Elusive 'Knowledge'

Contribution on Keith DeRose's *The Case for Contextualism: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context, Vol. 1* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), for *Analytic Philosophy* (David Sosa, ed.).

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The Case for Contextualism opens with the Bank Case, and fittingly so --- not just because it is so well-known¹ and so closely identified with DeRose and his views, but because examples like this are at the heart of the case for contextualism that DeRose presents: "The best grounds for accepting contextualism," he says, "comes 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" (p. 47). And not just them, but us: we sense, DeRose says, that the positive and negative attributions made in Bank Cases A and B respectively are made "with apparent propriety", which supports and explains the (claimed) intuition that both the relevant claims are true (pp. 50-51). For, DeRose says, assuming that the relevant belief is true and that there's nothing unusual about either case, when we consider the two cases individually, it does seem that,

(1) When I say that I know that the bank will be open on Saturday in Case A, my claim is true.

And that,

(2) When I [say] that I don't know that the bank will be open on Saturday in Case B, my [claim]² is true. (p. 2)

In itself, the conjunction of (1) and (2) is not theoretically interesting: there are many reasons why one might know some p in one situation but fail to know it in another. The problem arises only because, at first blush, none of the differences between the two Cases is epistemically relevant: as presented, the subject's evidence, belief, etc., are the same, and entirely unaffected by the factors traditionally thought to be irrelevant to whether one knows, such as the increased importance of getting things right and/or one of the parties' having introduced various possibilities of error not mentioned in A.³ *Now* we have a puzzle: "How can both assertions be true, given that the speaking subject seems to be in an equally good epistemic position in the two cases?" (p. 187; cf. p. 2).

Because, the contextualist says, there is in fact no common proposition being affirmed and denied in (1) and (2): an utterance of a sentence of the form 'S knows that p'

¹ So well known, that I take its rehearsal here to be unnecessary.

² The terms in square brackets replace "admit" and "admission", respectively. Since our sense of whether the relevant claim is true is what's at issue, the apparently factive 'admit' and its variants are best avoided. Fortunately this point does not affect the present discussion.

³ DeRose, like the 'classical invariantist', adheres to 'intellectualism' – the view that "the factors in virtue of which a true belief amounts to knowledge are exclusively truth-relevant, in the sense that they affect how likely it is that the belief is true, either from the point of view of the subject or from a more objective vantage point" (p. 24; cf. pp. 31, 187).

expresses the proposition that the subject (has a true belief⁴ and) meets such-and-such epistemic standards, where all such standards depend upon and can vary with shifts in 'attributor' factors (cf. pp. 188-189, 214). Thus, in spite of the apparent incompatibility -given that the subject seems to be in an equally good epistemic position in the two cases - of (1) and (2), various features of the example (not least, the importance of getting a check deposited very soon) effect a heightening of standards such that what an utterance of 'S knows [/doesn't know] that p' does or would express in the two Cases changes. Thus, as DeRose might put it (pp. 3, 7), it's true that,

(1*) S has a true belief and is in a moderately strong epistemic position with respect to p;

and it's also true that,

(2*) It's not the case that (S has a true belief and is in a very strong epistemic position with respect to p).

The preceding is a bare-bones recapitulation of DeRose's initial statement of just what contextualism is. That and other clarificatory matters addressed, the rest of *The Case for Contextualism* elaborates, augments and defends, against both competing theories and various objections, the basic contextualist view and the arguments and considerations said to favor it. It is a rich and densely packed book, offering plenty to think about, to learn from, and -- yes -- to take issue with. Here I probe some broadly methodological matters, ones that are largely independent of the details of the latter portions of DeRose's discussion: they can be posed in terms of just the basic 'set up', above. As we'll see, DeRose is aware of the relevant concerns, or at least of the points that animate them; to my mind, however, they have yet to be given their full due.

First, a tired but essential point: contextualism isn't an object-level theory, a theory about knowledge; it's a theory about 'knows'; specifically, it's the view that the *truth conditions* of sentences involving 'know(s)', or the propositions expressed by utterances thereof, (can) vary with shifts in context (conceived of, again, in terms of 'attributor factors'). The idea is not, then, that 'know(s)' sentences have fixed contents, with variable *standards* for *their* assessment: *that* isn't why the uttered sentences referred to in (1) and (2) above, say, can both be true. Rather, it is only relative to a contextually-determined standard that such a sentence expresses a complete proposition at all; and no such standard is the correct one in any absolute (extra-contextual) sense. As we saw just above, the claims in A and B are can both be true because, contrary to appearances, they're not really 'about' the same thing at all.

