

Why Contextualists Cannot Know They Are Right: Self-Refuting Implications of Contextualism

Elke Brendel

Johannes Gutenberg-University, Mainz, Germany

Conversational contextualism in epistemology is characterized by four main theses: 1. the indexicality of knowledge claims thesis; 2. the attributor contextualism thesis; 3. the conversational contextualism thesis, and 4. the main thesis of contextualism according to which a knowledge claim can be true in one context and false in another context in which more stringent standards for knowledge are operant. It is argued that these theses taken together generate problems for contextualism. In particular, it is shown that there is no context in which the contextualist can truthfully claim to know her theory is true. Since these results were obtained only with principles the contextualist cannot give up—like the principle of epistemic closure and the principle that knowledge implies truth—it seems that contextualism is in need of a thoroughgoing revision if it is to become a successful epistemic theory.

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1. Introduction

Contextualism has become one of the leading paradigms in epistemology in recent years. There are a plethora of different contextualist approaches to knowledge. What unites these different contextualist accounts is the shared view that the truth values of knowledge ascriptions—like “S knows that p (at time t)” —are context-dependent. But in spelling out this general thesis contextualist approaches begin to diverge. In particular, there is an ongoing debate about what constitutes a context and what determines changes in contexts. The most popular version of contextualism in contemporary epistemology is that championed by David Lewis, Keith DeRose and Stewart Cohen.¹ This version is often described as *conversational contextualism* or *semantic contextualism*.² In the following, I will focus on this version of contextualism. I will spell out the main theses of contextualism and argue that they generate problems for contextualism. In particular, it will be shown that the contextualist cannot know some of the central claims of contextualism.

2. Four Central Theses of Contextualism

According to contextualists, knowledge claims are *indexical*. To explain the kind of indexicality involved in knowledge ascriptions, ascriptions of *flatness* are often used as an example. According to “normal” standards given in a context of a billiard game, the claim made by a player: “This billiard table is flat” is true if the table does not have any “bumps” that can be detected even by a closer look at the table. But in higher standards contexts in which microscopic irregularities count, the claim “This billiard table is flat” is false, i.e., the claim “This billiard table is not flat” is true. Competent speakers wouldn’t judge these two claims to be contradictory to each other. It is perfectly clear that the conditions of correctly applying the term “flat” to the table have changed in the second claim. This hidden context-sensitivity can be made explicit by using different indices representing different contexts in which different standards are operant. Furthermore, it should be noticed that sentences like “X is flat” are always context-sensitive. There is no context-independent objective application of the term “flat”.

The indexicality of ascriptions of flatness is a model for the indexicality of knowledge claims. The truth values of knowledge claims can also vary with different contexts. Let’s consider a variation of a famous example by Dretske³: During a zoo visit, a person S is looking at some animals in a paddock that she identifies as zebras. This visual experience occurs under normal perceptual conditions and S has prior knowledge of what zebras look like. Furthermore, there is a sign at the fence that says “zebras”. Let’s assume that the animals S is looking at are in fact zebras and that S’s knowledge about zebras allows her to reliably distinguish zebras from other similar looking animals such as donkeys and ponies.

According to contextualists, in such a situation during a normal zoo visit, S *knows* that the animals she is looking at are zebras, even though she cannot rule out the possibility that these animals are cleverly disguised mules. But let’s now assume that it is rumored that in order to save money the zoo director adds to the few zebras he owns some cleverly disguised mules that look exactly like real zebras. In this situation the possibility that the animals S is looking at are cleverly disguised mules becomes *salient*. Since S cannot (by merely looking at the animals) rule out this possibility, S *does not know* that the animals she is looking at are zebras—even if she is in fact looking at real zebras. Contextualists also contend that like “flat” there is no context-independent objective knowledge ascription.

The *Indexicality of Knowledge Claims Thesis* (IKCT) is one of the central theses of contextualism. It can be roughly summarized as follows:

(IKCT) All knowledge claims of the form “S knows that p” are indexical.

The contextualist answer to the question of whose standards determine the truth values of a given knowledge ascription brings us to the second central thesis of contextualism. The truth value of “S knows that p” depends, according to contextualism,

on whether *S* conforms to the standards given by the context of the *speaker*, i.e., the context of the *knowledge ascriber* or *knowledge attributor*. Thus, in determining the truth value of a knowledge claim, the subject's epistemic standards are not relevant—except in the case of knowledge self-ascriptions. The relevant epistemic standards are determined by the context of the speaker who attributes knowledge to the subject. Of course, *S*'s epistemic position plays a role in fixing the truth value of “*S* knows that *p*”: If *S* does not believe that *p* or does not meet the standards of the context given by the speaker, then “*S* knows that *p*” will not be true in this context.

We can now state the second thesis of contextualism that I call the *Attributor Contextualism Thesis* (ACT):

- (ACT) The truth conditions of knowledge attributions are determined by the context of the knowledge attributor. “*S* knows that *p*” is true only if *S* satisfies the standards for knowledge operant in the knowledge attributor's context.

