

# Contextualism and Conceptual Disambiguation

*Matthias Steup*

St. Cloud State University, Minnesota, USA

I distinguish between Old Contextualism, New Contextualism, and the Multiple Concepts Theory. I argue that Old Contextualism cannot handle the following three problems: (i) the disquotational paradox, (ii) upward pressure resistance, (iii) inability to avoid the acceptance of skeptical conclusions. New Contextualism, in contrast, can avoid these problems. However, since New Contextualism appears to be a semantitized mirror image of MCT, it remains unclear whether it is in fact a genuine version of contextualism.

*Keywords:* contextualism, skepticism, ordinary knowledge, cartesian knowledge, conceptual disambiguation, the multiple concepts theory

## 1. The Disquotational Paradox

Contextualism is the view that the truth conditions of knowledge attributions are fixed by the standards of knowledge that are in place in the attributor's conversational context. In "Knowledge, Speaker, and Subject," Stewart Cohen defends contextualism against an objection that has been raised by, among others, John Hawthorne.<sup>1</sup> Here is what I take to be the gist of that objection, which involves two subjects each of whom makes a knowledge attribution. One subject is in a low-standard context, the other in a high-standard context. Let's refer to the first subject as 'Lynn', as in 'low-standard', and to the second as 'Hal', as in 'high standard'. Low-standard Lynn attributes to herself knowledge of her feet. She says, "I know that I have feet." Now suppose that high-standard Hal, for whatever reason, wishes to report to someone else what Lynn said. So Hal is going to say this:

(1) Lynn said "I know I have feet."

Next, we need to make a further assumption. Hal is a contextualist. So Hal is convinced that the truth value of Lynn's knowledge attribution is fixed by the low standard of knowledge that is in place in Lynn's context. Since Lynn's epistemic position vis-à-vis her feet satisfies low standards of knowledge, Hal will consider Lynn's knowledge attribution true. So he will judge that:

(2) What Lynn said is true.

But if Hal accepts (1) and (2), then surely he is in a position to disquote (1) and assert:

(3) Lynn knows that she has feet.

But now let's take into account that Hal is in a high-standard context. Since Hal is a contextualist, and since Lynn's epistemic position vis-à-vis her feet does *not* satisfy high-standards of knowledge, Hal must judge that (3) is false. It would appear, then, that contextualism generates a kind of paradox. Hal, the contextualist, must both assert and deny (3). To avoid this paradox, it would seem, contextualists must abandon the thought that we can move from (1) and (2) to (3). But that thought is extremely plausible. So it looks like contextualism is burdened with a seriously implausible consequence.

## 2. Cohen's Response

In response to the disquotational paradox, Cohen argues in the aforementioned essay that contextualists should distinguish between *knowing-by-low-standards* and *knowing-by-high-standards*. When Hal disquotes Lynn, what he *asserts* is

(3a) Lynn knows-by-low-standards that she has feet

whereas when he assesses, by his own lights, whether or not Lynn knows that she has feet, what he *denies* is

(3b) Lynn knows-by-high-standards that she has feet.

Clearly, then, what Hal asserts and what he denies differs. Hence there is no paradox.

On the face of it, this looks like a straightforward response. Note, however, that it amounts to a significant deviation from the following claim that, at least up to now, appeared to be an essential element of contextualism:

### The Contextualist Core Principle (CCP)

When an attributor, A, makes a knowledge ascription, and skeptical alternatives or error possibilities are salient in A's context, then A means 'know-by-high-standards' when using the word 'know'.<sup>2, 3</sup>

Actually, we can distinguish between two different claims that we find in the contextualist literature:

C1 When A's situation (*via* conversation or perhaps merely A's thoughts) makes error possibilities salient, then A is in a high-standard context.

C2 When A is in a high-standard context, then A means 'high-standard knowledge' when she uses the word 'know'.

Cohen's response to the disquotational paradox commits him to giving up either C1 or C2. Hal is, *ex hypothesi*, in a high-standard context, that is, in a context in which error possibilities or skeptical alternatives are salient. Yet when he uses the word 'know' for the purpose of reporting what Lynn said, he means 'low-standard knowledge'. So either the salience of skeptical alternatives does not put Hal in a high-standard context, or Hal's high-standard context does not fix what he means by 'know'.<sup>4</sup> Now, it would seem that we can omit context as the mediating link between (a) the salience/non-salience of skeptical alternatives and (b) what a person means when using the word 'know', focusing instead directly on the connection between (a) and (b). After all, 'context' is merely a term of art used to talk conveniently about a subject's position vis-à-vis salient or non-salient error possibilities. It is the connection between these and what a subject means by 'know' that is es-

sentential to what contextualism is all about. C1 and C2, therefore, can legitimately be condensed into CCP.

