

## **Relativism and Contextualism**

### 1. Introduction

Relativistic thinking, including about epistemic matters, has a very long history; the position known as epistemic contextualism is a much more recent development. Each of these views represents an important departure from more standard and traditional ways of epistemological assumptions. While they are, in this respect and others, similar, there are very important distinctions between them. Still, relativism and contextualism are easily confused, thanks in no small part in a lack of precision in how they are sometimes described. The primary goal here is to describe and differentiate between epistemic relativism and contextualism, making it clear just what each is and how they differ (Section 3). That done, we will briefly consider some specific versions of each view (Section 4). Finally, we will visit one of the central fronts on which contextualists and relativists contest each other's approaches: providing a plausible and charitable interpretation of the flexibility in our willingness to attribute/deny knowledge (Section 5). This will provide a sense, not just of one of the leading, shared motivations for the two views, but also one of the criticisms they both face. However since, as just mentioned, both contextualism and relativism are reactions against more orthodox epistemological theories, it will be useful to begin by reminding ourselves of some of the central features of that orthodoxy.

### 2. Classical Invariantism and the Ho-Hum View

As just noted, each of contextualism and relativism can be seen as a departure from standard, traditional ways of thinking about epistemic matters. And both involve positing

*some* kind of heretofore unnoticed relativity. To fix ideas, let's just focus – as we'll largely be doing here -- on knowledge, and begin by getting some trivial and uncontentious epistemic relativities out of the way. For there are such: after all, no one denies that whether you know that  $p$  depends on – and so is in *some* sense 'relative to' -- many features of you and your situation – of your 'context', in an indiscriminating sense of the term.

Thus, consider the traditional and widely agreed upon 'ho-hum view' (Rysiew, 2007b), according to which knowledge is ungettiered true belief, together with the subject's *being in a good epistemic position* with respect to the proposition in question. As the name suggests, the ho-hum view isn't supposed to be very interesting. The interesting and contentious epistemological issue concerning knowledge centers on how best to conceive of the relevant goodness of epistemic position, and (hence) just which features of the subject and his/her situation are relevant to whether he/she knows. Thus, we have familiar debates about whether and/or in what sense knowing depends on what else you believe, on certain objective features of your situation over and above 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. But, the thinking goes, whatever conditions must be met for someone to know – whatever the *standards* for knowing (e.g.) are – *they* don't depend upon, and so are insensitive to shifts in, any further facts about you, your situation, other's beliefs and preferences, and so on. In this way, the knowledge relation, whatever exactly it is -- and more generally, epistemic facts – are commonly thought to be 'absolute' and context-invariant.

Complementary to this traditional and all-too-familiar picture of knowledge itself is a certain view about the language we use to talk about it. For while epistemologists disagree about just what it takes to convert a true belief into knowledge, the natural thought is that sentences of the form ‘*S* knows that *p*’ expresses none other than that the subject stands in the familiar – if theoretically elusive – two-place knowing relation to some proposition; and that meaning is insensitive to shifts in factors like those just mentioned. Thus, changes in such things as what the speaker—yourself or another -- has in mind in attributing knowledge to you, for example, don’t affect the truth conditions of what he says, and so don’t affect whether he speaks truly in saying that you know: perhaps the attributor is considering some far-out sources of possible error, perhaps they have a great practical stake in whether *p* is in fact true, and so on; but on the traditional way of thinking no such facts affect the truth-conditional content of the sentence used in attributing (/denying) knowledge. As to those factors which *are* supposed to be relevant to whether one knows, their relevance is entirely extra-semantic. Thus, you can have better or worse evidence that *p*, and believe it more or less firmly, but such factors figure at most into the determination of whether you know; they don’t affect what it means to *say* that you do (i.e., the truth-conditional semantic content of the sentence uttered in such a claim).

Likewise, and just as obviously (it’s traditionally thought), the truth-*values* of the sentences used in attributing knowledge aren’t hostage to facts about or features of any actual or potential *evaluators* of them. That those evaluating the relevant knowledge claim (/denial) have particularly strong or weak epistemic standards, for instance, or that they are/aren’t apt to take certain forms of evidence seriously, doesn’t affect what it takes

for the proposition expressed by the speaker to be true or false, as opposed to whether it's more or less likely to be *regarded* as such, say.