One consequence that follows from IKCT and ACT consists in the following: Given an epistemic subject *S* and a proposition *p*, it is possible that the claim “*S* knows that *p*” is true in one context, but false in another context, i.e., “*S* knows that *p*” is true in one context, while “*S* does not know that *p*” is true in another context—for the same *S*, same *p* (and same time). I will call this the *Main Thesis of Contextualism* (MTC). Let c_i and c_j stand for different contexts with $i, j \in \mathbb{IN}$ (\mathbb{IN} is the set of natural numbers). If $i < j$, then the standards in c_j are higher than in c_i —so for example, c_j could be a context in which skeptical hypotheses are discussed, i.e., in which the possibility of being a brain in a vat is salient, and c_i could be a “normal” standards context in which brains in vats scenarios (or other skeptical scenarios) are not salient. Let *p* be the proposition that *S* has hands. Then, according to MTC, it is possible that “*S* knows that *p*” is true in c_i but false in c_j .

We can now state the main thesis of contextualism in more formal terms as follows:

- (MTC) Let *S* be an epistemic subject, *p* a proposition and c_i, c_j contexts with $i, j \in \mathbb{IN}$ and $i < j$, then it is possible that: “ $K_S(p)$ ” is true in c_i and “ $\neg K_S(p)$ ” is true in c_j .

If it is true that *p*, *S* believes that *p* and is in a position to rule out the error-possibilities given in c_i , but cannot rule out at least one error-possibility given in c_j , then the possibility mentioned in MTC is actualized. In the following, I will refer to the claim that “ $K_S(p)$ ” is true in c_i and “ $\neg K_S(p)$ ” is true in c_j as the *main claim of contextualism*.

IKCT, ACT, and MTC are nicely expressed in the following quote by Cohen:

I want to defend the view that ascriptions of knowledge are context sensitive. According to this view, the truth value of sentences containing the word “know”, and its cognates will depend on

contextually determined standards. Because of this, such a sentence can have different truth-values in different contexts. Now when I say “contexts”, I mean “contexts of ascription”. So, the truth value of a sentence containing the knowledge predicate can vary depending on things like the purposes, intentions, expectations, presuppositions etc., of the speakers who utter these sentences. This view has the consequence that, given a fixed set of circumstances, a subject S, and a proposition p, two speakers may say “S knows p”, and only one of them thereby say something true. For the same reason, one speaker may say “S knows p”, and another say “S does not know p”, (relative to the same circumstances), and both speakers thereby say something true.⁴

The fourth and last defining thesis of contextualism concerns the driving force behind context changes. What induces a change in context? What are the criteria for lowering or raising the standards? According to the contextualist account favored by Lewis, DeRose and Cohen, context changes are induced by *conversational* features. The mere *mentioning* of an error-possibility to a proposition p in conversation makes this possibility *salient* and *relevant* for those involved in the conversation, and the subject must be in a position to rule out this possibility in order to know that p. So, just *drawing attention* to an error-possibility that has not yet been considered raises the standards of knowledge. Lewis, in particular, stresses the point that a possibility in which not-p holds and which cannot be eliminated by S’s evidence becomes a relevant alternative *if it is not ignored* (by the speaker) *in the given context*. According to Lewis’ so-called *Rule of Attention*, a possibility we (i.e., the speaker and hearer of a given context) are *attending to in conversation* is relevant in the given context—even if it is a very far-fetched error-possibility that we might have ignored so far.⁵

Cohen points out that the *salience of error-possibilities* can affect the truth-values of knowledge attributions. If we draw attention to the possibility of being a brain in a vat, this possibility becomes salient in the given context. In doing so, we thereby raise the standards of knowledge extremely high, so high in fact that in the newly acquired high standards context every knowledge ascription ascribing external world knowledge will turn out false. We can only lower the standards by *ignoring* the error-possibilities. But this seems to be difficult. How can we just forget about them once they have become salient?

I will call the claim that context changes are induced by conversational features the *Conversational Contextualism Thesis* (CCT):

- (CCT) Context changes are solely induced by the *dynamics of conversation*. By *mentioning* (or *drawing attention to*) error-possibilities that have not yet been considered, we can raise the standards for knowledge ascriptions in a given context. We can lower them by ignoring or forgetting error-possibilities.

One advantage of the contextualist approach characterized by the four central theses is that it seems to account for the strength and persuasiveness of skeptical arguments but nevertheless allows for the truth of many knowledge claims in

everyday life. In doing so, contextualists do not have to reject the *principle of epistemic closure* (PEC) in any given context. This principle states that if S knows p and knows that p entails q, then S also knows that q, or to put it a bit more formally:

(PEC) If $K_S(p)$ and $K_S(p \rightarrow q)$, then $K_S(q)$.⁶

In ordinary everyday contexts in which skeptical alternatives are irrelevant and can be ignored, knowledge ascriptions about everyday propositions are true, provided the subject meets the ordinary standards that govern this everyday context (and provided the proposition is in fact true and the subject believes that it is true). Even sentences about the knowledge of the negation of skeptical hypotheses, like “S knows that she is not a brain in a vat” will be true in ordinary standards contexts (provided the skeptical hypotheses are in fact false, i.e., we are not in fact brains in vats and provided the subject believes that she is not a brain in a vat), since in ordinary contexts she does not have to rule out the possibility of being a brain in a vat. So, contextualists can preserve the truth of many everyday knowledge ascriptions (including the truth of knowledge claims about the negation of skeptical hypotheses).

