

Contextualism

Patrick Rysiew

1. INTRODUCTION: WHAT CONTEXTUALISM IS (AND ISN'T)

Whether you know that p depends on many features of you and your situation. Epistemologists disagree over which such features are important – whether knowing depends on what else you believe, on objective features of your situation beyond whether p is true, on certain counterfactuals holding of you, on your evidence for (/against) p , on the etiology of your belief, and so on. The natural thought, though, is that the *meaning* of ‘ S knows that p ’, e.g., is insensitive to shifts in factors such as these, and that once such factors are fixed the proposition expressed by such a sentence is either true or false.

Hence the significance of epistemic contextualism (EC). For contextualists deny the ‘invariantist’ (Unger 1984) thinking just articulated. In the words of one leading contextualist, EC is the view that “the truth conditions of sentences of the form ‘ S knows that p ’ or ‘ S does not know that p ’ vary in interesting ways depending on the context in which they are uttered” (DeRose 1992: 914), and ‘context’ here means none other than such things as the interests, expectations, and so forth of knowledge attributors (e.g., DeRose 1999: 189-190; Cohen 1999: 57). Put slightly differently, EC is the view that the proposition expressed by a given tokened knowledge sentence depends upon features of the knowledge attributor(s)’ psychology and/or conversational-practical situation. As a result of such context-dependence, it’s said, utterances of a given such sentence, made in different contexts, may differ in truth value.

Before proceeding further, and by way of further clarifying EC, we should pause to fend off a pair of possible confusions.

The first stems the fact that different views have been termed ‘contextualist’. Again: EC as we’re discussing it here concerns the *truth conditions* of knowledge sentences, or the propositions expressed by utterances thereof. The thesis is that it is only relative to a contextually-determined standard that a knowledge sentence expresses a complete proposition; further, change the standard, and you change what the sentence expresses. This view differs significantly from ‘contextualism’ of the sort defended by David Annis (1978) and Michael Williams (1991), which is an attempt to clarify the nature of knowledge and/or justified belief itself. At the same time, in its linguistic orientation EC naturally *comports* with another bearer of the ‘contextualism’ label: viz., the general semantical-linguistic approach that sees ‘context’ as central to certain fundamental semantic issues, including meaning itself. (See, e.g., Recanati 1989, Travis 2005.) Still, EC should not be confused with this general philosophy of language view.

The second possible confusion to guard against concerns just wherein the relevant context-sensitivity resides, if EC is true. Here, it’s useful to consider utterances involving uncontroversially context-sensitive terms. For instance, just what proposition is expressed by an utterance of

- (1) 'It's raining,'
- (2) 'I'm hungry,' or
- (3) 'That's red,'

depends in obvious ways upon such facts as the location (1) or identity (2) of the speaker, and/or the referent of the demonstrative (in 3). Similarly, it is plausible that attributions of tallness or flatness are context-sensitive, insofar as there are varying standards that one might have mind in applying either predicate and which affect just what is said in doing so.

Note, though, that insofar as the truth *value* of such utterances “depends on context”, that is because their truth *conditions* — or, the proposition expressed thereby — are so dependent: it is not as though (1)-(3) each has fixed truth-evaluable contents, the truth *values* of which happen to depend on context, perhaps because there are context-variable standards for *their* assessment. So too for EC: though the thesis is sometimes put in terms of the context-variability of knowledge sentences’ truth *values* (e.g., Rieber 1998: 190; Cohen 1998: 289 and 2005: 57), or variable “standards” for knowing or for what “counts as” knowing (DeRose 1995), this is misleading (see, especially, Bach 2005: Section I): those truth values shift only because, according to EC, *different propositions are expressed in different contexts*.

Likewise, just because EC is a thesis about knowledge-sentences’ truth conditions it is not a thesis about knowledge itself. So it is misleading too when EC is described, as it sometimes is, as the view that *whether one knows* depends upon context (Feldman 2004: 24; Bach 2005: 54-55). EC is an *epistemological* theory only in the sense that it concerns sentences used in attributing (/denying) “knowledge”, as opposed to those employing some non-epistemological term(s).

