism¹⁰ incurs. The classical analysis of knowledge and many of the theories that had tried to complete it have been often formulated exactly according to the principles of invariantism, however, the rigidity of this approach has the unpleasant consequence to create unattractive asymmetries. A too exigent set of conditions, for example, if by one hand let us to safeguard the value of knowledge - attributing it only at strict conditions, - on the other risks to condemn our ordinary knowledge claims. At the same time, if we would grant our knowledge in everyday context we would be compelled to define weaker conditions, but if deciding whether a subject knows or not would be very important to us, then it seems difficult that we would be satisfied by so weak criterions. However, EC is not a valuable theory only because it overtakes this kind of worries; its premises let contextualists to propose interesting solutions for well-known epistemological problems as the one of lottery or the Gettier cases, and moreover, EC developed an original argument against skepticism which makes our ordinary knowledge claims compatible with the exercise of radical skeptic doubts.¹¹

2 Is Epistemic Contextualism Inconsistent? the Problem in a Nutshell

Clearly, the contextualist solutions have been - and still are, - hotly debated. The main part of the critics are focused on the semantic aspects of EC (The account proposed by EC for the semantics of "know" really depicts the linguistic behaviour of the speaker of

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Cohen (1999), (2005).

¹⁰ Unger (1984). According to invariantism there is only one epistemic standard for knowledge.

¹¹ Lewis (1996), Cohen (1998), DeRose (1995).

the ordinary language? Is “know” really a context-sensitive term?), while others wonder about the epistemological relevance of the theory (Semantic contextualism is a sufficient ground to formulate an adequate epistemological contextualism?).

Lesser broad is the debate about a serious problem that seems to afflict EC and that questions the consistence of the theory itself: the factivity problem¹² (Therefore: FP). Let’s recall our example set at the station, we have:

- (1). Thomas doesn’t know_H that p .
- (2). Lucy knows_L that p .

In prose: “Thomas doesn’t know that p ” is true in his high standard context while “Lucy knows that p ” is true in her low standard context; with p : “The train will arrive at destination at 9.30”.

According to EC, even if we are in the more demanding context of Thomas the proposition (2) is still true in the context of Lucy; as we have seen in the Sect. 1 knowledge cannot vanish and despite the evaluations of the knowledge attributor Lucy’s epistemic position is still the same. Therefore Thomas couldn’t be considered a proper contextualist if he would not give an account for (2) in his own context:¹³

- (3). Thomas knows_H that (2).

But from (3) we can derive a very unpleasant contradiction if we combine that proposition with two epistemological principles that the contextualist endorses; the factivity principle (F), according to which some verbs - as “to know”, - implies truth:

(F). S knows that $p \rightarrow p$.

and the closure principle (C) which claims that the knowledge of a subject can be extended to that proposition which are entailed from the ones that he yet knows:¹⁴

(C). If S knows that p and S knows that $(p \rightarrow q)$, then S knows that q .

Now, because for (F) proposition (2) implies p :

(2_F). Lucy knows_L that $p \rightarrow p$.

and because Thomas knows_H that (2):

(3_C). Thomas knows_H that \langle Lucy knows_L that $p \rangle$ and that \langle Lucy knows_L that $p \rightarrow p \rangle$.

for (C) and (3) we obtain:

- (4). Thomas knows_H that p

Which contradicts (1). EC seems to be inconsistent.

¹² For a specific analysis of FP and its variations see Williamson (2001), Brendel (2005), (2014), Wright (2005), Kallestrup (2005), Steup (2005) and Baumann (2008).

¹³ Brendel (2005), p. 47.

¹⁴ Luper (2006) “The Epistemic Closure Principle” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2006 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).

3 Hypothesis for a Consistent Contextualism

According to Wolfgang Freitag and Alexander Dinges¹⁵ FP arises only because EC is misunderstood: for them contextualist is not committed to (2).