Since Hal is exposed to salient error possibilities, CCP tells us that, when Hal uses the word 'know' in a sentence such as (3), he has high-standard knowledge in mind. But Lynn's epistemic position vis-à-vis her feet does not satisfy high standards of knowledge. Thus CCP implies that Hal, as a contextualist, should *deny* (3). Thus we end up with a paradox. Since the inference from (1) and (2) to (3) seems beyond reproach, Hal is in a position to assert (3). But CCP tells us that he must deny (3). To avoid this paradox, Cohen proposes an addendum with which contextualism is to be embellished. This addendum declares, when it comes to disquotation, an exception to CCP. Contextualism, when modified in this way, is the following theory:

### **Contextualism Plus (C-Plus)**

When an attributor, A, utters that S knows that p, what A means by the word 'know' is fixed by the standards of knowledge in A's context, *except* when A reports a knowledge ascription made by another attributor, B. In that case, what A means by the word 'know' is fixed by the standards of not A's but rather B's context.

C-Plus is not burdened with the disquotational paradox. And in light of the evidence Cohen cites in "Knowledge, Speaker, and Subject," the addendum seems well motivated.<sup>5</sup>

However, declaring an exception to CCP creates a problem for plus-type contextualists. Once the door is opened to let in an exception, it will be difficult to shut it again when critics of contextualism point out that there are good reasons to admit even further exceptions. If too many exceptions are admitted, contextualism might lose its distinctive identity. Next, I will consider another exception that's called for.

### **3. The Problem of Upward-Pressure Resistance**

As we just saw, one problem for contextualism arises from reporting and disquoting knowledge attributions. Another problem for contextualism arises from the fact that, when error possibilities become salient, not everybody responds to the upward pressure on the standards of knowledge by shifting to a high-standard meaning of the word 'know'. Consider, for example, Roderick Chisholm. When he discussed skeptical scenarios, he insisted he knew that they didn't obtain. He also insisted that he had knowledge of the external world even though his evidence did not *entail* the falsehood of skeptical hypotheses. Here we have an example of an attributor who ascribed to himself knowledge of his hands even when entertaining skeptical alternatives. Contextualism would thus appear to imply that Chisholm, one of the great figures of 20th century epistemology, when he discussed skepticism in the philosophical seminar room and insisted he knew that he had hands, or that he wasn't a brain-in-a-vat, was confused about what he meant by the word 'know'. That's not a plausible implication.

Cohen actually acknowledges that a subject can resist the upward pressure towards higher standards that's generated by mentioning skeptical hypotheses.<sup>6</sup> So

perhaps Cohen would not want to say that, when Chisholm used the word ‘know’ in contexts in which skeptical alternatives were salient, he was confused about what he meant by that word. Perhaps Cohen would say instead that Chisholm remained unaffected by any upward pressure on the standards of knowledge and, as far as his own use of the word ‘know’ went, succeeded in employing a low-standard meaning of ‘know’ even though error possibilities were salient.<sup>7</sup>

But then we get a second exception to CCP. The first exception is that things are different when subjects report and disquote knowledge attributions made by others. The second exception is that things are different when subjects simply refuse to bow to whatever upward pressure might come from their conversational environment. Let us call the kind of contextualism that incorporates both of these exceptions, and thus in effect repudiates CCP, *New Contextualism* (NC). NC is to be contrasted with *Old Contextualism* (OC), which remains firmly committed to CCP. Compared with OC, NC is a bit watered down. It says that error possibilities made salient by conversational context sometimes *do*, and sometimes *do not*, fix the meaning/truth-conditions of knowledge attributions. One wonders whether that kind of view is still genuine contextualism. In the last section of this paper, I will argue that there is some reason to think that it is not. In the next section, I will introduce a theory that may be considered an alternative to contextualism.

#### 4. The Multiple Concepts Theory

According to Cohen, what recommends contextualism is its ability to solve the puzzle that arises from the following three propositions, which form an inconsistent set.

(C) If I know I have hands, then I know I’m not a BIV (a brain-in-a-vat).

(S) I do not know I’m not a BIV.

(H) I know I have hands.

The contextualist solution to the puzzle goes like this: Depending on whether an attributor is in a low or high standard context, she may either deny (S) and assert (H), or assert (S) and deny (H).<sup>8</sup> Contextualism, then, is a package that consists of two parts. The first is a low-standard/high-standard response to the skeptical paradox. The second is a semantic theory about the meaning/truth-conditions of sentences containing what contextualists consider context-sensitive words. The alternative theory I am going to consider retains the low-standard/high-standard response to the skeptical puzzle, but rejects what contextualists say about the semantics of ‘know’. This alternative is what we might call the *Multiple Concepts Theory* (MCT).