But while it does not concern knowledge (/justified belief) in the way that traditional epistemological theories do, EC’s departure from the traditional epistemological assumption of ‘invariantism’ is claimed to allow an attractive solution to certain longstanding puzzles about knowledge, as well as to best comport with our everyday knowledge-attributing practices. As we’ll see, there is good reason to doubt whether EC delivers on all it promises, and indeed whether it is really well supported. But first, a brief review the sort of considerations used to motivate EC is in order.

2. THEORETICAL MOTIVATIONS

Although EC is not itself a theory of knowledge (or other epistemic matters), it has been said to afford a resolution of certain epistemological puzzles, both ordinary and extraordinary. Most notably, EC is said to give us a way of responding to certain cases in which we have apparently inconsistent knowledge claims, each of which enjoys some real plausibility. Though these puzzles are not exclusively skeptical, it is EC’s offering a solution to skeptical problems that figures most prominently in recent discussions. So that is the natural place to start.

2.1 A Skeptical Puzzle

Consider one particular form of skeptical argument upon which leading contextualists have focused (e.g., Cohen 1986, 1988, 2005; DeRose 1995; Neta 2003a & b). We'll call it 'SA', for 'skeptical argument':

- P1. I don't know that not-*h* [*h* = some skeptical 'hypothesis'; e.g., that I'm a bodiless brain in a vat, being stimulated to have just those experiences I would be having if I weren't a brain in a vat ('BIV')].
- P2. If I don't know that not-*h*, then I don't know that *p* [*p* = some mundane proposition which we commonly take ourselves to know; e.g., that I have hands].
- C. So, I don't know that *p*.

SA constitutes a puzzle because (a) each of the premises enjoys some plausibility. As to P1, how, after all, could I know that I'm not a bodiless brain in a vat? By waving my arms around? As to P2, it is just an instance of the closure principle for knowledge -- i.e., the principle that if *S* knows that *p* and that *p* entails *q*, then *S* knows that *q* (a rough statement, but good enough here); and many, including leading contextualists, are inclined to regard this principle as axiomatic. But (b) given our intuitive anti-skepticism, C seems immensely *implausible*, even though (c) the argument appears to be formally valid.

On the face of it, we have a paradox — a set of independently plausible but seemingly mutually inconsistent propositions. Because *that* is the problem, a complete solution to SA will have to explain both which of the assumptions lying behind the generation of the paradox should be rejected, and why, and why the assumption singled out for rejection struck us as plausible in the first place (DeRose 1995).

At first blush, it might seem that there are just three possible responses to SA:

- (i) we can capitulate to skepticism;
- (ii) we can reject P2 and the closure principle on which it depends; or
- (iii) we can reject P1 (the 'Moorean' response, as it's sometimes called).

Essential to EC is the idea that these three options do not exhaust the possible responses to SA. Stephen Schiffer (1996, 2004) agrees, but his recommendation is that we admit (iv) that our concept of knowledge is incoherent, and that epistemological paradoxes such as SA are irresolvable. For most, this is no more satisfactory than embracing skepticism.

Enter the contextualist alternative: (v) we deny that SA's conclusion really does threaten our intuitive anti-skepticism. According to EC, recall, the proposition expressed by a given knowledge utterance crucially depends upon 'context'. If a token of '*S* knows that *p*' is true just in case the subject has a true belief and is in a strong epistemic position vis-à-vis *p*, there may be variable standards governing just *how* strong the subject's epistemic position must be in order for the tokened sentence to express a truth. While different

contextualist theories differ in their details (see Rysiew 2007a: Section 3.3), the basic contextualist solution to SA involves claiming that it involves a dramatic upwards shift in the operative standards. Those standards are not epistemic in the strict sense, of course, since they do not concern knowledge *per se*; but they do affect whether a given tokening of ‘*S* knows that *p*’ expresses a truth; for they affect just what it expresses.

Thus an utterance of P1, such as occurs in SA, might express a truth only because, owing to the introduction of a high-standards context, what it expresses is that the subject does not stand in an *extraordinarily strong* epistemic position with regard to the proposition that he has hands. But that, of course, is compatible with his meeting the lower standards ordinarily in play.

Of course, we still need an explanation of why we *thought* that the skeptic’s claims threatened our ordinary claims to know. The contextualist seeks to explain this — more generally, why we might think that what is said in a given ‘high stakes’ case is incompatible with what is said in its ‘low stakes’ counterpart — by adopting an *error theory*: “competent speakers can fail to be aware of [...] context-sensitive standards, at least explicitly, and so fail to distinguish between the standards that apply in skeptical contexts, and the standards that apply in everyday contexts” (Cohen 1999: 77; 2005, 60; DeRose 1995: 40-41; 1999: 194; 2004: 37).