Although contextualist approaches have an indisputable *prima facie* plausibility, they also face serious problems. All four theses have been attacked in the literature. In what immediately follows, I will briefly mention the main existing objections against contextualism. I will then turn to my own criticisms of contextualism. These latter novel criticisms take aim at both the contextualist answer to skepticism and the main claim of contextualism.

3. Are Knowledge Claims Indexical?

The alleged analogy between knowledge claims and other clear-cut examples of indexical claims, like ascriptions of flatness, has been challenged. First of all, the indexicality of ascriptions of flatness are obvious for every competent speaker. Competent speakers normally do not have any difficulty detecting different standards governing flatness ascriptions in different contexts. According to contextualists, the same is true for knowledge ascriptions.

But why then is it not a trivial fact that knowledge ascriptions are indexical, if it is so obvious that ascriptions of flatness are indexical? Why do even competent speakers have such difficulties in recognizing the indexicality of knowledge ascriptions, and why do they have—in contrast to ascriptions of flatness—difficulties in detecting the standards of knowledge that are operant in a knowledge claim—although “know” is surely as common in the English language as “flat” (maybe we even use the term “know” more often than “flat”)? Why are so many philosophers still of the opinion that there is a real and fundamental *disagreement* between the skeptic and the non-skeptic? Why do they think that the skeptic who denies that we

have knowledge and the anti-skeptic who insists that we do have knowledge *contradict each other*?

The skeptical paradox is often presented in the literature by the following inconsistent triad of sentences:

- (i) I know that I have hands.
- (ii) If I know that I have hands, then I know I am not a (handless) brain in a vat.
- (iii) I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat.

Philosophers have debated at length about which proposition to give up (e.g., the skeptic opts for giving up (i), Dretske rejects (ii), and the Moorean rejects (iii)). But if the indexicality of knowledge claims were so obvious, (i)–(iii) wouldn't even generate a paradox at all, because everyone would immediately recognize the contextual shifts from one proposition to the other and would immediately realize that the claims are not inconsistent. But this is not what happens. To the contrary, many people think of the inconsistent triad as stating a fundamental skeptical paradox, and they have great difficulty in trying to solve this problem. Ordinary indexical expressions, like "flat", typically do not generate such problems for competent speakers of the language.⁷

If knowledge-ascriptions are at all indexical, then their indexicality, in contrast to the indexicality of flatness ascriptions, is a hidden semantic feature that even competent language-users have a difficult time recognizing. Is the hidden-indexicality thesis plausible? According to Stephen Schiffer it is not:

What's hard to see is how the hidden-indexical proposal can sustain the idea that fluent speakers systematically confound their contexts, so that even when they're in a context in which Tough is the induced standard occurring in the *false* proposition *they* have just asserted, they mistakenly think they're just asserted a *true* proposition, a proposition that evidently contains the standard Easy that would be induced by an utterance of the problematic sentence in a quite different context. It's as though a fluent, sane, and alert speaker, who knows where she is, were actually to assert the proposition that it's raining in London when she mistakenly thinks she's asserting the proposition that it's raining in Oxford.⁸

Second, it seems to be fairly easy to switch between the different standards of ascriptions of flatness. If microscopic irregularities count, we agree that "This billiard table is flat" is false. But, if for some reason, the context changes and less stringent standards for flatness are put in place, we have no difficulty recognizing that the sentence "The billiard table is flat" is true in that context. So, the lowering and raising of standards seems to be equally easy in these cases. But, it has been argued that, as far as knowledge-ascriptions are concerned, there seems to be a clear asymmetry between raising and lowering standards.⁹ It seems to be fairly easy to raise the standards for knowledge. Somebody can draw our attention to an error-possibility that we haven't thought about yet or we can ourselves deprive us from knowing that p by reflecting on possible defeaters to p.

Critical thinkers who do not want to rush to conclusions often do call their alleged knowledge claims into question by reflecting on error-possibilities and thereby raising

their knowledge standards. But once the standards have been raised by conversational mechanisms, it seems to be extremely difficult to lower them again. Once an error-possibility has been mentioned that we cannot rule out, this possibility casts doubt on our knowledge, and we cannot just ignore it in order to be in a position to have knowledge again.¹⁰ Since “knows” seems to behave differently than other indexical expressions, there is at least a *prima facie* reason to think that it is not an indexical, after all.

What could be the reason for the above mentioned asymmetry between raising and lowering standards of knowledge ascriptions? When we raise the standards for knowledge ascriptions by drawing attention to an undefeated error-possibility that we find relevant, *we* are in no position to say whether S really has knowledge in lower standards contexts, since the *truth of her belief in lower standards contexts* (i.e., a necessary condition for the truth of her knowledge claims in lower standards contexts) seems to be doubtful in light of these error-possibilities.