This semantic view, according to which the truth-values and/or truth-conditional contents of knowledge-attributing *sentences* don't vary in any interesting way with situational and/or evaluational shifts is, following Peter Unger (1984), usually called 'invariantism'. Qualifiers such as 'classical', 'strict' (MacFarlane, 2005a), and 'standard' (MacFarlane, forthcoming) now often occur in characterizing the view just sketched, so as to distinguish it from certain recent theories, such as 'subject sensitive', 'interest relative', or 'sensitive moderate' (Hawthorne, 2004; Stanley, 2005) invariantism. But, as the latter such views won't figure in the present discussion, we can use the unadorned 'invariantism' to refer to the general position concerning knowledge attributions just outlined.

### 3. Relativism and Contextualism: Clarifications and Distinctions

Against the preceding traditional epistemological picture, the relativist and contextualist each posits a crucial sort of relativity not recognized by either the ho-hum view of knowledge or the accompanying invariantist semantics. Thus, they each challenge one or both of the two main strands of traditional epistemology as described above: the (so to speak) metaphysical strand, concerning the fixedness or 'absoluteness' of epistemic facts or standards – their insensitivity to variations in factors over and above those laid down as what must be added to (unGettiered) true belief for knowledge to obtain; and the invariantistic one, concerning the semantics of knowledge-attributing sentences – *their*

insensitivity to such variations, including variations in the attributor's or evaluator's psychology or situation.

Contextualists single out the latter, semantic component as unacceptable: instead of being invariantists, we should adopt 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, p. 914), where ‘context’ is taken to refer to such things as the interests, expectations, and so forth of knowledge attributors (e.g., DeRose, 1999a, pp. 189-190; Cohen, 1999, p. 57). A bit more precisely, contextualism has it that the proposition expressed by a given knowledge sentence (‘*S* knows that *p*’, ‘*S* doesn’t know that *p*’) -- just which epistemic relation a sentence involving ‘knows’ expresses -- depends upon the context in which it is uttered – where, once again, ‘context’ refers to features of the knowledge *attributor(s)*’ psychology and/or conversational-practical situation. (Hence this view’s sometimes being referred to as ‘attributor contextualism’.) As a result of such context-dependence, we’re told, utterances of a given such sentence, made in different contexts, may differ in truth-value.

Not only, however, can shifting ‘contexts’ (variations in speakers’ interests, intentions, etc.) make for variable ‘standards’ that sentences used to attribute or deny knowledge – or, rather, attributions/denials involving ‘knows’ -- encode; no such standard “is simply correct or simply incorrect. Rather, context determines which standard is correct....*And there is no context independent correct standard*” (Cohen, 1999, p. 59).

Now, it is at just this point – with talk of shifting truth-values and an absence of any context-independent standard of correctness before us -- that confusion is apt to creep

in, confusion about what contextualism amounts to and, as a result, about the distinction between contextualism and relativism.

Such confusion is encouraged by several factors. First, in everyday speech, talk of the ‘context-dependence’ and/or ‘relativity’ of various things is both fairly commonplace and rather loose; and so there’s already some inducement to fail to be precise in using them and to distinguish between them when we turn to philosophy. (Notice, for instance, just how easy it was to speak of ‘relativity’ and ‘context’ in describing epistemological orthodoxy above – where, no less, we knew that we were discussing the latter view in service of distinguishing between it and both contextualism and relativism!)

To make matters worse, there is an unfortunate lack of terminological uniformity even among the relevant figures within epistemology. Thus, to preview some views that will be discussed briefly below, David Annis (1978), one of the first to use the label ‘contextualist’ to describe his epistemological position, isn’t a contextualist on what’s come to be the dominant understanding of the term; on the contrary his appears, if anything, to be a relativist view. And similarly for Michael Williams’ (1999, e.g.) brand of “contextualism” (in spite of his own arguments to the contrary): it too arguably is really most plausibly construed as a form of relativism. Meanwhile, John MacFarlane, a prominent proponent of contemporary epistemological relativism describes his own preferred version thereof as “a kind of contextualism” (2005a). And the view dubbed ‘epistemic *relationism*’ by Paul Boghossian (2006), who is among the staunchest recent critics of relativism (epistemic and otherwise), closely resembles *contextualism*, rather than (as Boghossian presents it) an essential component of relativism *per se*. As such examples illustrate, besides being ordinarily imprecise, the terminology within

philosophy has, as Crispin Wright has recently observed, “[gotten] horribly tangled” (2008a).