2.2 Everyday Cases

While a major selling point of EC is supposed to be its resolution of skeptical puzzles, contextualists also emphasize EC’s (alleged) consonance with our ordinary knowledge-attributing practices. There too, they say, we find evidence of the same sort of context-sensitivity that SA exploits.

For a couple of reasons, it’s very important not to overlook this appeal to everyday cases. First, as we will see, a number of philosophers have questioned just how effective EC is in its response to skepticism; and if they are right, then it matters greatly that the effectiveness of that response is not EC’s sole basis. Second, as Keith DeRose says, “the contextualist’s appeal to varying standards for knowledge in his solution to skepticism would rightly seem unmotivated and ad hoc if we didn’t have independent reason from non-philosophical talk to think such shifts in the content of knowledge attributions occur” (2002: 169). But in fact, DeRose says, “The best grounds for accepting contextualism concerning knowledge attributions come from how knowledge-attributing (and knowledge-denying) sentences are used in ordinary, non-philosophical talk: What ordinary speakers will count as ‘knowledge’ in some non-philosophical contexts they will deny is such in others” (2005: 172; 2006: 316). Likewise, as with DeRose (1992) and his well-known Bank Case, Stewart Cohen claims that examples such as the following “strongly [suggest] that ascriptions of knowledge are context-sensitive” (1999: 59):

“Mary and John are at the L.A. airport contemplating taking a certain flight to New York. They want to know whether the flight has a layover in Chicago. They overhear someone ask a passenger Smith if he knows whether the flight stops in Chicago. Smith looks at the flight itinerary he got from the travel agent and

respond, ‘Yes I know — it does stop in Chicago.’ It turns out that Mary and John have a very important business contact they have to make at the Chicago airport. Mary says, ‘How reliable is that itinerary? It could contain a misprint. They could have changed the schedule at the last minute.’ Mary and John agree that Smith doesn’t really *know* that the plane will stop in Chicago. They decide to check with the airline agent.” (*Ibid.*: 58)

Here too, contextualists claim that regarding the relevant sentences’ truth conditions as context-dependent makes best sense of the flexibility in knowledge-attributing behavior. Thus, contextualists tend to agree that in *everyday* cases, such as that just described, the practical importance of the subjects’ ‘getting it right’ tends to raise the standards for the truth of a sentence of the form ‘*S* knows that *p*’. (Remember: what changes here is what an utterance of such a sentence expresses; we do not have a fixed such proposition, with different standards for *its* truth applying in the more demanding context.) So here too, the sentences used by someone in a ‘high-stakes’ context (John and Mary) and their ‘low stakes’ counterpart (Smith) can both be true, since the propositions they express are not really conflicting after all. (For discussion of when such a claim should/shouldn’t be made, see DeRose 2006: Section 1; 2005: Sections 3-4.)

In general, then, EC posits a neat symmetry between the flexibility in our (alleged) judgments as to the truth of a given knowledge claim/denial, and a parallel plasticity in the truth conditions (and, as a result, truth *values*) of the knowledge-attributing sentences we utter. And if speakers realize, however tacitly, that what is expressed by such utterances is a context-sensitive matter, that can be used to explain the observed tendency to attribute/deny knowledge in a way that depends on such things as “the purposes, intentions, expectations, presuppositions, etc., of the speakers who utter these sentences” (Cohen 1999: 57).

2.3 Other Allegedly Pro-Contextualist Considerations

In addition to the foregoing, some contextualists (e.g., Cohen 1988, 1998; Lewis 1996; Neta 2002; Rieber 1998) have suggested that EC enables an attractive solution to ‘the lottery problem’. So too, David Lewis (1996) has proposed extending EC to the Gettier problem; but this is a much more controversial idea among EC’s proponents. Controversial too is whether *concessive knowledge attributions* (Rysiew 2001) -- i.e., sentences of the form ‘*S* knows that *p*, but it is possible that *q*’ (where *q* entails not-*p*) -- motivate EC. (Lewis 1996 thinks so; both Stanley 2005a and Dougherty and Rysiew 2009 disagree, though for rather different reasons.) Finally, DeRose (2002) has argued that ‘the knowledge account of assertion’ (Williamson 2000) – the idea that one should assert only what one knows – favors EC. But whether the knowledge account is correct is highly contentious (e.g., Weiner 2005); and several people have pointed out that there is no direct path from it to EC anyway (e.g., Blackson 2004; Leite 2007).