Of course, from an outside perspective where it is already assumed that the relevant error-possibilities to *p* are defeated, the error-possibilities do not cast doubt on the truth of the sentence “S knows that *p*” in lower standards contexts. But normally we are not in such a privileged epistemic position that allows us to take the truth of S’s beliefs for granted. Once we learn about the deceitful zoo director, if S is not in a position to rule out the cleverly-disguised-mule possibility, then the truth of S’s belief that the animals she is looking at are zebras is called into question. And as long as we, the knowledge ascribers, know of no defeater to this error-possibility, it is not proper for us to ignore it. That is the reason why a lowering of the standards seems to be so hard.

On the other hand, if we already know that the error-possibilities that are salient in high standards contexts are defeated, then we seem to be justified in ignoring these possibilities, and once we do ignore them the standards are lowered as a result. If we, for example, learned that the animals were genetically tested and that all of them have turned out to be real zebras, we could properly ignore the cleverly-disguised-mule possibility, thereby lowering the standards. So it is not at all clear that the alleged asymmetry between “knows” and other indexicals concerning the ease with which one can lower standards exists. So it seems that one main argument against the indexicality thesis could be rejected by a contextualist.¹¹

4. Objections to the Conversational Contextualism Thesis

The mere mentioning of skeptical hypotheses in a philosophy seminar usually doesn’t have the effect on students that contextualism predicts. Most students are not at all concerned about their everyday knowledge when discussing the possibility of being a brain in a vat. A typical reaction is that brain-in-vat scenarios are considered as far-fetched thought-experiments that they don’t have to take seriously—not even in the

seminar room. As long as there is no good reason why we should think we are brains in vats, the mere mentioning of this skeptical hypothesis cannot render most of our everyday knowledge claims false. But most students think that Neo—the hero in the movie *The Matrix*—even before he learned about the “real world”, had some evidence (in the form of experiential incoherence) for denying most of his knowledge claims about the alleged “external world”. So, there must be more than the mere mentioning of a skeptical possibility in order for us to be inclined to question our everyday knowledge claims.

According to CCT, it is psychologically almost impossible to ignore an error-possibility in a conversation after it has been mentioned. Sometimes the only way to free oneself from skeptical worries once they had been mentioned, is—as Hume describes it vividly in his *Treatise*—to leave the study and find distraction in a bar by playing backgammon and making merry with friends.¹² CCT also has the unpleasant consequence that if a participant in a conversation stubbornly continues to draw attention to a far-fetched error-possibility to p that nobody else really thinks to be relevant, the sentence “S knows that p” can never be true—as long as this “spoil-sport” is around.

In this case not even Hume’s strategy helps—as Lewis points out:

If you bring some hitherto ignored possibility to our attention, then straightway we are not ignoring it at all, so *a fortiori* we are not properly ignoring it. How can this alteration of our conversational state be undone? If you are persistent, perhaps it cannot be undone—at least not so long as you are around. Even if we go off and play backgammon, and afterward start our conversation afresh, you might turn up and call our attention to it all over again.¹³

But clearly this doesn’t seem to be right. If an error-possibility is just not relevant for the conversation’s subject, we shouldn’t pay attention to it, even if someone persistently mentions it in the conversation. So, context changes are not solely induced by conversational features alone.

5. Can Knowledge Get Lost?

One other apparent problem for contextualism is that knowledge can be *lost* or *destroyed*, if the standards are raised. Lewis, for example, writes:

In the strict context of epistemology we know nothing, yet in laxer contexts we know a lot.¹⁴

[I]t will be inevitable that epistemology must destroy knowledge. That is how knowledge is elusive. Examine it, and straightway it vanishes.¹⁵

According to ACT, the truth values of knowledge claims are determined by the context of the knowledge ascriber. The epistemic subject to whom we ascribe knowledge and we, the knowledge ascribers, do not have to stand in any communicative relation to each other. This is true in particular, if we, according to our own standards, ascribe or deny knowledge to a historic figure that is already dead. But if knowledge is something like a *cognitive state* of the epistemic subject and if

Lewis is right in claiming that knowledge can be lost or destroyed by raising the standards, how is it then possible that we, the knowledge ascribers, can change or even destroy a certain cognitive state of a person to whom we have no contact at all—just by reflecting, for example, on skeptical hypotheses? In particular, it seems ridiculous to assume that we can *posthumously* change a cognitive state of a dead person. So, something must be wrong when we say that a person in an ordinary standards context *knew* that she had a hand, but now in a higher standards context in which skeptical hypotheses are salient the person *no longer knows* that she has a hand.