Freitag argues that the sufficient and necessary condition for the arise of KP is:

(α). $\exists p \in B: (C \rightarrow [p \wedge \neg K_X(S, t, p)])$

In prose: Exist a proposition p which belongs to the set of empirical propositions B such that there is a theory C that implies that p is true, but that p cannot be known by a subject S at a moment t in a certain context X . Clearly, if EC satisfies (α) or not depends upon the way in which we construe our theory,¹⁶ however, according to Freitag we shouldn't ever allow that (α) is fulfilled because if so "we would have to make the empirical claim that {I} a certain proposition p is true and that {II} S doesn't know_X that p at t ".¹⁷ We may think that EC implies {II} because of skepticism, which is generally conceded by contextualist;¹⁸ nevertheless, according to Freitag skepticism isn't part of EC, which if not entails skepticism then doesn't entail {II} neither. According to Peter Baumann¹⁹ {I} derives from the factivity principle, from (2) - that EC seems to concede - and from the claim of EC according to which in ordinary context our knowledge attributions are generally true. But for Freitag Bauman's interpretation of EC is not correct. If EC would be committed to empirical claims like (2), then it would perilously depend upon contingent facts: e.g. if (2) would come out false EC would be refuted. For Freitag knowledge in ordinary contexts is expected, but is not part of EC theory. EC is then not committed neither to (1) and (2), so FP appears to be solved. However, two remarks seems to cause troubles to Freitag argument. First, we could agree that EC doesn't entail skepticism, but EC claims that there are high standard - not skeptic, - contexts in which happen that S doesn't know that p , which it was the case that S knew in a lower standard context. This kind of situations seems a proper part of EC theory, then {II} seems justified: indeed there are contexts in which happen that S doesn't know a proposition that he know in others, less demanding contexts. Freitag could perhaps object that specific attributions - as (2) - or denials - as (1) - of knowledge are not parts of EC, and here we come to the second remark: maybe propositions as (1) or (2) are not proper part of EC theory, but it could happen that the contextualist finds himself in a practical situations as the one described in Sect. 2; if so, he couldn't simply reject (1) or (2). Freitag's solution perhaps saves EC from a general point of view, but seems to not have any practical application: the contextualist still have to deal with a theory that doesn't survive when is put to the test.

¹⁵ Freitag (2011), Dinges (2014).

¹⁶ Freitag suggests that we could formulate EC reducing it to just its anti-skeptical form:

(EC_S). $\neg \forall x, y \in X, \forall S \in G, \forall t \in T, \forall p \in B: \wedge [K_X(S, t, p) \leftrightarrow K_Y(S, t, p)]$ which wouldn't suffer of KP. However this solution looks unattractive to Freitag because contextualist should aims to a more complex and articulate theory. Freitag (2011) p. 281.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ See footnote 11.

¹⁹ Baumann (2008).

Dinges proposes to refute (2) because it seems to not follow from any premise of EC. Proposition (2) doesn't follow from the anti-skeptic claim of EC - according to which our ordinary knowledge attributions are generally true, - because claiming that doesn't mean endorsing the truth of any particular empirical proposition. For example, we could say that the major part of the tickets of a lottery will lose even if we don't know which tickets will lose in particular; in the same way we could understand the anti-skeptical claim of EC: the contextualist knows that the ordinary knowledge attributions are generally true, even if he doesn't know of any particular true knowledge attribution. Even the contextualist anti-skeptical argument²⁰ seems to not entailing the truth of any particular proposition: the contextualist argues that we cannot show that a proposition as "S knows that *p*" is false in an ordinary context by showing that it is false in a skeptical one, but that doesn't entail the truth of *p*. Again, if we could concede to Dinges that (2) is not a proper part of EC, it seems that FP in its practical form isn't solved. Dinges considers this aspect of the problem, but according to him the argument of FP should be refuted because appears to be based on a "a tricky logical issue".²¹ To show that, Dinges proposes an argument which has very implausible conclusions, and which has a structure that looks like the one of FP: let's suppose to assign different properties to a predicate depending on the time in which it is uttered. "Know" would then express different relations depending on the time of utterance: e.g. if *S* has forgot something, there would propositions that he know_(past) but that he doesn't know_(now). So, according to Dinges, *S* would say that he know_(past) that *p* but that he doesn't know_(now) that *p*. But for the knowledge norm of assertion (KNA)²² *S* should know_(now) that he know_(past) that *p*, but if so, for factivity and closure we could derive that *S* know_(now) that *p*, which deny our assumption that *S* has forgot that *p*. The structure of this argument looks very similar to the one of FP, however, even if we obtain an implausible conclusion this doesn't mean that it is the structure of the argument that need to be rejected; the problem could in fact depends upon the premises of the argument, but Dinges doesn't propose any reason to exclude this alternative. Refuting (2) then doesn't appear a suitable strategy to overtake FP, because doing so means to solve the problem from a general point of view, but the practical inconsistency remains: EC is still a not working theory.