According to MCT, there are as many *concepts* of knowledge as there are different *standards* of knowledge. For the sake of simplicity, let’s focus on just two: Cartesian knowledge, or knowledge<sub>c</sub>, and ordinary knowledge, or knowledge<sub>o</sub>. If a subject is to have knowledge<sub>c</sub> of p, her evidence must eliminate any possibility of p.<sup>9</sup> If a subject is to have knowledge<sub>o</sub> of p, her evidence must merely eliminate any reasonable doubt regarding p. Equipped with this distinction, the MC-theorist will respond as follows to the inconsistent triad that makes up the skeptical paradox: When we are talking about knowledge<sub>c</sub>, we must reject (H). But that shouldn’t be upsetting, for knowledge<sub>c</sub> isn’t really what matters to us. The kind of knowledge we value is

knowledge<sub>o</sub>. If we didn't have knowledge<sub>o</sub> of our hands, that *would* be upsetting. But when it comes to knowledge<sub>o</sub>, we may retain (H) and deny (S). The gist of the MC reply to skepticism, then, is this: Regarding knowledge<sub>c</sub>, skepticism is correct but not worrisome. Regarding knowledge<sub>o</sub>, skepticism is worrisome but not correct.<sup>10</sup>

This response to skepticism is stated with admirable clarity in Fred Feldman's book *A Cartesian Introduction to Philosophy*.<sup>11</sup> Feldman sums up the reply's main point as follows: "So the upshot is that if we take the [skeptical] argument to be about practical [ordinary, in my terminology] knowledge, it has a remarkable conclusion, but an indefensible premise. If we take it to be about metaphysical [Cartesian, in my terminology] knowledge, it is sound, but the conclusion is not of much interest. If we try to retain the interesting conclusion, but make the premises all true, the argument will lose its soundness [due to equivocation]. In any case, we have no proof of any surprising form of skepticism."<sup>12</sup>

According to Cohen, a solution to the skeptical paradox succeeds only if it can explain why we feel we can't give up (H) and yet, when considering the BIV hypothesis, think that (S) is true. In short, a successful solution to the paradox must explain why we find skepticism both crazy and compelling.<sup>13</sup> Contextualism and MCT both do this by appealing to shifts or differences in meaning. MCT, however, does not come with a semantic theory that assigns a significant role to conversational context. According to MCT, the dual nature of skepticism—its seeming combination of cogency and craziness—results from not shifts in conversational context but the hidden *ambiguity* of the word 'know', and lasts only as long as the ambiguity is not cleared up.

Let's distinguish between *transparent* and *hidden* ambiguity. Consider the word 'pen'. It means either 'writing instrument' or 'enclosure for animals'. This is transparent ambiguity, for context typically settles what a speaker means when using the word 'pen'. In contrast, the word 'know' is an instance of hidden ambiguity because ordinary speakers are not even aware of the distinction between knowledge<sub>o</sub> and knowledge<sub>c</sub>. It's only after some exposure to epistemology that people grasp that there is a *difference* here. As a result, ordinary usage of the word 'know' is unsettled, and thus ambiguous with regard to the high standard/low standard distinction.<sup>14</sup>

Unless we carefully attend to how different occurrences of the word 'know' can differ in meaning, we may not realize that when we say we know we have hands, and when we say we do not know we are not BIVs, these utterances are true only if, in each case, a different concept of knowledge is employed. The failure to differentiate between these concepts, the MC Theorist argues, makes skepticism look stronger than it really is. For if one fails to disambiguate, one might conclude—fallaciously—that one doesn't know (in the ordinary sense) that one has hands *because* one doesn't know (in the Cartesian sense) one isn't a BIV. So according to MCT, the appeal of skepticism can be explained by pointing out that skepticism is correct at least as far as knowledge<sub>c</sub> is concerned, and will be given more credit than it deserves when one fails to distinguish between knowledge<sub>c</sub> and knowledge<sub>o</sub>.

## 5. MCT and Old Contextualism Compared

In this section, I'll focus on differences between MCT and OC. In the next section, I will discuss three problems that add up to a serious challenge for OC.

MCT differs from OC in three ways. First, there is a difference with regard to the semantics of ‘know’. According to OC, what subjects have in mind when they use the word ‘know’ is, as a general rule, fixed by what error possibilities they attend to. According to MCT, the word ‘know’ is not context sensitive in that way. The essential claim MCT is committed to is that subjects can use the word ‘know’ in its low-standard sense even when they are attending to skeptical alternatives. Additionally, MC theorists might as well argue—even though that would not be essential to their view—that the standard use of ‘know’ hardly ever, even in contexts in which skeptical alternatives are salient, assumes a high-standard meaning. The exception would, of course, consist of contextualists who think that what they mean by ‘know’ is as flexible as what they mean by ‘flat’. I myself, in any case, always have low-standard, ordinary knowledge in mind when I use the word ‘know’ without any attached qualifier. Indeed, outside of epistemology circles I have not ever encountered anyone who gave me reason to believe that her use of ‘know’ shifts in the way OC advocates suggest.