Strictly speaking, the contextualist shouldn't say that a person S knows p in one context and does not know p in another context, because, according to DeRose, the contextualist does not attribute or deny a property (knowledge) to S in different contexts. For a contextualist there is no such property—knowledge *per se*—that can be gained or lost. Instead, the contextualist is making a *metalinguistic* claim about the truth of knowledge ascriptions of the form “‘S knows that p’ is true in c_i ” according to different standards. To say “S knows that p in context c_i ” is actually inaccurate and misleading. The correct statement must be: S knows that p is true in c_i . While the former assertion ascribes “knowledge” to a person in a context c_i , the latter assertion is a claim about the truth value of a knowledge ascription. It claims that S meets the (attributor's) standards for knowledge ascriptions given in context c_i .¹⁶ DeRose points out that we shouldn't mix up the two versions. Anyone who derives the former object-language version from the latter metalinguistic version commits the so-called *fallacy of semantic descent*.¹⁷

Cohen too is aware of this difference when he writes:

For stylistic reasons, following Lewis, I will not always be careful about formulating the contextualist thesis metalinguistically. So instead of saying that a sentence containing the knowledge predicate can be true in one context and false in the other, I will say that whether we know can vary across contexts. Strictly speaking, though, the metalinguistic formulation should be used.¹⁸

In contrast to Lewis, DeRose claims that when we change the context by raising the standards neither *objective knowledge per se* nor *contextualist knowledge* can be lost. The former doesn't exist and can therefore not be lost. To say that “contextualist knowledge gets lost” by raising the standards would mean that, while shifting from the less strict standards of context c_i to the stricter standards of context c_j , the knowledge claim “‘S knows p’ is true in c_i ” would no longer be true in c_j . But it is still the case that “S knows that p” is true *in* c_i , even if we shift the context to c_j . So even if most of our knowledge claims are false in a high standards context in which the possibility of being a brain in a vat is salient, contextualists seem to have a consoling message: In those high standards contexts, the truth values of our knowledge claims *in less stringent* contexts stay the same. So, the proposition that “‘S knows that she has a hand’ is true in c_i ” should be the object of a *true* knowledge ascription of S in c_j .

In this sense, it seems that (to put it in object-language terms) “contextualist knowledge cannot be lost”. In the following section I will show, however, that as soon as we raise the standards, the truth of knowledge ascriptions in lower standards contexts can no longer (to put it again in object-language terms) be known in these higher standards contexts.

6. Knowledge in Low Standards Contexts and High Standards Contexts

Suppose again that *S* is an epistemic subject and *o* is a proposition about ordinary fact of everyday life (such as having a hand). Let’s assume that the sentence “*S* knows that *o*” is true in c_i , and that “*S* knows does not know that *o*” is true in c_j , since c_j is a context in which the skeptical hypothesis of being a brain in a vat is salient. Put a bit more formally:

(1a) “ $K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_i

and

(1b) “ $\neg K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_j (i.e., “ $K_S(o)$ ” is false in c_j).

If we change the context from c_i to c_j , the truth value of the sentence “ $K_S(o)$ ” changes, but the fact that “ $K_S(o)$ ” is true *in* c_i does not change when we are in the high standards context c_j , i.e., “ $K_S(o)$ ” is true *in* c_i ” should still be a true sentence *in* c_j . In this sense, as explained in the former section, contextualist knowledge cannot get lost when we move to higher standards. Since this is a central thesis of contextualism, this sentence should not only be true in c_j , but should also *be known* by any contextualist *S* in context c_j , or to put it in correct metalinguistic terms: “ $K_S(“K_S(p)$ is true in $c_i”)$ ” should be a *true* sentence *in* c_j .

In short, according to contextualism, the following should hold:

(2) “ $K_S(“K_S(o)$ is true in $c_i”)$ ” is true in c_j .

But I will show that the conjunction of (1), (2) and two other principles that the contextualist can hardly deny leads to a *contradiction*.

The first principle states the trivial fact that knowledge implies truth. In contextualist and metatheoretic terms, this means that for any knowledge claim of the form “ $K_S(p)$ ”, if “ $K_S(p)$ ” is true in a context c_n (where c_n can be any context), then *p*. If *p* does not hold, then, of course, “ $K_S(p)$ ” is false in every context. We can now formulate this (metalinguistic version of the) principle that knowledge implies truth (KPP_m) as follows:

(KPP_m) “ $K_S(p)$ ” is true in $c_n \rightarrow p$

(where $n \in \mathbb{IN}$ and *p* is a proposition).

The second principle is the principle of epistemic closure. We have already seen above, that keeping PEC is one of the main tenets of and main motivations behind contextualism. Instead of PEC, we will use the metalinguistic version of the principle of epistemic closure (PEC_m):¹⁹

(PEC_m) If “K_S(p)” is true in c_n and “K_S(p → q)” is true in c_n, then “K_S(q)” is true in c_n

(where n ∈ IN and p, q are propositions).

From KPP_m we get:

(*) “K_S(o)” is true in c_i → o.

Since KPP_m is a trivial conceptual claim about knowledge (and not an empirical claim about the external world that can be challenged by a skeptical hypothesis), S should know that (*) is true in any context, i.e., in particular, the following claim should hold:

(**) “K_S(“K_S(o)” is true in c_i → o)” is true in c_j.

From (2), (**) and PEC_m we get:

“K_S(o)” is true in c_j—which contradicts (1)b)!