Of course, DeRose is well aware of all of this: he makes it perfectly clear at the outset that contextualism is a theory about the content of various tokened sentences (e.g., p. 18), and that, in the Bank Case say, what shifts is "what exactly I'm claiming when I say that I do or do not 'know', but not whether those claims, given those contents, are true" (p. 9). Further, as DeRose points out (Chapter 6), precisely because contextualism is a semantic and not an epistemological theory, certain supposed untoward implications of the view –

⁴ Or whatever related attitude knowing requires (pp. 186-187).

e.g., that it licenses some bizarre dialogues, or that it makes knowledge "elusive", in David Lewis' (1996) famous phrase – are really no such thing. So too, it's only if one commits a "levels confusion" (p. 188) that contextualism will appear to be making factors other than broadly truth-relevant ones germane to whether a 'know(s)' sentence expresses a truth – it's only then, that is, that contextualism will appear to be an "antiintellectualist" view like its anti-classical-invariantistic competitor, 'subject sensitive invariantism' (SSI) (pp. 24ff, 188ff.).

At various points, of course, DeRose slips into simpler, object-level speech. For instance, when he says that contextualists appeal to pairs of cases (like the Bank Case) that display a certain variability: "A 'low-standards' case...in which a speaker seems quite appropriately and truthfully to ascribe knowledge...[and] a 'high-standards' case...in which another speaker in a quite different and more demanding context seems with equal propriety and truth to say that the same subject....does not know" " (p. 47). This is misleading, however, given that it's part of the point of contextualism⁵ that there *is no* common knowledge relation which various occurrences of 'know(s)' pick out (see Bach 2005, pp. 54-59): it's really not knowledge *simpliciter* that's being ascribed and denied in such examples – indeed, it's *never* such a thing that a use of 'know(s)', or that 'practical' factors can affect (at most) "which proposition gets expressed by a knowledge-ascribing sentence" (p. 188). Here too, inasmuch as the unqualified 'knowledge' is being used, things are being framed in a too invariantist-sounding way.

Well, so what? Isn't this just so much fussiness? In cautious statements of the contextualist view, or in explaining what's wrong with Lewis' provocative claims, for instance, it's important to pull oneself up out of the object language – as DeRose does -- and speak about what's expressed by various occurrences of 'knows'; but at other times, it's entirely forgivable and harmless for DeRose to "build the tiresome 'semantic ascent' of [the more cautious formulations] into easy little phrases like 'standards for knowledge', and 'counts as knowing', which, when spelled out, amount to higher-level claims about the truth-conditions and truth-values of the relevant sentences" (pp. 216-217; cf. p. 187, n. 3).

Fair enough: expository shortcuts and a reliance upon the charity and good sense of one's readers are inevitable for everyone. However, it is not so clear that, if one is a contextualist, object-level phrases that in fact belie one's theoretical commitments *are* always easily (if inconveniently) replaced without any kind of loss. My own sense is that it's actually quite difficult simply to articulate the contextualist position while eschewing descent into the object language -- and not just because the latter makes for more convoluted speech.

One prominent example of this concerns the notion of *strength of epistemic position*, which is "key to [DeRose's] explanation of contextualism" (p. 7). As we saw above, (1)

⁵ At least, of the sort developed by DeRose. On the contrastivist variant advocated by Schaffer (2004), 'know(s)' denotes a three-term relation, with the value of one of the *relata* being shifty; here, the contents of knowledge ascriptions are context-variable even though 'know(s)' itself is univocal.

and (2) can appear to be in tension only because any differences between Cases A and B appear to be irrelevant to whether *S* knows. DeRose puts the latter point in terms of the subject's seeming to be in an equally good epistemic position vis-à-vis the relevant proposition in the two cases. He writes:

"As I'm here using it, our grasp of [the notion of *strength of epistemic position*] is entirely derivative from the concept of knowledge: To be in a strong epistemic position with respect to some proposition one believes is for one's belief in that proposition to have to a high extent the property or properties the having enough of which is what's needed for a true belief to constitute a piece of knowledge.^[...] The 'epistemic standards' set by a context are the standards for how strong a position a subject must be in with respect to a proposition, in this very generic sense, for a sentence attributing 'knowledge' to her in the context in question to be true. The contextualist holds that these standards vary according to the speaker's context. The invariantist denies that the standards so vary." (p. 7)