According to Anthony Brueckner and Christopher Buford²³ EC shouldn't concede "asymmetrical" knowledge attributions like (3), which therefore should be refuted. When the contextualist is pondering about his theory he should limit himself to say something like "It's possible that there are two context C_1 and C_2 such that a proposition as "S know that *p*" is true in a context but false in the other". Now let's consider FP in his practical form; for the example of Sect. 2 we have that (1): Thomas doesn't know_H that *p* and that (2): Lucy knows_L that *p*. According to Brueckner and Buford, if we - sharing the same context C_H of Thomas, - would tell him that Lucy is in a low

²⁰ For EC reply to skepticism: DeRose (1995), Rysiew (2011) "Epistemic Contextualism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).

²¹ Dinges (2014) p. 3550, footnote 20.

²² According to KNA an utterance of *p* is appropriate only if the speaker knows that *p*.

²³ Brueckner and Buford (2009).

standard context C_L , that she satisfies the standard at stake in C_L and that she attributes herself knowledge about p saying “I know that p ”, Thomas shouldn’t endorse (3), but his answer should be:

Well, it sounds as Lucy is in a position to be saying something true via uttering his “knowledge”-sentence, given his wimpy context C_L and ordinary evidence. So I know that the conditions for the truth of “Lucy knows $_L$ that p ” are satisfied up to the “truth condition”, i.e. the condition that p is the case. However, to know that “Lucy knows $_L$ that p ” is true in C_L , I must know whether p is the case [...]. But I have just told you that I do not know p ; [...] “Lucy knows $_L$ that p ” is not true in our context C_H .²⁴

In virtue of his lack of knowledge about p Thomas is not in the position to utter (3), which is therefore to be considered an illegitimate step. But if so, we wonder if we can still speaking about a proper EC. As Brueckner and Buford recognize,²⁵ their solution saddles EC with a ‘stability problem’: the contextualist thesis that in a low standard context “ S knows that p ” is true cannot be known anymore in a more demanding context. According to Baumann, it’s highly controversial whether EC “can live with the above mentioned stability limitation”,²⁶ it’s then doubtful if Brueckner and Buford’s solution can be considered as a progress of any kind.

Martin Montminy and Wes Skolits²⁷ proposes to understand (3) not as a proper assertion, but as a weak one, which is a kind of illocutionary act which includes conjectures, guesses and hypothesis. As the two authors underline, this is the typical way that philosophers adopt when they propose or defend their views. Weak assertions are not governed by the KNA: a weak assertion that p is epistemically appropriate if the speaker have some evidence that p - the number of evidence required depends upon the strength of the assertion. But if (3) is a weak assertion, then when the contextualist utters (3) it seems that he is not properly recognizing (2) - i.e. that Lucy know $_L$ that p . Perhaps he would say something like “It seems that Lucy knows that p in her own context”, but therefore the epistemic status of (2) is indeterminate. This solution appears to meet worries analogous to the ones that the solution of Brueckner and Buford meets; there is a knot that needs to be unravelled: for Thomas - which is in the high standard context, - Lucy knows or not that p ? Montminy and Skolits’ solution seems then to suggest to Thomas to endorse and answer analogous to the one which Brueckner and Buford have proposed, something as “I know that the conditions for the truth of \langle Lucy knows $_L$ that p \rangle are satisfied up to the truth condition, but I cannot proper say that she knows that p ”, but we have already seen what kind of troubles that answer involves.

Peter Baumann²⁸ doubts about the plausibility of the disquotation principle that is involved in FP - which according to him is: (D) [$“p”$ is true $\rightarrow p$] - because the supposed context-sensitivity of “know” wouldn’t allow us to apply (D) and infer from (2) and (3) that (4). Of course it would be a trouble for EC to deny any kind of

²⁴ *Ivi.* pp. 434–435. This quote has been adapted to our exposition of the FP.

²⁵ *Ivi.* pp. 436, 437.

²⁶ Baumann (2010), p. 88.

²⁷ Montminy and Skolits (2014).