Second, there is a difference in the way advocates of OC and MCT respond when confronted with a skeptical argument. The presentation of a skeptical argument makes error possibilities salient, and thus, assuming the truth of CCP, invariably creates a high-standard context. Hence their response, when confronted with a skeptical argument, is necessarily concessive.<sup>15</sup> The MC Theorist, in contrast, rejects the skeptical argument as either invalid (due to equivocation between the Cartesian and the ordinary meaning of ‘know’), unsound (because in the ordinary sense of ‘know’, we know skeptical hypotheses to be false), or uninteresting (because when it comes to Cartesian knowledge, the skeptical conclusion is not disturbing).<sup>16</sup>

Third, the two theories differ with regard to the assessment of skepticism. According to OC, skepticism enjoys genuine appeal, since their conclusions are true in high-standard contexts.<sup>17</sup> According to MCT, there is not much to be said on behalf of skepticism at all. If a skeptic argues that we don’t have ordinary knowledge of our hands, her argument will be either invalid or unsound. If, on the other hand, she asserts that we don’t have Cartesian knowledge of our hands, the conclusion is not exactly earth shattering. We can live quite comfortably knowing we have very little knowledge that is based on infallible evidence. Either way, the status of skepticism as a philosophical contender turns out to be significantly diminished.

Fourth, according to OC, we need to appeal to the context sensitivity of ‘know’ if we are to give a satisfactory response to the skeptical paradox (its seemingly dual nature of craziness and cogency). MCT denies this. If we distinguish between different meanings of ‘know’, context becomes irrelevant. Consider ‘tall’. If Ted is 6’ 3” tall, we can correctly call him a ‘tall person’ in any context, but a ‘tall basketball player’ in none. Here, context is rendered irrelevant by disambiguating between tall *persons* and tall *basketball players*. Likewise, we can correctly say in any context that Cohen has ordinary knowledge of his hands, but in no context that he has Cartesian knowledge of his hands. Again, context is made irrelevant by making a conceptual distinction.

Fifth, practitioners of OC and MCT differ with regard to the way they do epistemology. The former do epistemology in a new way. It’s epistemology after what we might call the *semantic turn*. The focus has shifted away from concepts and propositions to words and utterances. MC theorists, in contrast, do epistemology the old-

fashioned way. They are interested in, not sentences, but *propositions* that attribute or deny knowledge, understood either in the Cartesian, or the ordinary way. For evaluating the truth values of such propositions, the question of how the meaning of sentences varies with context is irrelevant.

### 6. Three Problems for Old Contextualism

Consider again the disquotational paradox. Hal, who is in a high-standard situation, reports:

(1) Lynn said “I know I have feet.”

Knowing that Lynn is in a low-standard situation, he asserts:

(2) What Lynn said is true.

He then deduces from (1) and (2):

(3) Lynn knows that she has feet.

But since Hal is in a high-standard context, he must judge that

(4) Lynn does not know that she has feet.

High-standard contexts arise because of the salience of skeptical alternatives. Advocates of OC will have to say that Hal remains stuck in his context until the salience of the skeptical alternatives is significantly diminished. Yet even though Hal is confronted with salient error possibilities and thus uses, according to OC, ‘know’ in the high-standard sense, nothing prevents him, as a contextualist, from asserting (1) and (2). Thus, for practitioners of OC, the only way to block the inconsistency of (3) and (4) from arising is to deny the inference from (1) and (2) to (3)—a move that is altogether lacking in plausibility. It remains unclear, then, how OC advocates can handle the disquotational paradox.

For MCT, the paradox raises no problem. MC theorists will simply say the following. If Lynn, when she attributed to herself knowledge of her feet, had ordinary knowledge in mind, then what she said is true, and what she said can be disquoted without saying anything false. If, on the other hand, she had Cartesian knowledge in mind, then what she said was false, and then she cannot be disquoted without saying something false. That’s a straightforward application of what MCT is all about: conceptual disambiguation.

Next, consider again the problem of upward pressure resistance. OC advocates cannot handle it. Committed to CCP, they have to say that, when Chisholm discussed skepticism and thus was confronted with skeptical error possibilities, he meant ‘high-standard knowledge’ when using the word ‘know’. Now, we may safely assume that Chisholm knew he didn’t have high-standard knowledge of his hands. Yet, according to OC, when Chisholm in such situations claimed to know he had hands, he had high-standard knowledge in mind. OC, then, cannot avoid the highly implausible consequence that Chisholm, when in a discussion of skepticism he claimed he knew he had hands, was confused about the concept of knowledge he had in mind.