Finally, the confusion between (epistemic) contextualism and (epistemic) relativism – in particular, the perception that contextualism *just is* (a form of) relativism – is encouraged by certain things that proponents of the former view, especially, have said in spelling out their position. To take a few representative examples, here are some passages from leading epistemic contextualists in which they describe contextualism and/or its implications:

- First, speaking of an anti-skeptical of the sort that G. E. Moore is (in?)famous for having presented, David Lewis says:
 

“...the premise ‘I know that I have hands’ was true in its everyday context, where the possibility of deceiving demons was properly ignored....The conclusion ‘I know that I am not handless and deceived’ was false in *its* context, because that was a context in which the possibility of deceiving demons was being mentioned....” (David Lewis, 1996, p. 564).
- In the same vein, Stewart Cohen begins a recent paper:
 

“Contextualism explains our inconsistent inclinations about skepticism by appealing to contextual shifts in the standards at which we evaluate the truth of our knowledge ascriptions.” (2001, p. 87)
- Or again:
 

“While various kinds of epistemological theories have been called contextualist, I am here concerned with theories according to which the truth-value of a knowledge ascription is sensitive to certain facts about the speaker and hearers of

the context. Accordingly, for a particular subject S, and proposition P, one speaker could truly say ‘S knows P’ while at the same time another speaker in a different context truly says, ‘S does not know P’.” (Cohen, 1998, p. 289)

- And lastly:

“Current contextualists posit such a wide variety of different standards; they look for rules by which what is said in a conversation can change the standards that are in place; and they typically try to (at least partially) explain the intuitive pull of skeptical arguments by claiming that the skeptic, in presenting her argument, exploits one of these rules, raising the standards for knowledge, and thereby making her conclusion that we ‘don’t know’ true. If this is how the skeptic’s argument works, then the truth values of our ordinary claims to know are protected, for the fact that the skeptic can install very high standards which we don’t meet has no tendency to show that we don’t know according to the lower standards that govern our ordinary, non-philosophical conversations.” (DeRose, 1999b, p. 17)

Such passages are, again, altogether representative statements by leading contemporary contextualists about what that view involves or implies. But again, they are misleading.

To see this, consider the following sets of sentences:

- (1a) ‘I know that I have hands.’
  - (1b) ‘Ted is justified in thinking that the earth is much older than 10K years.’
  - (1c) ‘Every rational person believes that there are other minds.’
- 
- (2a) ‘It’s raining.’

(2b) 'I have a headache.'

(2c) 'There's Frank – he's in this room.'

(1a-c), of course, are notable only insofar as they express the sort of epistemic claims and subject matter that it has been the business of the epistemologist traditionally to investigate.

The salient feature of (2a-c) is that, absent information about the location (2a) or identity (2b) of the speaker, or the referent of "this" (2c), one won't know just what proposition is being expressed by the relevant sentence – hence, whether the proposition so expressed is true or false. So too, changing the former (who's claiming to have a headache, say) can change the latter (whether that claim is true), just because it can change what that claim *is*. And it is *this* idea that inspires the contextualist: as we saw above, contextualists hold that the proposition expressed by a given knowledge sentence ('S knows that *p*', 'S doesn't know that *p*') depends upon the context in which it is uttered – where, once again, 'context' refers to features of the knowledge attributor(s)' psychology and/or conversational-practical situation. Contextualists hold that it is only relative to a contextually-determined standard that a knowledge sentence expresses a complete proposition: change the standard, and you change what the sentence expresses; acontextually, however, no such proposition is expressed.