This contradiction is fatal for the contextualist, since the principles we used to derive the contradiction are the principles definitive of the contextualist position.

The principle KPP_m is clearly beyond reproach. Truth is generally considered as a necessary condition for knowledge. KPP_m expresses a conceptual fact about the notion of knowledge. Therefore, it is also very plausible to assume that an epistemic subject S who is capable of understanding the concept of knowledge knows that KPP_m is true in every context. Even skeptical worries of the external world shouldn't cast doubt on the truth of KPP_m.

PEC_m is a central principle of contextualism. As noted at the outset, one of the principal goals of contextualism is to find a solution to the skeptical problem that allows us to retain epistemic closure in any given context. So, a contextualist cannot give up PEC_m.

(1) expresses the main thesis of contextualism. That an ordinary knowledge claim, like “S knows that she has a hand,” is true in ordinary standards contexts, but false in high standards contexts where skeptical hypotheses are salient, just is the core claim of contextualism. To reject (1) is to give up contextualism.

What about (2)? If we were to reject (2), knowledge—contrary to DeRose and others—would get lost. That “K_S(o)” is true in c_i is also central to the contextualist approach to knowledge and in particular, to the contextualist solution to the skeptical challenge. Even if knowledge claims about ordinary facts are false in contexts where we deal with skeptical hypotheses, this does not affect the truth of those knowledge

claims in ordinary standards contexts. If a switch to higher standards contexts affected the *truth* of our knowledge claims *in ordinary standards contexts*, so that in higher standards contexts sentences asserting the truth of our knowledge claims in lower standards contexts were false, the skeptic would triumph along the line.

So, if the fact that “ $K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_i is so important for the contextualist approach, the contextualist should *know* this fact even in standards higher than c_i . Even if she is reflecting on skeptical hypotheses, she should still know that her knowledge claims about ordinary facts are *true in standards contexts lower than in the skeptical context in which she now happens to be*. But since contextualists are surely not willing to give up (1), KPP_m and PEC_m they have to give up (2), which means they cannot know this in higher standards contexts, i.e., “ $K_S(“K_S(o)”$ is true in c_i)” cannot be true in c_j —and this would be good news for the skeptic.

7. Can Contextualists Know the Main Claim of Contextualism?

With a very similar argument we can also show that the contextualist cannot even know the main claim of contextualism in high standards contexts. If o is again a proposition of everyday life, c_i is an ordinary standards context and c_j a skeptical context, then, according to contextualism, (1) (= the conjunction of (1)a) and (1)b)) holds, i.e.,:

- (1) “ $K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_i and “ $\neg K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_j .

If a contextualist is reflecting about this main claim of contextualism (1), her standards for knowledge must be at least as high as the standards in c_j . Since she is reflecting about a knowledge claim in a skeptical context, skeptical hypotheses are salient. (1) is the main claim of contextualism and S , as a contextualist, should know (1) in c_j .

To put it metalinguistically, the following should hold:

- (2)* “ $K_S(“K_S(o)”$ is true in c_i and “ $\neg K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_j)” is true in c_j .

But, as we will see, (2)* turns out to be false. The main claim of contextualism cannot be known in c_j .

Here is the proof: If a conjunctive knowledge claim is true in a context c_n , so are the conjuncts. A metalinguistic version of the *principle that knowledge distributes over conjunction* ($DIST_m$) can be formulated as follows:

$$(DIST_m) \quad “K_S(p \text{ and } q)” \text{ is true in } c_n \rightarrow “K_S(p)” \text{ is true in } c_n \text{ and } “K_S(q)” \text{ is true in } c_n$$

(where $n \in \mathbb{IN}$ and p, q are propositions).

From $DIST_m$ and (2)* (substitute “ $K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_i ” for “ p ” and “ $\neg K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_j ” for “ q ”) we can derive:

- (i) “ $K_S(“K_S(o)”$ is true in c_i)” is true in c_j

and

(ii) “ $K_S(\neg K_S(o))$ is true in c_j ” is true in c_j .

With (i), PEC_m and (**) (i.e., “ $K_S(K_S(o) \text{ is true in } c_i \rightarrow o)$ ” is true in c_j) we get:

“ $K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_j ,

and with (ii) and Kpp_m we get:

“ $\neg K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_j .

So, we have derived the *contradiction*:

“ $K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_j and “ $\neg K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_j ,

i.e., “ $K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_j and “ $K_S(o)$ ” is not true in c_j

$DIST_m$ appears to be an unquestionable principle about knowledge and, as we have already seen, PEC_m and (**) are beyond reproach for a contextualist. So, it seems that (2)* has to go. But this, of course, is a fatal result for a contextualist, since it entails that the contextualist cannot consistently know the main claim of contextualism, i.e., the claim that she knows that her ordinary knowledge ascription is true in ordinary standards contexts and false in high standards contexts can never be true in high standards contexts.