MCT, on the other hand, handles the problem easily *via* disambiguation. MC theorists would say that unrelenting antiskeptics, such as Chisholm, distinguish between ordinary and Cartesian knowledge. So when Chisholm in discussions of skepticism insisted he knew he had hands, or that he wasn't a BIV, he had, the salience of skeptical alternatives notwithstanding, low-standard knowledge in mind.

Finally, consider the challenge of debating the skeptic. Again, the very activity of debating the skeptic cannot be carried out without allowing error possibilities to become salient. Hence OC, because of its commitment to CCP, cannot avoid the consequence that a philosopher who debates the skeptic must accept the skeptical argument's conclusion and admit that, say, she doesn't know that she has hands.

MC theorists have no problem avoiding such a concessive response. Employing the device of disambiguation, they will say that, when it comes to ordinary knowledge, the skeptic's argument is disturbing but unsound, and when it comes to Cartesian knowledge, it is sound but not disturbing.

It turns out, then, when we judge the merits and demerits of MCT and OC in light of the three problems we just examined, MCT looks quite a bit more appealing than OC, at least to me.

## 7. New Contextualism

NC is not burdened with any of the three problems we considered in the previous section. Instead of CCP, NC embraces what we might call the thesis of *semantic hyper-flexibility*. What a person means by 'know' can change within a split-second, whether or not error possibilities are salient. Hal, who is entertaining, say, the possibility of being deceived by a Cartesian demon, and impressed by this error possibility, has high-standard knowledge in mind when using the word 'know'. Yet, when within the same conversation, just seconds later, he reports what Lynn said and then disquotes her, his use of 'know' refers to low-standard knowledge, which makes the disquoted sentence "Lynn knows that she has hands" come out true. Yet when the disquotational episode is concluded, Hal can easily switch back to the high-standard meaning of 'know', and truly assert that Lynn doesn't know that she has hands. Since in the two assertions, "Lynn knows she has hands," and "Lynn does not know she has hands," Hal's use of the word 'know' means something different, there is no conflict.

To pull off this maneuver, the rejection of CCP is indeed needed. Once error possibilities have become salient, their salience does not go away easily. Surely, just by virtue of reporting what Lynn said and disquoting her, Hal does not manage to revoke to salience of the skeptical scenario that has been the conversation's focus. Hence, if indeed Hal employs the low-standard meaning of 'know' for the duration of the disquotational episode, he does so notwithstanding the fact that the skeptical scenario under consideration remains salient throughout this episode. Clearly, then, what defines NC as opposed to OC is the rejection of CCP. Indeed, it is precisely the rejection of this principle that allows the NC advocate to avoid the other two problems we examined.

Consider Chisholm, our representative of the principled anti-skeptic who resists the upward pressure generated by the consideration of skeptical scenarios. If contextualists wish to avoid the untoward consequence of having to accuse Chisholm



of being confused about the meaning of his own use of the word ‘know’, they must deny that, in Chisholm’s case, exposure to salient error possibilities fixed what Chisholm meant when he used the word ‘know’. Rather, they would have to say that, on account of how he *intended* to use the word ‘know’, Chisholm succeeded in sustaining the low-standard meaning of his use of ‘know’ even when he was entertaining skeptical error possibilities. Again, it is the rejection of CCP that enables the NC advocate to avoid the problem of upward pressure.

Finally, since proponents of NC are no longer committed to CCP, they need not be concessive when debating the skeptic. Debating the skeptic invariably makes for salient error possibilities. Thus, according to OC, when debating the skeptic, one cannot help using the word ‘know’ in the high-standard sense. Advocates of NC, however, deny that salient error possibilities have this effect. Hence, when Stewart Cohen debates the skeptic, he might indeed continue using the word ‘know’ in the low-standard sense, by virtue of his *intending* to use the word ‘know’ in that sense. And thus he might, even when debating the skeptic and entertaining skeptical scenarios, correctly attribute to himself knowledge of his hands. Thus the objection in question—contextualism is bound to be concessive when it comes to debating the skeptic—has no purchase when it comes to NC.

NC, then, avoids the three problems that recommend MCT over OC. The reasons that recommend MCT over OC are not, therefore, reasons that recommend MCT over NC.

### 8. Is New Contextualism Contextualism?

There might not be any reason to prefer MCT to NC because, (i) NC and MCT are simply two different versions of one and the same theory, and (ii), NC is a version of contextualism in name but not substance.

Compare:

- (1) We have ordinary knowledge of our hands.
- (2) We correctly attribute to ourselves ordinary knowledge of our hands.
- (3) When we say “We have ordinary knowledge of our hands,” we speak truly.