²⁸ Baumann (2008).

disquotation principle, so Baumann proposes that we should formulate a principle which would make explicit the context-sensitivity of “know” and that would understand “‘knowledge’ as referring [...] to a ternary relation between a person, a proposition and a standard”.²⁹ We should then formulate a contextualist friendly disquotation principle as:

(D_{EC}). An utterance of “*S* knows that *p*” in a context C_X is true $\rightarrow S$ knows_X that *p*

However, if we consider (3) - “Thomas knows_H that Lucy knows_L that *p*” - and we apply factivity, closure and D_{EC} we can still obtain (4) - i.e. “Thomas know_H that *p*” - which leads to the contradiction. But according to Baumann, the warrant that Thomas needs to know Lucy’s epistemic performance is not the same that he needs to know what Lucy knows; Thomas could have very sophisticated knowledge about the rough nature of Lucy’s knowledge of, e.g. the average weight of an hippopotamus, but by no means it follow that he has sophisticated knowledge about the very same thing. For Baumann there is a certain failure of transmission of warrant:

(T). S_1 has warrant for knowledge_H that S_2 knows_L that *p* $\rightarrow S_1$ has warrant for knowledge (at some level, but not necessarily for knowledge_H) that *p*

We should then endorse a new principle of closure as:

(C_{EC}). For all subjects *S*, propositions *p* and *q*, and knowledge relations know_A, there is a knowledge relation know_B (where know_A is not more demanding than know_B) such that:

$[S$ knows_A that *p* $\wedge S$ knows_A that (*p* \rightarrow *q*)] $\rightarrow S$ knows_B that *q*.

Because of (T) and the new principle of closure (C_{EC}) we cannot derive (4) any-more; at least we could obtain (4_B): “Thomas know_L that *p*”, which doesn’t deny (1). According to Baumann in fact, it could be the case that, considered the factivity principle (F): [*S* knows_X that *p* \rightarrow *p*], Thomas would know_H the antecedent of (F) - i.e. that Lucy knows_L that *p* - but he wouldn’t know_H the consequent. However, Baumann’s solution is controversial: If we still endorse a factivity principle as (F), as Baumann suggests, then in his context Thomas should infer from (2) - “Lucy knows_L that *p*” - that *p* is true *simpliciter*; the truth of *p* is in fact one of the necessary conditions for the truth of (3), a condition that Baumann doesn’t seem to refute. So, as Montminy and Skolits have noticed,³⁰ Thomas would find himself saying something as (5): “I know_H that *p* is true, even if I don’t know_H that *p*”, which is quite odd; bizarre propositions as “While I do not know that I’m a bodiless brain in a vat, I do know that I have hands” or “Even though I don’t know that these are not well dis-guised mules, I know that they are zebras”³¹ should be avoided. Even Baumann solution then seems unattractive.

²⁹ *Ivi.* p. 589.

³⁰ Montminy and Skolits (2014), p. 325.

³¹ *Ibid.*

4 Solving the Factivity Problem: A Further Attempt

We have seen that denying specific knowledge attributions doesn't seem to be a good strategy to solve FP because it turns out to be an impassable path when practical cases are considered. Denying (3) as Brueckner and Buford suggest however, has proved to be a dangerous solution as well: It seems to solve FP, but saddles EC with the limitation of the stability problem. On the other hand, the solution developed by Baumann involves odd consequences which every theory about knowledge-attributing sentences - not only EC, - should avoid. Nevertheless, Baumann's solution seems to be the only one that really attempts to preserve the possibility for the contextualist to know - in his high standard context, - that the knowledge attribution made in lower standard contexts are true, a possibility that, according to Baumann, seems to be pivotal for EC:³²

What is the attraction of contextualism if one cannot (at least as a contextualist) coherently say (or think) that knowledge attributions made in a lower context are in fact true? [...] The kind of contextualism that results would be a very much weakened one and not very attractive.³³

Therefore, a formulation of EC which could be called "robust" and "attractive" appears to be compelled not only to avoid the contradiction of the FP, but also to pursue this goal without denying the possibility mentioned above. To achieve this purpose and to explore the features of this reading of EC let's consider an example: Suppose that Thomas, an amateur ethologist, is attending a lesson about primates in a natural reserve. During the lesson, Thomas notices an animal on a tree that appears to be a chimpanzee, so he say

(a). "The animal on that tree is a chimpanzee!"