Note, though, that insofar as the truth-values of sentences like (2a-c) "depends on context", that is only because their truth *conditions* — or, the propositions expressed by them — are so dependent. Again: you aren't in a position to evaluate (2a), say, unless you know the location the speaker means to be talking about. The idea is not that that sentence has a fixed truth-evaluable content, the truth value of which happens to depend

on the place to which the speaker's referring; for it is only relative to the latter type of facts that tokenings of sentences like (2a-c) *have* specific contents. And so too for epistemic contextualism: we can get changes in the relevant sentences' truth-values only because and insofar as those sentences' contents (the propositions they express) can shift. It is because (among other things) they elide this fact that passages like those quoted above are misleading: for they invite precisely the idea that contextualists think that there is some stable content expressed by knowledge sentences the truth value of which happens to depend on context, owing to the application of more or less stringent standards. As should now be clear, that's not the view at all.

Of course, if terminological looseness is one vice, a procrustean patrolling of linguistic boundaries is another. And, so long as we're being clear about just what we do and don't mean thereby, it's perfectly all right to say that contextualism is in some sense **a relativistic**. Then again, as we saw above, even the orthodox epistemological view could be described as embodying *some* form of relativism. And, as we're about to see, the sort of relativity contextualists posit is, in its own way, just as different from what epistemic relativists have in mind as is the traditional view.

Just as contextualism seems to fit sentences like (2a-c), the view alluded to just above – that while certain sentences have clear and fixed truth-conditional contents, the truth *values* of which are somehow context-dependent -- is eminently plausible for some cases. It's natural to think, for instance, that it captures what we should say about the following sentences:

- (3a) 'The Eiffel Tower is to the left of the Louvre.'
- (3b) 'My house is stationary.'

(3c) ‘You must [legally] drive on the right-hand side of any two-way street.’

Here, as with (2a-c), we need more information before we’re able to evaluate the propositions expressed. But that is not – as it is in (2a-c) -- because it’s not yet clear what those propositions *are*. Rather, each of (3a-c) at least appears to express a complete proposition – we know *what it is* that we’d be tasked with evaluating if someone were to ask whether any of those claims were true. But we still might not know how to answer, because we’d need more information about *how* precisely to evaluate them. As Gideon Rosen, from whom (3a-c) are adapted, says:

“There is a sense in which these sentences are never simply true. They are at best true, or false, only relative to some parameter....

This is a familiar phenomenon. Sometimes a grammatically complete declarative sentence is incapable of truth or falsity simpliciter, but fully capable of truth or falsity relative to some parameter. Concrete utterances of such sentences may be true or false full stop; but that is only because the conversational context somehow supplies a value for the parameter in question.” (2007, p. 11).

So here too, with (3a-c), as with (2a-c), we can get the result that the truth-values of the relevant sentences can shift: move to the east along the Seine, and (3a) goes from false to true; my house is stationary relative to me, but not the moon; and so on. But such an effect occurs downwind, so to speak, from their truth-conditional contents: it’s not what’s expressed, but only whether it’s true, that changes, owing to differences in the circumstances or standards of evaluation.

The bearing of these examples on the distinction between contextualism and relativism is straightforward: while contextualists wish to assimilate claims like (1a-c) to

those relevantly similar to (2a-c), relativists want to assimilate epistemic claims to those relevantly similar to (3a-c): such claims are true or false only relative to some standard of assessment; and, it perhaps goes without saying, just as there is no situation-independent ‘right’ way of evaluating sentences like (3a-c), there’s no absolutely correct way of evaluating epistemic claims, there are just assessments which more or less accurately reflect the standards in play at that particular place, time, or situation.

Note the qualification ‘relevantly similar’ just above: one shouldn’t automatically think that this is some kind of cheat. The qualification serves merely to indicate that the *type* of thing that occurs in (2a-c) and/or (3a-c) is supposed to be what happens with claims like (1a-c). Thus, for example, in likening (1a-c) to (2a-c) contextualists aren’t forced to say that ‘knows’, e.g., is an indexical or a demonstrative like any other; and, in likening (1a-c) to (3a-c) relativists aren’t forced to say that epistemic standing is, like legality, a matter of explicit convention or something involving institutionalized state power. As to the sorts of things that these theorists *do* say, we’ll briefly consider some specific contextualist and relativist views in the next Section. Before proceeding, however, we still have some more work to do in getting clear about the basic idea(s) involved in the two views under discussion.