Contextualism itself is silent on the question of "what properties *are* relevant to whether a subject knows". But we can still get some mileage out of the notion of strength of epistemic position: assessments of comparative conditionals can serve as an intuitive test of when some *S* is in at least as strong a position as another. Thus, regardless of whatever standards of 'tallness' are being used, if we know that Wilt is at least as tall as Mugsy, we can know that *If Mugsy is tall, then Wilt is tall*, according to any such standards (pp. 7-8). Similarly, regardless of just which standards for 'knowing' are being used, one can know that *If S knows that p in A, then S knows that p in B*, according to any such standards. One can know this because one can sense the truth of comparative conditionals like the following:

(3) If I know that the bank will be open on Saturday in Case A, then I know that it will be open on Saturday in Case B,

and

(3R) If I know that the bank will be open on Saturday in Case B, then I know that it will be open on Saturday in Case A. (p. 8)

"Together," DeRose says, "these conditionals provide a good intuitive indication that I'm in an *equally strong* epistemic position with respect to the bank's being open on Saturday in [A and B]" (*ibid*.). So too, we now have intuitive grounds for supposing that certain factors (those which make for the difference between A and B) are epistemically irrelevant – for supposing, that is, that intellectualism is true. Just as important, we only now have something to be explained: viz., how (1) and (2) can be true, *given (3)*.

There is reason to wonder about all of this, however. DeRose (p. 7, n. 3) likens his *strength of epistemic position* to Alvin Plantinga's *warrant*: warrant is "that, whatever precisely it is, which together with true belief makes the difference between knowledge and mere true belief" (1993, p. 3). Plantinga, however, is an invariantist; for him, the degree of warrant that a belief has is to be thought of in terms of how closely it approximates the fixed value of that quality which knowledge requires. (Compare the

first-pass, object-level statement on strength of epistemic position in second sentence of the passage quoted above.) But of course that sort of thing's not available to DeRose;⁶ and it's not available to us either if we're trying to provide a consistent formulation of the contextualist view.

Next, consider 'tallness'⁷. True enough: once I know that Wilt is at least as tall as Mugsy, I can know that, *whatever* the standard, *If Mugsy's tall, Wilt's tall*. But it seems that I'm able to come by that initial, comparative knowledge in no small part because our grasp of the concept of *height*, which is *that quality the having enough of which is what's needed to count as 'tall', where there's no acontextual standard for just how much is "enough"*, is *not* "entirely derivative" from the concept of *being tall*. Wilt is 7'1" and Mugsy is 5'3", Mugsy's head is at Wilt's midsection, etc., regardless of whether either "counts as tall" in any context.⁸ In the case at hand, however, one wonders about the source of the initial comparative judgment (i.e., concerning strength of epistemic position), given that we're debarred from tying it conceptually to some fixed target *and* from supposing that we have any handle on it that's independent of 'know(s)'.

So, let's return to DeRose's notion, explicated in the appropriate meta-linguistic way: for one to be in a *strong epistemic position* is for one's belief to have to a high extent the property or properties required for an utterance of 'S knows that p' to express a proposition that is true, where there's no fixed, acontextual standard for the latter. (This is close to the third sentence in the quoted passage.)

With this notion in hand, we can restate "(3)" more carefully as:

(3*) If I (have a true belief and) am in a strong enough epistemic position for 'S knows that p' to express a truth in Case A, then I (have a true belief and) am in a strong enough epistemic position for 'S knows that p' to express a truth in Case B.

Now, on one reading (3^*) , it seems clearly incorrect: after all, we are supposed to intuit that the *denial* is true in Case B. It is clear, however, that we are meant to keep the relevant standard constant: if, given whatever standards we're using, *S*-in-A "counts as knowing", so does *S*-in-B, etc. Recall, however, that our grasp of 'strength of epistemic position' is supposed to be "entirely derivative from the concept of knowledge" – or, rather, from our grasp of what it takes for a sentence of the form '*S* knows that *p*' to express a proposition that is true. The difficulty is that, absent some fixed point such as invariantism about 'know(s)' might provide, it's not clear where to begin. It's not clear, that is, what in general that *does* take -- not just because (as the Bank Case illustrates) what it takes can vary widely, but because there's no unique epistemic relation that various uses of 'know(s)' denote.⁹ What's elusive isn't knowledge, but what exactly

⁶ For discussion on this point in particular I am indebted to Jennifer Nagel.