The ethology professor - who knows that the animal is a chimpanzee, - asks to Thomas: "How do you know that?" and Thomas, aware that his only answer could be

(b). "I saw many images of chimpanzees and that animal looks as one of them"

and that however this too generic answer could not satisfy the professor, prefers to reply: "No, I don't know that the animal on that tree is a chimpanzee". Now imagine to say to Thomas that Lucy - who is in the natural reserve for a safari, - has said that (a) speaking of the same ape seen by Thomas, that she has justified her claim saying that (b) and that her trip mates, satisfied with her explanation, have attributed knowledge to her: What kind of answer should we suggest to Thomas, who is a contextualist? Does Lucy know (a) according to the standard at stake in *her* context?

A first useful remark is to remember that, according to EC, the truth conditions of an expression as "S knows that *p*" can be defined only considering the characteristics of the knowledge attributor's context - i.e. the practical interests and purposes of the attributor as well as the goals of the conversation in which he is involved; those characteristics are in fact responsible for the setting of the epistemic standard, and

³² On this point Brendel seems to agree with Baumann, see Brendel (2005) pp. 45–47.

³³ Baumann (2008) p. 583.

therefore for the definition of the truth conditions of the knowledge-attributing or denying sentences. We can then deduce that - at least according to her trip mates, - Lucy is well positioned enough in respect to the standard at stake in the safari context, and therefore that, in that context, she counts as a knowing that (*a*). To clarify this point we could imagine the evaluations made by Lucy's trip mates. Indeed, if it's up to the knowledge attributor defining the conditions at which an expression as "*S* knows that *p*" is true, we could also imagine that, when the attributor is evaluating the epistemic performance of a subject, it's up to him saying something as, in our case: "(*i*) Lucy believe that *p*, (*ii*) her belief is justified with enough good reasons and (*iii*) *p* is true"; but then, if it's the knowledge attributor the one who decides if the truth conditions are satisfied or not, then, even (*iii*), the truth condition, should be understood according to a contextualistic point of view. Indeed, before that the attributor could say that

(*c*). "*S* knows that *p*"

he should claim that

(*d*). "I know that *p* is true"

knowing that *p* is true is in fact a supposed required condition to know that (*c*); however, (*d*) is a knowledge-attributing sentence and then, according to EC, it should be evaluated considering the practical interests of the knowledge attributor. A clue, this one, that seems to suggest that it would be coherent for EC to argue that it's up to the knowledge attributor deciding if *p* is "true enough"³⁴ or "reasonably true" according to his purposes and practical interest - and not true *simpliciter*. After all, when the epistemic performance of a subject is evaluated, the judgement of the knowledge attributor always grounds on some specific epistemic basis. Imagine to evaluate if a subject *S* knows a proposition *p*: our epistemic custom - which appears to be mainly concerned with the practical aspects of the knowledge attributing practice, - would suggest to define a reasonable perimeter for our evaluation; e.g. if an ordinary epistemic standard would be at stake, we would admit many truths that in a more demanding context we would not assume. In a skeptical context, for example, Thomas would probably deny knowledge to himself about (*a*) since the possibility that an evil demon is deceiving him would be salient; nevertheless, in an ordinary context he would ignore the evil demon possibility and would smoothly attribute knowledge to himself. Indeed, in such a context certain error possibilities would be ignored, but also certain propositions would be assumed as true and certain methods to catch truth would be approved. Suppose that Thomas is at the zoo, looking to an animal that looks like a chimpanzee in a pen beside a banner that says 'chimpanzees': in this context, looking to the animal and considering that it quite exactly resembles to a chimpanzee could be enough for Thomas to admit that the animal in the pen is in fact a chimpanzee. Clearly someone could ask to Thomas: "How can you be sure that the animal in the pen is a chimpanzee?" and then he could reply making a list of the characteristics that distinguish a chimpanzee from a bonobo; or even, if the doubts raised would involve a stricter standard, he could test the DNA of the supposed chimpanzee to be surer. Anyway,

³⁴ This concept is ought to Elgin (2004).

every challenge moved to the epistemic position of Thomas would set an epistemic standard that, among other things, would also define which error possibilities could be properly ignored, which propositions could be smoothly assumed as true and which methods to catch truth could be considered as reliable.