In any case, it is fair to say that the consideration that has figured most prominently in arguments for EC is the fact that there are some cases, skeptical and otherwise, about which both a knowledge claim and a surface-incompatible knowledge-denial have some appeal. The primary virtue of EC is supposed to be that it gives us a straightforward way

of accommodating this: the claims can both be true because they don't express contrary propositions after all.

3. OBJECTIONS TO CONTEXTUALISM

In spite of its promising a neat solution to certain problems involving knowledge attributions, EC remains very controversial, with critics pointing out several serious difficulties it faces. Here, three are discussed.

3.1 Is EC Linguistically Plausible?

According to EC, 'know(s)' is a context-sensitive term. However, it's not clear that the linguistic data surrounding 'know(s)' is what one would expect were it genuinely context-sensitive. For example, Jason Stanley (2004) argues that, unlike 'flat' and 'tall', e.g., 'knows' is not clearly gradable. (It makes sense to describe someone as "very tall", but while I might say that someone knows something "very well," 'very' does not seem here to function as a degree modifier.) And while '(is) justified' is obviously gradable, even if gradability were sufficient for context-sensitivity, from the fact that knowledge requires justification it would not follow that 'knows' is context-sensitive as well (*pace* Cohen 1999: 60). Nor, Stanley argues, does 'know(s)' behave like indexicals ('I', 'here') or relational terms (such as 'enemy').

In a related argument, Herman Capellen and Ernie Lepore (2003) contend that, according to certain tests for the genuine context-sensitivity of a term, 'know(s)' just does not pass muster.

Finally, John Hawthorne points out that with uncontroversially context-dependent terms, we find it very natural to employ "the clarification technique". For instance: I balk at your claim that Kansas is flat, pointing out that there is a small rise just ahead of us. You clarify: "Well, what I meant was that there are very few mountains." Hawthorne's point is that we have very few techniques of clarification in the case of 'know(s)'; whereas, it "is through the clarification technique that sensitivity to context-dependence is manifested" (2004: 104-106).

Responses on behalf of EC to such arguments vary. Commenting on Stanley, Barbara Partee (2004) agrees that 'know(s)' is unlike expressions such as 'tall', but that perhaps better models are available. Nikola Kompa (2002) suggests that the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)' is best understood as deriving from a *sui generis* sort of "unspecificity". And Rob Stainton (forthcoming) argues that if there are pragmatic determinants of what is stated/asserted/claimed, then what is stated (/etc.) in different uses of "knowledge" sentences can vary in truth conditions, even if 'know(s)' itself is not context-sensitive. (Here, we see a connection between EC and its philosophy-of-language namesake mentioned above; a similar connection is evident in Travis 2005.)

Ceding less ground, Peter Ludlow (2005) argues that questions about gradability are too crude a standard by which to judge whether 'know(s)' is context-sensitive. Ludlow disagrees with Hawthorne about the prevalence of clarificatory devices for 'know(s)' and argues that there is good reason to think its semantics includes some placeholder(s) for

the variable standards that EC posits. Like DeRose (2005), Ludlow casts EC as a piece of ‘ordinary language’ philosophy, and he presents the results of Google searches in which clauses like, “...by objective standards”, “...by academic standards”, “...with some certainty”, “...doggone well...”, and so on, accompany uses of ‘know(s)’.

It’s not clear what to make of such data. In general, from the fact that different qualifying phrases are used in making some evaluative judgments (whether x is/isn’t F , whether S does/doesn’t A) in different domains, it does not immediately follow that a contextualist semantics for the relevant terms (F -ness’, (to) A) is correct (cf. Conee 2005: 50-51). Such devices may be semantically revealing – as they arguably are with, e.g., “He’s pretty tall for a jockey”; but they may be grammatically misleading – as they would be with, e.g., “She spoke with confidence”, or “By anyone’s reckoning, Albert lied.” In the latter cases, the extra information involves, not the making-explicit of context-variable standards (for “speaking” or “lying”), but the featuring of information over and above that encoded in the relevant verb (the manner of speaking, the obviousness of the deceit). In the same fashion, the qualifying phrases in Ludlow’s examples *might* be overt references to standards for knowing *per se*; but they might be serving merely to indicate such things as the nature or quality of the subject S ’s evidence, just who has judged S to be a knower, S ’s exact degree of confidence, the uncontroversial character of S ’s knowing or of what S knows, and so on.