⁷ As we've seen, this is used by DeRose to illustrate the point about comparative conditionals; it is also, he says, his "favorite example" (p. 45) of a clearly context-sensitive term.

⁸ The relevant point here is unaffected if it turns out, as DeRose has argued elsewhere, that the standards governing 'tallness' and other context-sensitive terms is rather messier than it commonly supposed (see his 2008, and p. 8, n. 5).

 $^{^{9}}$ As well, of course, there is the possibility that the properties relevant to whether a use of 'know(s)'

'know(s)' picks out.¹⁰ So if our grasp of the notion of strength of epistemic position is "entirely derivative from the concept of knowledge," *it* is difficult to get a general handle on as well: the 'epistemic' in *strength of epistemic position* must not be read in any context-independent way.

This gives us good reason to suspect that, if the original, object-level (3) strikes us as pretty clearly true, that's because we already have a sense of what goodness of epistemic position is, because we are at least implicitly thinking of the latter (hence, of knowledge) in invariantist terms, and because it's part of the latter thinking that things like heightened stakes are not directly relevant to whether *S* knows.

A second point is this: Forget the worrying about whether there is a workable gloss on strength of epistemic position available from within the contextualist framework. Take (3*) and apply it in the intended way: whatever standards we're using, if, given those standards, *S*-in-A "counts as knowing", so does *S*-in-B. Suppose that this does vindicate the claim that A and B are in an equally strong epistemic position. It then also — and for that very reason -- accounts for the thought that the two claims (the A-affirmation and B-denial) can't both be true (*pace* contextualism)! As we saw above, after all, it's only in conjunction with (3) that (1) and (2) give us something to explain.

Right though this seems, it doesn't fit well with how DeRose tends to characterize things, especially in later Chapters of the book where he is responding to objections and fending off competing views. According to DeRose, all of our intra-contextual intuitions are in fact in perfect harmony:

"...in the 'low-standards' contexts, it seems appropriate and it seems true to say that certain subjects know and it would seem wrong and false to deny that they know, while in the 'high-standards' context, it seems appropriate and true to say that similarly situated subjects don't know and it seems inappropriate and false to say they do know." (p. 116)

And when we choose our examples carefully and focus on 'the right kinds of cases' (pp. 157-8; 53-59), it's not clear that there's any appearance of in*ter*-contextual conflict:

"What becomes of the intuition that S-HIGH's assertion contradicts S-LOW's when we construct HIGH and LOW in the right way (so that contextualists really will say both assertions are true)? It is putting the matter extremely mildly to say that the intuition is then considerably weakened." (p. 158; cf. p. 130)

expresses something that is true are "a motley crew that have little to do with one another" (p. 7, n. 3). So too, there is the possibility that the 'height' of 'an epistemic standard', and so the strength of one's 'epistemic position', isn't a straightforward matter of variation along some one (or several) neatly ordered dimensions (cf. Bach 2005, p. 57, n. 11).

¹⁰ Cf. Schaffer, who writes that contextualism has the result that "the denotation of 'knows' is always warped to the current context. As such 'knows' cannot keep consistent score *across contexts*....(Imagine trying to score a baseball game if the denotation of 'run' changed with every inning!)" (2004, pp. 84-85).

However, while our intuitions within a given context may be harmonious, there is nothing to prevent us from considering both HIGH and LOW (B and A) at once (Brown 2005, pp. 412-413). Indeed, it seems that that's precisely what's happening when we consider (3) (or (3^*)) – as we must do, it seems, if we're to generate the problem to which contextualism is a proposed solution. And when we *do* consider this, we find ourselves judging in such a way that it's not clear how (1) and (2) *could* both be true. Perhaps any appearance of conflict can be made to disappear if one comes to be convinced of contextualism and then considers cases in light of that position. But if there were no appearance of conflict between the A/LOW-affirmation and the B/HIGH-denial to begin with, the theoretical impetus for contextualism would be lost.¹¹