(1) is the sort of thing an MC Theorist would say. NC advocates tend to say something like (2) or (3) instead. Not much of substance, it would seem, hinges on how the point is put. Rather, (1)–(3) just seem to be different ways of saying the same thing. What’s important is that in each case the device of conceptual disambiguation is employed. Ordinary knowledge is distinguished from Cartesian knowledge, and the qualifier ‘ordinary’ is in each case used to specify which kind of knowledge we take ourselves to have. MCT employs this device, and so does NC. It is difficult to see, therefore, how MCT and NC could differ in the treatment of the puzzles we considered.<sup>18</sup>

But is NC still contextualism? There are two reasons to think it might not be. First, like MCT, NC differentiates between two meanings of the word ‘know’. Use of that distinction and the rejection of CCP are the defining characteristic of NC. However, the very move of distinguishing between two senses of ‘know’ makes it hard to see what work there might be left to do for the appeal to context, that is, the salience or non-salience of error possibilities. After all, an advocate of NC can truly

assert (2) and (3) whether she is in a context with salient error possibilities or not. It's one fact that we have ordinary knowledge of our hands, and another fact that we do not have Cartesian knowledge of our hands.<sup>19</sup> Whether or not we are in a position to assert these facts is simply not constrained at all by the error possibilities that are salient within our conversational context, just as whether we are in a position to assert that knowledge requires truth, or that no proposition is both true and false, is not in any way constrained by whether or not skeptical alternatives are salient.<sup>20</sup>

Secondly, Cohen himself points out that what a person means by the word 'know' is, to a large extent, a matter of how the person *intends* to use that word. Consequently, what a person means by 'know' is to a large extent not at all settled by her conversational context, i.e., by whether or not she is entertaining skeptical alternatives. Now, it may of course be true that, when subjects consider skeptical hypotheses, they are sometimes, or even frequently, led to adopt a high-standard meaning of the word 'know'. But if we distinguish between ordinary and Cartesian knowledge (MCT), or using 'know' in either the high- or low-standard sense (NC), it is unclear what relevance we should attribute to the psychology underlying people's use of the word 'know'.

Cohen, I suspect, will say that a psychological explanation of why people vacillate with regard to what they mean by 'know' is important because we need it for a proper response to the skeptical paradox: the puzzle of explaining why we find skepticism simultaneously crazy and appealing. According to Cohen, it is a datum that we vacillate between rejecting and accepting skeptical arguments.<sup>21</sup> His explanation of such vacillation is that what we mean by 'know' varies contextually, depending on whether skeptical alternatives are salient or not. When a skeptic succeeds in making the standards of knowledge go up, we have high-standard knowledge in mind when using the word 'know,' unlike in ordinary life, when we have low-standard knowledge in mind. In the former context, we agree with skeptical arguments, in the latter, our attitude changes to anti-skepticism.<sup>22</sup>

But from the point of view of either MCT or NC, is it really a datum that we vacillate between finding skepticism cogent and finding it crazy? It would seem that, once we distinguish between ordinary and Cartesian knowledge, there is no such datum. Consider skeptical arguments that attack our claim to have ordinary knowledge of our hands. There is nothing cogent about such arguments. Obviously unsound, they do not appeal at all.<sup>23</sup> Now consider skeptical arguments attacking Cartesian knowledge. Such arguments are sound—indeed obviously sound, as made evident by the nonexistence of contemporary epistemologists who maintain that we have Cartesian knowledge of our hands. What, then, of our vacillation between skepticism and anti-skepticism? Differentiation between high- and low-grade knowledge, it turns out, generates a set of three arguments, none of which produces vacillation. We *reject* skeptical arguments against ordinary knowledge and arguments that equivocate between ordinary and Cartesian knowledge. We *accept* skeptical arguments against Cartesian knowledge. There is no vacillation in any of these cases. Rather, what we find crazy and what we consider cogent are different skeptical arguments. For advocates of either MCT or NC, there is, therefore, no vacillation datum that needs to be explained by appealing to conversational context. It remains unclear, therefore, what work is left to do for the appeal to conversational context.<sup>24</sup>

Let me conclude. I do not wish to suggest that there is anything wrong with the new version of contextualism that Cohen has proposed. To the contrary, since NC

would appear to be a semanticized mirror image of MCT, and since I've always liked MCT, I feel no reluctance in saying that I am sympathetic towards NC. Its employment of the distinction between high and low standard meanings of 'know', and its rejection of CCP, are features that, in my opinion, recommend NC. I should add, however, that MCT has never struck me as contextualism in disguise.<sup>25</sup> Now, if NC is indeed a semanticized mirror image of MCT, there are two possibilities: either MCT is a version of contextualism, or NC is not a version of contextualism. As we have seen, employment of the two-grades-of-knowledge distinction results in the disappearance of vacillation between skepticism and anti-skepticism, and allows us to make knowledge attributions whose correctness is entirely independent of the conversational context within which they are made. As a result, once we employ the two-grades-of-knowledge distinction, there is no longer any useful work left to do for the appeal to conversational context. I am inclined to conclude, therefore, that NC might indeed not be a version of contextualism in any meaningful sense.<sup>26</sup>