The contextualist could object that this is not at all a devastating result. If we are in a context with such extremely high standards for knowledge, it is quite natural that in this context we just don’t know anything—including the main claim of contextualism. But this response is premature. First of all, it is not clear to me why the possibility of being a brain in a vat (which is the skeptical possibility that is salient in c_j) is an *error*-possibility to the main claim of contextualism. Even for brains in vats with a favor for contextualism, (1) remains true, i.e., the truth value of (1) wouldn’t change even if we cannot rule out the possibility of being a brain in a vat.

Second, it should be noticed that the obtained result does not only apply for the extremely high standards context c_j . Our result can be *generalized* such that:

“ $K_S(K_S(p))$ is true in c_n and “ $\neg K_S(p)$ ” is true in c_m ” is true in c_m

holds for *any contexts* c_n and c_m with n, m and any proposition p such that:

“ $K_S(p)$ ” is true in c_n and “ $\neg K_S(p)$ ” is true in c_m .

This, for example, means, that in a context c_m where the possibility that the animals are painted mules are salient, S cannot know that the sentence “These animals are zebras” is true in the context c_n (context of a “normal” zoo visit), but false in context c_m . So, even much less remote skeptical worries than brains in vats can deprive us from knowing the main claim of contextualism.

Even if the contextualist finally agrees that she cannot know the main claim of contextualism in a context c_j (or more generally, in any context c_m with n, m such

that “ $K_S(p)$ ” is true in c_n and “ $\neg K_S(p)$ ” is true in c_m), she could nevertheless object, that at least in context c_i (or more generally, in contexts c_k with k, m), she *could know* the main claim of contextualism, since in contrast to (2)*,

(2)** “ $K_S(“K_S(o)”$ is true in c_i and “ $\neg K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_j)” is true in c_i

does not lead to a contradiction.²⁰

That (2)** does not lead to a logical contradiction is in fact true, but, nevertheless, there still remains an unsatisfying result for contextualism. From the standpoint of the knowledge ascriber, we have seen that S meets the standards given in context c_i so that S can know the main claim of contextualism in this context c_i . But if the contextualist S herself reflects about her own theory and ask herself whether she knows that “ $K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_i and “ $\neg K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_j is true or not, she is referring to the high standards context c_j in which the skeptical hypothesis of being a brain in a vat is salient.

If CCT is right and the mere mentioning of a skeptical hypothesis raises the standards, she can’t help but find herself in the skeptical context c_j , and, as we have seen, in this context S cannot know the main claim of contextualism. So it seems that the knowledge of the contextualist’s main claim in c_i (metalinguistically put in (2)**) is *not cognitively available* to the contextualist. S can know in c_i the main claim of contextualism, but S cannot *truthfully assert* that she knows the main claim of contextualism, because the assertion of the main claim of contextualism seems to push her automatically up to the skeptical context c_j .

8. Conclusion

Although at first blush contextualism appears to be a very promising epistemic theory in contemporary epistemology, in the final analysis, it faces serious problems. It seems that some of the core claims and theses of contextualism do not withstand closer scrutiny. Admittedly, there is good reason to believe that the truth values of knowledge claims of the form “S knows that p” depend on the standards given in a certain context and can therefore differ from context to context. The idea of this context-dependency of knowledge claims squares with intuitions most people have about knowledge. In particular, if we raise the standards by considering error-possibilities it seems to be in fact much harder to acquire knowledge (or to put it meta-linguistically: it seems harder to verify our knowledge claims). But there must be good reasons to take an error-possibility seriously. The mere mentioning of an error-possibility is not by itself a sufficient condition for raising the standards. The considering of the error-possibility must be motivated by the questions, interests and goals of the epistemic project or inquiry of the epistemic subject or the epistemic community searching for knowledge. That’s why a pure *conversational* contextualism characterized by CCT is inadequate.

In view of these shortcomings of CCT, Antonia Barke has developed an epistemic theory—that she calls “Epistemic Contextualism”—in which context changes are epistemically (and not conversationally) motivated. According to her account, context changes are driven by calling one or more assumptions of an inquiry into question. But it should be noted that Barke’s account is still a contextualist account. She subscribes to the thesis that the truth values of knowledge claims depend on contexts. So, even though Barke rejects CCT and replaces it with her own inquiry-driven account of context change, she remains committed to the core idea of contextualism, namely, that a knowledge claim can be true in one context and false in another; and as we have seen, any account that is committed to this core idea will be susceptible to the worries I have raised here.

I have also mentioned some reasons that cast doubt on the indexicality thesis of contextualism (IKCT). In particular, the asymmetry between raising and lowering standards for knowledge, the fact that indexical expressions, like “flat”, do not give rise to paradoxes similar to the “inconsistent triad” generated by knowledge claims, and the fact that most people are, in contrast to flatness ascriptions, simply unaware of the presumed indexicality of knowledge ascriptions, seem to indicate that there are fundamental differences between “know” and other uncontroversially indexical expressions.