The second point leads naturally into a familiar third point – viz., that contextualists have need of an error theory if they are to explain such things as why we'd suppose that (1) + (2) + (3) do form an inconsistent triad. While the need for such a theory is something that DeRose tends to explicitly allow in connection with cases where HIGH is some extraordinary sceptical context (e.g., pp. 42, 58, 139), we've just seen that that need can't be restricted to just those cases, on pain of undermining the more pedestrian data that inspire the view.¹² If it were perfectly clear all along that (1*) and (2*), say, were the correct renderings of the contents of the claims cited in (1) and (2), there wouldn't be even the appearance of any kind of puzzle here. But there is, so it isn't: "Speakers are to some extent blind to the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)'" (p. 159).

However, DeRose argues, if the positing of "semantic blindness" (Hawthorne 2004, p. 107) is a problem, it's a problem for everyone: if, for instance, you present a group of subjects with the rights kind of test case and ask them whether the claims of the speaker(s) in A and B are contradictory, some will say 'yes', and some will say 'no'. If contextualism turns out to be true, then many are blind to *that*; if invariantism is true, many are blind to *that*. So, whoever's right, a substantial portion of ordinary speakers are afflicted by 'semantic blindness'. 'Bamboozlement' (Schiffer 1996) is something we're stuck with either way (pp. 158-160, 174-179).

Perhaps. But there is still good reason to think there's an asymmetry here – to think, that is, that it's "more problematic to suppose that many speakers are blind to the context-sensitivity of their own words than to suppose that many are blind to the context-*in*-sensitivity of their own words" (p. 179). For even supposing that, considered all on its own, blindness to context-insensitivity is as widespread and (un)problematic as blindness

¹¹ DeRose writes of the "'methodology of the straightforward'," which "takes very seriously the simple positive and negative claims speakers make in utilizing the piece of language being studied, and puts a very high priority on making those natural and appropriate straightforward uses come out true, at least when that use is not based on some false belief the speaker has about some underlying matter of fact. Relatively little emphasis is then put on somewhat more complex matters, like what metalinguistic claims speakers will make and how they tend to judge how the content of one claim compares with [that of] another (e.g., whether one claim contradicts another)" (p. 153). While DeRose suggests that this methodology favors contextualism (*ibid*.), insofar as (3) (/(3*)) is essential to motivating a contextualist (and intellectualist) handling of the relevant claims, it is not true that the "straightforward" data – (1) and (2) alone, say – really do point that way.

¹² Not to mention, that elicit our intuitive intellectualism, and so which favor contextualism over SSI (pp. 8-9, 185-190).

to context-sensitivity, the case for contextualism leans very heavily upon intuitions like (1) an (2); it requires the assumption that it is an *awareness* of the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)' that is responsible for both our variable willingness to attribute 'knowledge' and our 'sense' that (1) and (2) are correct. In this way, the admission of partial blindness threatens to undermine the evidential basis for the view (Rysiew 2007, p. 653).

Of course, while the nature and status of intuitions in general is a matter of hot dispute, it's plausible to suppose that the invariantist is going to end up appealing to some intuitions in building a case for *her* view. There is no reason to suppose, however, that those intuitions will have to be specifically and exclusively linguistic, or that the case for invariantism won't rest just as much upon more theoretical considerations such as the stability of epistemized (knowledge-constituting) belief, the role of knowledge in explaining successful action, its transferability via testimony and preservability by memory, and so on.¹³ All of which is compatible with supposing that our everyday linguistic intuitions should be handled with theoretical care.¹⁴

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¹³ Of course, DeRose would challenge whether considerations like these really do favor invariantism (see, e.g., the various arguments and objections addressed in Chapters 5-7). If the discussion here is correct, however – if an implicit invariantism is what guides our $(3)(/(3^*))$ -type thoughts, if there really is a *conflict* among our intuitions that needs to be explained, and/or if the admission of some degree of semantic blindness fits poorly with a very heavy reliance upon our pretheoretic linguistic intuitions – then contextualism isn't really favored by "straightforward" (see n. 12, above) considerations after all, and the debate between contextualism and invariantism can be settled only by considerations "from other, fancier sources" (p. 153).

¹⁴ My thanks to Kent Bach, Trent Dougherty, Jennifer Nagel, and Mike Raven for helpful comments and discussion.

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