### Notes

1. Cohen, forthcoming. For Hawthorne's objection, see his 2004, pp. 98–111.
2. In the contextualist literature, it is typically claimed that conversational context fixes the *truth conditions* of knowledge attributions. In contrast, in his response to the disquotational paradox, Cohen talks of conversational context as fixing what attributors *mean* when they use the word 'know'. (Similarly, John Hawthorne articulates the contextualist thesis and identifies the difference between contextualism and invariantism using the concept of *semantic value*.) See his 2004, pp. 51ff. This difference in terminology need not be viewed as indicating any change in how contextualism is construed. The point seems simply to be that, since the truth conditions of a sentence are fixed by its meaning, context determines the truth conditions of a sentence *via* determining its meaning (or semantic value, to factor in Gricean implicature). This is consistent with the following passage, in which Keith De Rose makes it abundantly clear that he thinks of conversational context as determining what speakers *mean* when they make knowledge ascriptions: "Attributor factors set a certain standard the putative subject of knowledge must live up to in order to make the knowledge attribution true: They affect how good an epistemic position the putative knowledge must be in to count as knowing. They thereby affect the truth conditions and the content or meaning of the attribution." De Rose 1992, p. 921.
3. A strict approach to error possibilities as the source of adopting high standards of knowledge is taken by David Lewis. See his *Rule of Attention*, spelled out in his 1996, p. 559.
4. Cohen could avoid this consequence by claiming that, whereas before and after Hal reports what Lynn said, skeptical alternatives are salient to him, their salience is suspended for the duration of the disquotational episode. But that would not be a good move. Surely the salience of error possibilities is not quite as flexible as that. Moreover, as we will see below, this move would not be suitable to handle another problem that forces the contextualist to give up either C1 or C2: the problem of upward pressure resistance. I'll return to this point in note 7.
5. See Cohen's example involving basketball players.
6. See Cohen 2001, p. 92f. "On a contextualist view, the standards that govern a context are determined by a complicated pattern of interaction among the intentions, expectations, and presuppositions of the members of the conversational context. Though skeptical considerations frequently lead to a strong upward pressure on the standards, the shift to a skeptical context is not inevitable. The pressure toward higher standards can sometimes be resisted. One device for doing this is adopting a certain tone of voice."
7. Here is my sequel to note 4. We can now see why contextualists should not try to avoid the dilemma of having to choose between C1 and C2 by claiming that disquotational activity suspends the salience of error possibilities that were salient just a second before. For if in case of the Chisholm example they wanted to argue analogously, they would have to say about Chisholm that skeptical alternatives were *never* salient to him (since he *always* used 'know' in the low-standard sense). That, surely, would be a claim utterly lacking in plausibility.
8. See, for example, Cohen 1999, p. 65f.