3.2 Does EC Really Help with Skepticism?

Recall (Section 1) that EC is a semantic or linguistic thesis – it doesn’t concern knowledge itself, but rather the context-variable nature of the propositions expressed by utterances of ‘knowledge’ attributing/denying sentences. Just because this is so, one can wonder whether EC successfully engages skepticism. Various versions of this objection have been lodged (e.g., Feldman 1999, 2001, 2004; Klein 2000; Kornblith 2000; Sosa 2000; Bach 2005). On one version, (e.g., Conee 2005, Feldman 2001), it’s noted that EC *per se* does not generate the results essential to the contextualist resolution of SA, for example, since EC alone does not ensure that the propositions expressed by utterances of knowledge sentences in ordinary contexts are true.

On another version, the objection is that EC does not correctly characterize the skeptical problem. As we have seen, EC has it that skeptical claims express truths only relative to extraordinarily high epistemic standards. But, the objection runs, what’s at issue between skeptics and non-skeptics is whether we satisfy even our ordinary epistemic standards (Feldman 2004; Kornblith 2000). As Ernest Sosa (2000) puts it, the antiskeptical “Moorean stance” is not the thesis that folks in ordinary situations who claim to “know” things often express truths. Rather, it “is a stance, adopted in a philosophical context, about what one then knows and, by extension, what people ordinarily know” (Sosa 2004: 281).

Of course, the contextualist may counter that this Moorean view presumes falsely that there is some ‘knowledge’ proposition which is both true and expressible acontextually: perhaps the Moorean view itself manifests a failure to be aware of the context-sensitivity of the expressions in question (Section 2.1). But both that error theory and the

contextualist's appealing to it have been the target of strong objections. So, while other grounds for dissatisfaction with an EC-based response to skepticism have been cited — e.g., that it's not well-positioned to explain the plausibility of certain anti-skeptical claims (e.g., Sosa 2000: 15), that it's not obviously applicable to forms of skeptical argument beyond SA (e.g., Feldman 2001: 78ff.), or that it makes certain true "knowledge" propositions inexpressible (e.g., Brady and Pritchard 2005) — we will leave those aside, and turn instead to worries about EC's error theory.

3.3 Is the Contextualist's Error Theory Problematic?

As we've seen, one of the major attractions of EC is said to be that it allows us to resolve certain apparent conflicts among sets of individually plausible claims without forcing us to reject any of the members thereof as false. However, as we've also seen (Section 2.1), contextualists are committed the claim that we fail to fully appreciate the contextualist semantics and/or to faithfully track shifts in context.

This gives rise to another oft-voiced objection to EC (e.g., Schiffer 1996, Hofweber 1999, Rysiew 2001, Hawthorne 2004, Conee 2005, Williamson 2005). As formulated by Stephen Schiffer, the objection is simply that it is implausible that we would get "bamboozled by our own words" (*ibid.*: 329) in the way the contextualist alleges, since "speakers would know what they were saying if knowledge sentences were indexical in the way the Contextualist requires" (*ibid.*: 328).

This complaint may seem not to have much weight. With respect to SA above, for example, the two premises are (suppose) individually quite plausible, the argument appears valid, yet the conclusion seems very *implausible*. So "something plausible has to go" (DeRose 1995: 2) — we're going to end up being confused (mistaken) about *something*. This is one of the ways in which Cohen has recently responded to concerns about contextualism's error theory (2005: 70). And DeRose (2006) has replied along similar lines: if you present a group of subjects with SA, for instance, and ask them whether the conclusion contradicts an ordinary claim to know, some will say 'yes', and some will say 'no'. If contextualism turns out to be true, then many are blind to *that*, and so on. So, whoever's right, a substantial portion of ordinary speakers are afflicted by "semantic blindness" (Hawthorne 2004: 107). 'Bamboozlement' is something we're stuck with either way.