But even if the contextualist concedes that there are obvious dissimilarities between knowledge ascriptions and ascriptions of other uncontroversially indexical expressions, like “flat”, she can still maintain that these dissimilarities do not give rise to clear-cut arguments against IKCT. As for the alleged asymmetry between raising and lowering the standards, I have already indicated how the contextualist could defend the indexicality thesis. The contextualist could, for example, respond as follows: Since there are no doubt numerous senses of the word “know”, we should not expect an adequate philosophical analysis to account for all our linguistic intuitions concerning knowledge. An adequate philosophical analysis of “knowledge” should nevertheless try to be in accordance with most of these intuitions and at the same time give a theoretically fruitful explication of this term in which the most notorious problems and paradoxes concerning knowledge are solved. In doing this, it is possible that hidden features of the notion of knowledge are uncovered that most language-users have been unaware of. The contextualist could argue that the indexicality of knowledge claims is such a hidden feature and that most people are just unaware of the context-dependency of our knowledge claims. The unawareness of context shifts could then be the reason why so many philosophers are still puzzled by the skeptical paradox.

So, even if there are obvious dissimilarities between “know” and “flat”, the general idea of the indexicality of knowledge ascriptions can nevertheless be indispensable within an adequate philosophical analysis of the concept of knowledge. Thus, despite the standard criticisms attacking CCT and IKCT, it might seem that the prospects for contextualism are not so bad after all.

The arguments I have presented here show that contextualists cannot know main results of their own contextualist account and thus are more devastating than the standard criticisms, since they undermine the central ideas of contextualism. Since these results were obtained only with principles the contextualist cannot give up—like the principle of epistemic closure and the principle that knowledge implies truth—it seems that contextualism is in need of a thoroughgoing revision if it is to become a successful epistemic theory.

Notes

1. The most important of these author's publications on contextualism are: Cohen (1986), (1988), (1998) and (2000), DeRose (1995) and (1999), Lewis (1979) and (1996).
2. See, for example, Pritchard (2002) in which *semantic contextualism* is sharply distinguished from *inferential contextualism*, as advanced by Michael Williams. Inferential contextualism is, in particular, not a version of attributer contextualism. According to Williams, it is the *subject's context* that is relevant for the determination of the truth values of knowledge ascriptions. Furthermore, context changes are not necessarily induced by conversational features—like the mere mentioning of error-possibilities. In inferential contextualism a change from context c_i to context c_j can be motivated for example by the questioning of certain assumptions that stood fast in c_i but are no longer “methodological necessities” in context c_j . For details see, for example, Williams (2001a), (2001b), and (2004).
3. See Dretske (1970), 1016.
4. Cohen (2000), 94.
5. See Lewis (1996).
6. There is one obvious counterexample to PEC discussed in the literature: S can know p and can know that p entails q , but fails to know q because she does not “see” that her knowledge is connected to q . So, strictly speaking we should state PEC in the following refined version: If S knows p and knows that p entails q , and believes q as a result of believing p and believing p entails q , then S knows that q . For reasons of simplicity I will stick to the simple version of PEC. For a discussion about different versions of the principle closure see, for example Hales (1995) and Barke (2002), chapter 1.
7. This objection against the indexicality of knowledge claims can also be found in Davis (2004).
8. Schiffer (1996), 326.
9. See, for example, Barke (2004) and Davis (2004).
10. For a much more detailed and fundamental critique on the indexicality thesis of knowledge claims see Davis (2004).
11. For a similar argument in favor of the indexicality thesis of contextualism see Ernst (2004).
12. See Hume (1978), 268. For a more detailed critique on the question whether, according to conversational contextualism, one really knows more in a bar than in a seminar room where skeptical hypotheses are discussed, see Engel (2004).
13. Lewis (1996), 560.
14. Lewis (1996), 551.
15. Lewis (1996), 560.
16. Consider again the “flat” example. When I claim that the Rheinland is flat to Lance Armstrong, but not flat to me, this, of course, does not imply that an alleged property of the Rheinland—namely its flatness—is lost or destroyed by considering Armstrong's higher standards. Of course, I didn't change any property of the Rheinland just by talking about it. What I intended to say is that ac-

ording to my standards the sentence “The Rheinland is flat” is false and that according to Armstrong’s standards “The Rheinland is flat” is true. So, in this respect there is a parallel between “knowledge” and “flatness”.

17. See DeRose (2000).

18. Footnote 10 in Cohen (1998), 292. See also footnote 14 in Cohen (1988) for a similar remark.

19. Cohen explicitly demands for such a metalinguistic version of the principle of epistemic closure—see Cohen (1988), footnote 14, 118.

20. Let’s see what happens if we use (2)** instead of (2)* in the above proof. With DIST_m and (2)** we get:

(iii) “ K_S (“ $K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_i)” is true in c_i

and

(iv) “ K_S (“ $\neg K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_j)” is true in c_i .

With (iii) and KPP_m we get:

“ $K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_i —and therefore (with KPP_m): o .

Form (iv) and KPP_m it follows:

“ $\neg K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_j .

Thus, we have derived that o and “ $\neg K_S(o)$ ” is true in c_j .

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Elke Brendel
Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz
Department of Philosophy
D-55099 Mainz, Germany
e-mail: brendel@uni-mainz.de