9. Put differently, if a subject has knowledge of  $p$ , then she has evidence for  $p$  that entails the truth of  $p$ .
10. See Engel 2004 and Russell 2004 for examples of the MC Response to skepticism.
11. Feldman 1986, p. 35ff.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 36. In his contribution to the *Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, De Rose (1999) refers to views according to which there are two concepts of knowledge as “limiting cases of contextualism,” and then goes on the state that the “great rival” to contextualism is invariantism. However, as I argue in this paper, the conceptual distinction between low and high grade knowledge makes the appeal to context superfluous. It seems to me, therefore, that MCT should be seen, not as a special manifestation of contextualism, but as, in addition to invariantism, a second rival for contextualism. For De Rose’s objections to MCT, see his remarks in the same article on p. 195.
13. See Cohen 1999, p. 63.
14. There are other examples of hidden ambiguity. People sometimes judge actions to be free or not free. Typically, what they have in mind does not have any specific implications with regard to the distinction between compatibilist and libertarian freedom. In general terms, hidden ambiguity can be found wherever philosophy tells us that the kind of thing an ordinary word refers to can be construed in significantly different ways.
15. Thus Richard Feldman objects to contextualism on the basis of its inherent friendliness towards skepticism. See Feldman 1999.
16. Consider BIV skepticism: (1) If I don’t know I’m not a BIV, then I don’t know I have hands. (2) I don’t know I’m not a BIV. Therefore: (3) I don’t know that I have hands. If ‘know’ means Cartesian knowledge in the premises but ordinary knowledge in the conclusion, the argument is invalid due to equivocation. If ‘know’ refers to Cartesian knowledge throughout, it is sound, but its conclusion is not surprising. If, finally, ‘know’ refers to ordinary knowledge throughout, the argument is unsound because (2) is false. Note that this latter point is shared by MCT and contextualism, since contextualists hold that skeptical conclusions are false when it comes to knowledge attributions that are uttered in ordinary contexts. According to both MC theorists and contextualists, knowledge attributions like “I know I’m not a BIV” are true in ordinary contexts.
17. Thus Cohen says: “Contextualism does explain the stubborn appeal of skeptical arguments by allowing that there is some truth in skepticism.” Cohen 2005, pp. 71. Cohen’s contextualist strategy is to limit the damage by offering a good news/bad news theory. The good news is that in ordinary contexts, our typical knowledge attributions are true. The bad news is that, in contexts in which skeptical alternatives are salient, they are false. See Cohen 2005, p. 61f. In note 24, I briefly address the question of whether NC can retain the good news/bad news approach.
18. Cohen made that point in his response to my commentary on his paper at the SOFIA XV conference.
19. I should note that we might of course want to debate whether we do in fact possess as much ordinary knowledge as we would like to think. A different kind of skepticism, based on what Hawthorne calls “Lottery Propositions,” takes as its target not knowledge based on infallible evidence, but knowledge based on the ordinary kind of evidence we think we have in daily life situations. See Hawthorne 2004, chapter 1. That kind of skepticism, however, is not under consideration here.
20. We might think of fancy examples of evidential defeat in which people lose knowledge of ordinary things. But such evidential context dependence is not what contextualists have in mind, and is not the kind of context dependence at issue here.
21. See Cohen 1999, p. 63, and Cohen 2005, p. 56f.
22. See Cohen 2005, p. 56f.
23. Again, our claim to ordinary knowledge might not be as secure as we would like to think. See note 19. Again, such skepticism is not at issue here. To the extent such skepticism rests on good grounds, it poses a problem for MCT and OC/NC alike.
24. It’s doubtful, therefore, that Cohen can retain the good news/bad news approach to skepticism. The bad news is that, when we are impressed by skeptical scenarios, it seems to us that we cannot escape the skeptical conclusion. However, if we distinguish between (i) skeptical arguments against ordinary knowledge, (ii) skeptical arguments that equivocate, and (iii) skeptical arguments against Cartesian knowledge, it’s hard to see what the bad news is supposed to be. I have yet to meet the epistemologist who thinks that the unavailability of Cartesian knowledge of our hands amounts to bad news. Rather, it would seem that, once we distinguish between (i), (ii) and (iii) above, it’s good news for anti-skeptics all around.
25. Certainly it wasn’t advertised as contextualism by Fred Feldman.

26. An earlier version of this paper was presented as a commentary on Stewart Cohen's paper "Knowledge, Speaker, and Subject," at the 2004 SOFIA XV conference on *Circularity, Epistemic Principles, and Externalism*, in Porto Alegre, Brazil. A somewhat expanded version was presented at the 2004 *Contextualism* conference in Bled, Slovenia. I wish to thank the following for helpful discussions of the issues discussed in or related to this paper: Stewart Cohen, Wayne Davis, Mylan Engel, Nikola Kampa, Alastair Norcross, Bruce Russell, Ernest Sosa, and David Sosa.

## References

- Cohen, S. Forthcoming. "Knowledge, Speaker, and Subject."  
 Cohen, S. 2005: "Contextualism Defended." In Steup and Sosa, pp. 56–62.  
 Cohen, S. 2001: "Contextualism Defended: Comments on Richard Feldman's 'Skeptical Problems, Contextualist Solutions'." *Philosophical Studies* 103, 87–98.  
 Cohen, S. 1999: "Contextualism, Skepticism, and the Structure of Reasons." *Philosophical Perspectives* 13.  
 Engel, M. 2004: "What's Wrong With Contextualism, and a Noncontextualist Resolution of the Skeptical Paradox." *Erkenntnis*.  
 De Rose, K. 1992: "Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52, 913–929.  
 De Rose, K. 1999: "Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense." In *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, ed. by John Greco and Ernest Sosa. New York: Blackwell Publishers.  
 Feldman, F. 1986: *A Cartesian Introduction to Philosophy*. New York: McGraw Hill.  
 Feldman, R. 1999: "Contextualism and Skepticism." *Philosophical Perspectives* 13, 91–114.  
 Feldman, R. 2001: "Skeptical Problems, Contextualist Solutions." *Philosophical Studies* 103, 61–85.  
 Hawthorne, J. 2004: *Knowledge and Lotteries*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.  
 Lewis, D. 1966: "Elusive Knowledge." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74, 549–567.  
 Russell, B. 2004: "How to Be an Anti-Skeptic and a Noncontextualist." *Erkenntnis*.  
 Steup, M. and Sosa, E. 2005: *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Received: October 2004

*Matthias Steup*  
*Department of Philosophy*  
*Brown Hall 109*  
*St. Cloud State University*  
*720 4th Avenue South*  
*St. Cloud, MN 56301-4498*  
 USA  
 e-mail: [steup@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:steup@stcloudstate.edu)