In assessing this type of response to the objection under consideration, it is useful to separate out two questions: First, whether, considered on its own, the contextualist's error theory is plausible. Second, whether that theory raises any problems internal to the contextualist view.

As to the first question, there *are* precedents for the type of error that the contextualist says is going on in the case of knowledge attributions. For example, by implicitly raising the standards — drawing attention to previously disregarded bumps, etc. — you can get a competent speaker to take seriousness 'flatness skepticism', the view that nothing's really flat (Cohen 1999: 78-9; 2001: 91; 2005: 60, 70; 2004: 193).

However, such cases are conspicuous in manifesting a *disappearance effect*: when an apparent incompatibility between certain uttered sentences is due to their expressing different propositions, once this is pointed out, any appearance that they are incompatible tends to go away. Thus, we might ‘disagree’ over whether Kansas is flat, but once it is made clear that you mean *relatively un-mountainous* and I mean *devoid of any hills at all*, we quickly agree that we were both right. But for many, no such effect attends the consideration of EC (Conee 2005: 55, 66; Feldman 2001: 73, 77-78; Rysiew 2001: 484-485). Thus, using subscripts to denote the context-sensitivity that the contextualist alleges is at work in the airport case (Section 2.2), we can make explicit the (alleged) truth-conditional content of the two uttered sentences as follows:

(Smith) ‘*S* has a true belief and is in a strong_{C1} epistemic position,’ and

(Mary) ‘It is not the case that (*S* has a true belief and is in a strong_{C2} epistemic position)’ (Rysiew 2007b: 652-653; cf. Bach 2005: Section I).

To many, however, such renderings of the relevant claims don’t bring to light a context-sensitivity that’s immediately obvious upon being brought to our attention; they serve only to highlight the controversial character of EC.

Acknowledging this fact, Cohen notes that there are “varying degrees to which competent speakers are blind to the context-sensitivity in the language” (2005: 61). That of indexicals (‘I’, ‘now’) are easy to spot, that of ‘flat’ somewhat harder. For ‘knows’, “it may be very difficult even after some amount of reflection for competent speakers to accept context-sensitivity. It may take subtle philosophical considerations concerning the best way to resolve a paradox in order to ‘see’ the context-sensitivity of ‘knows’” (*ibid.*).

This type of response to the worry at hand brings into focus the second sort of concern noted above: that the contextualist’s error theory raises problems internal to the contextualist view itself. For, to the extent that the context-sensitivity of the relevant expressions can remain deeply hidden, even after careful reflection, it becomes even less clear than it already was that in the cases of concern (SA, the airport example, etc.) what’s driving our judgments as to whether what speakers say is correct is, as the contextualist says, precisely an *awareness* of that context-sensitivity.

More has been said concerning the plausibility of EC’s error theory (for which, see Rysiew 2007a: Section 4.3; 2001: Sections 3 and 10). But it’s clear that we’ve moved beyond considerations merely of the contextualist’s imputation of linguistic error to ordinary speakers: in spite of how it is sometimes presented, both by critics of EC (e.g., Schiffer 1996, Hawthorne 2004) and by its defenders (e.g., DeRose 2006), the issue does not concern semantic ‘blindness’ or ‘bamboozlement’ *per se*. Rather, it has to do with the unsatisfactory or troubling nature of the contextualist’s appeal to such a thing in particular.

Still other criticisms of EC have been made as well (see Rysiew 2007a: Section 4.5). Of course, if EC were the only solution to the data that inspire it, we’d have good reason to at least hope that all the various problems facing EC could be overcome. However, several alternative treatments of the relevant data have been proposed.

4. ALTERNATIVE, NONCONTEXTUALIST ACCOUNTS

Among critics of EC, at least three such alternative explanations have emerged. Since each is intended to preserve the thought that we do ordinarily know many things, the granting of knowledge in the relevant ‘low standards’ case is taken to express a truth. What needs explaining, then, is why denying knowledge of the same subject can seem correct once the standards are raised, even though nothing in the subject’s situation changes. Though they are not obviously competing, each attempt to explain this in non-contextualist terms keys on different factors. Framed in terms of the airport example described in above (Section 2.2), and in broad outline only, these sample non-contextualist proposals are as follows.