The structure of the contextualist anti-skeptical argument seems to support this reading of EC. Indeed, according to the contextualist skepticism is in a certain sense a licit practice: When the epistemic standard is allowed to raise until a skeptical level in fact, according to EC we know quite nothing. In a skeptical context the warrant required to know a proposition is in fact generally out of reach, but also, in that context we cannot rely on propositions which we would otherwise assume as true, as well as on methods to catch truth which in an ordinary context would be approved; according to the contextualist then, in his own context the skeptic efficaciously undermines our confidence in the truth of many propositions which we would have assumed as true in an ordinary context. Therefore, in the skeptical context we cannot know that certain propositions are true, and then we cannot know that propositions. But if so, then (iii), the truth condition, should be understood by the contextualist in a moderate way: indeed, arguing that, if we would know that p is true *simpliciter* then the skeptic could not undermine our confidence in p would mean, for the contextualist, to endorse a Moorean approach towards skepticism which seems extraneous to EC; on the other hand, also an odd proposition as “I know that p is true, but in this skeptical context I don’t know that p ” should be avoided by the supporter of EC. However, maintaining that the truth of “ S know that p ” implies that p is true enough according to the standard of the knowledge attributor would let the contextualist to preserve his classic approach towards skepticism.

To be clear, arguing that the truth of a knowledge-attributing sentence as “ S knows that p ” implies that p is true enough - and not true *simpliciter*, - doesn’t mean that, if it would come out that p is false we would still have to say that “ S knows that p ” is true. However, if we would not know if p is a true proposition or not, we could still acknowledge that “ S knows that p ” is true according to the epistemic standard of the subject who has attributed knowledge to S . Let’s recall our example set in the natural reserve: in his demanding context Thomas doesn’t know if the proposition (a) is true; nevertheless, he knows - as a contextualist, - that one of the conditions for the truth of a proposition as “Lucy knows that (a)” is true in the safari context is that (a) is considered true enough in the safari context. Because Thomas knows that Lucy’s trip mates have attributed knowledge to her about (a), and since he cannot argue that (a) is false, Thomas could at least acknowledge that “Lucy knows that (a)” is true in the safari context. Of course, this would not mean that Lucy count as knowing that (a) according to standard at stake in the context of Thomas. In this way the contradiction of the FP could be avoided, and it’s open to the contextualist to acknowledge that some knowledge-attributions made in low standard contexts are true. The contextualist should then reject the traditional factivity principle (F) in favour of a contextualist friendly factivity principle as:

(F_i). S knows_X that $p \rightarrow p$ is reasonable true according to the standard of the subject who attributed knowledge to S

Therefore from:

(3). Thomas knows_H that Lucy knows_L that p

We cannot infer (4) anymore; what we could obtain is:

(4_i). Thomas knows_H that p is reasonably true according to standard at stake in Lucy's context

5 Concluding Remarks

Admitting the factivity principle seems to be a really dangerous step for EC: The idea that from a knowledge attribution sentence about p we can deduce that p is true *simpliciter* seems to be inconsistent *per se* with the formulation of EC according to which to the contextualist should be granted the possibility to know, in his more demanding context, that some knowledge attributions made in less demanding contexts are true.

Our reading of EC, rejecting the traditional factivity principle, if by one hand let us to solve the FP, on the other describes the knowledge-attributing practice as concerned mainly with the practical aspects of knowledge and, mostly, undoubtedly saddles the theory with a certain kind of relativism: Indeed, the practical interests and purposes of the knowledge attributor assume a really heavy role in the theory. However, it's in doubt if this consequence could have ever been avoided maintaining the main characteristics of EC; after all, as Stewart Cohen, John Greco and Leonid Tarasov have observed,³⁵ in a way or in another, relativism seems to be a companion of EC. The relativism consequence could perhaps be due to EC's "practical" nature: The theory is in fact patterned upon the so called ordinary language's evidences, which show an understanding of knowledge that seems to be committed especially to the needs of our practical reasoning; indeed, the practical interests of the knowledge attributor play a much than a pivotal role in the dynamics of the theory *per se*, and perhaps we have taken this premises to their more radical consequences. If then we conclude that EC entails a certain kind of relativism, much has to be done to put this relativism "under rigorous restraint"; after all, the ordinary language speakers' use of "know" doesn't seem to be totally "disparately varied and undisciplined, individual-dependent and arbitrary"³⁶ as has been argued by Tarasov. An inquiry in that direction is then especially needed.

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³⁵ Cohen (1987) p. 15, Greco (2008), Tarasov (2013).

³⁶ Tarasov (2013), pp. 574, 575.

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