4.1 Salience, Conflicting Arguments, and Focusing Effects

When we find people seeming to disagree about some matter, often that’s because there is a genuine conflict of evidence — arguments and considerations on either side of the issue, none of which can be easily dismissed. And which of these one focuses on can affect one’s view as to the truth of the proposition in question. So, for instance, if Mary and John focus on the various ways in which Smith might be mistaken (e.g., because of a misprint in the itinerary), this can get them thinking that he does not know what he claims to know, especially if focusing on a possibility tends to make one over-rate its probability. (See especially Feldman 2001: 74-78. For similar ideas, see Williamson 2005: 112; 2005b: 226; Conee 2005: 63-66; and Rysiew 2001: 503-505.)

4.2 Psychological Presuppositions of Attributing Knowledge

Kent Bach (2005: 76-77) points out that if Mary is not sure that Smith’s itinerary is reliable, she won’t be confident enough herself to believe that the plane will stop in Chicago, in which case she cannot coherently attribute *knowledge* of that fact to Smith. Indeed, Mary will have to deny that she knows it, “since she thinks that it is not yet established. And, since Smith has no evidence that she doesn’t have, she must deny that he knows it [too].” In a similar spirit, Jonathan Adler (2006) suggests that such cases are best explained in terms of the subject’s diminished confidence as to *p*, where the latter does not imply a lack of belief.

4.3 Pragmatic Factors

According to some (e.g., Blauw 2003, Black 2005, Brown 2006, Pritchard forthcoming, Rysiew 2001, 2005, 2007b), pragmatic factors explain the relevant knowledge-attributing behavior. (There are differences among these views; here, one sample elaboration is sketched.) In the airport case, it is mutually obvious to John and Mary that they want to ensure that their epistemic position with respect to the flight plan is *very* strong — strong enough to rule out the possibility of a misprint, e.g. Being in an epistemic position of such strength may or may not be required for knowing. Hence, whether Smith does know — whether the proposition literally expressed by “Smith knows...” is true — may or may not be relevant to John and Mary’s concerns. Either way, ‘*S* knows that *p*’ entails that *S* is in a good epistemic position — this is why granting someone knowledge involves representing them as entitled to their belief. But it would be odd of Mary and John to grant Smith such an entitlement (by saying ‘he knows’) and represent him as being in a good epistemic position if they thought that his evidence wasn’t so good as to put their

concerns to rest. Whereas, by denying knowledge to Smith, they are able to express the thought, which seems not just relevant but true, that his epistemic position is not so good that they do not need to check further. And if they (we) read what is conveyed by the relevant utterance onto the sentence uttered, the knowledge denial will strike them (us) as expressing a truth.

Of course, the contextualist can deny that pragmatic factors play any real role in the relevant cases. Suppose that's so -- i.e., suppose that the information that each of the speakers in the airport example (e.g.) is concerned to communicate, and to which our intuitions about their utterances are responsive, is nothing more or less than that which is, according to EC, what the sentence he/she utters semantically expresses. In that case, we should expect that our laying bare those contents -- as we did with (Smith) and (Mary), the explicit relativizations in Section 3.3 -- will generate the very same response as did their inexplicit counterparts. But of course they don't: the airport case, or SA, presents a puzzle only because the relevant claims strike us as incompatible; but (Smith) and (Mary) are obviously compatible -- and not just with each other, but with a non-contextualist view of the truth conditions of knowledge sentences (Rysiew 2007b: 652-653)! In response, the contextualist could once again resort to his/her error theory; but at this point such a move should appear rather strained.

4.4 Other Alternative Views

Each of the preceding alternative treatments of the data can be made to fit with standard epistemological thinking about knowledge (and 'knows'). But EC faces other recent and less orthodox competitors, including those treated in the other essays in the current Section of this volume -- contrastivism (e.g., Schaffer 2004; Karjalainen and Morton 2003); 'subject sensitive invariantism' (e.g., Fantl and McGrath 2002; Hawthorne 2004; Stanley 2005b); and relativism (e.g., MacFarlane 2005). As the field of available views expands, the case for EC's providing a uniquely viable treatment of the data that inspires it is further weakened.

5. CONCLUSION

EC has garnered a lot of attention in recent years, and rightly so. It poses a challenge to standard, invariantist thinking. Just as importantly, it has forced epistemologists to pay closer attention to our actual knowledge-attributing practices. However, whether it provides the best account of the latter, and the best resolution of certain long-standing philosophical problem, is far from clear.

6. REFERENCES

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