Earlier, it was noted that the relativist and contextualist each posit a crucial sort of relativity not recognized by either the ho-hum view or invariantism. Thus, they each challenge one or both of the two main strands of traditional epistemology as described above: the (so to speak) metaphysical strand, concerning the fixedness or ‘absoluteness’ of epistemic facts or standards – their insensitivity to variations in factors over and above those laid down as what must be added to (unGettiered) true belief for knowledge to

obtain; and the invariantistic one, concerning the semantics of knowledge-attributing sentences – *their* insensitivity to such variations, including variations in the attributor’s or evaluator’s psychology or situation.

With this in mind, notice that the discussion of the last few pages, with its focus on sentences – the (alleged) variability in their truth-conditional contents and/or truth-values -- has really only addressed the semantic side of this debate. And of course, in their different ways, contextualism and relativism do each depart from (classical, strict) invariantism.

In the case of contextualism, the focus on linguistic matters is perfectly apt. For contextualism as we’re discussing it here is an exclusively linguistic or semantic thesis -- it concerns the truth conditions of knowledge sentences (/the propositions expressed by utterances thereof). As we have also seen, though the thesis is sometimes put – for instance, in some of the passages from prominent contextualists quoted just above -- in terms of the context-variability of knowledge sentences’ truth-*values* (e.g., Cohen, 1998, p. 289 and 2005, p. 57; Lewis, 1996, p. 564), variable “standards for knowledge” (DeRose, 1999b, p. 17) or for what “counts as” knowing (DeRose, 1995), this is misleading (see Bach 2005, Section I). Likewise, just because contextualism is a thesis about knowledge-sentences’ truth *conditions* — namely, that they are context-variable — it is not a thesis about knowledge itself. (Compare: observing that ‘here’ is an indexical has no implications about who’s where or what it is to be at some location, and so on.) So it is misleading too when contextualism as its being understood here is described, as it sometimes is, as the view that *whether one knows* depends upon context (Feldman, 2004, p. 24; Bach, 2005, pp. 54-55): contextualism 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); it is not itself a theory about any such epistemic property or relation.

All of this is by way of making it clear – perhaps clearer than it needs to be, but also clearer than it often is – that contextualism is a linguistic or semantic thesis, one that is directed exclusively at the invariantist component of traditional epistemology. Such a fixity of concern, however, is lacking in the case of relativistic views: it’s much less clear that there is such a thing as *the* relativist position, and *the* component of orthodox epistemology that the relativist denies.

So for example, among those who have been developing and defending relativistic epistemological views in analytic philosophy over the past decade or so, the primary focus has often been on linguistic matters – patterns of use in our everyday talk of epistemic matters, our intuitive judgments about the ‘correctness’ of various claims employing epistemic terms, how best to model relativistic semantical facts, and so on. (In Section V below, we’ll consider one example of this sort of approach.) Such ‘New Age relativism’, as Wright (2007, 2008b; see too Boghossian 2008) provocatively calls it, does nicely fit the linguistic characterization given above. And, so understood, relativism is, like contextualism, directed just at the invariantistic strand of traditional epistemology.

But one just as often finds characterizations of epistemic relativism that are not linguistically-geared at all. Thus:

“Epistemological relativism may be defined as the view that knowledge (and/or truth) is relative – to time, to place, to society, to culture, to historical epoch, to conceptual scheme or framework, or to personal training or conviction – so that

what counts as knowledge depends upon the value of one or more of these variables.” (Siegel, 1992, pp. 428-9)

“*Normative epistemic relativism* is the claim that there are no framework-independent facts about which modes of inference, norms of justification, standards of rationality or the like are right, but that there *are* facts about such things relative to particular frameworks. ... Epistemic standards have a strong normative dimension--we use our standards of rationality and reasonableness to guide, evaluate, and criticize reasoning, both our own and that of others--so here the label ‘normative’ applies in a very full-blooded sense. And if knowledge requires justification, as many philosophers suppose, then relativism about justification also leads to relativism about knowledge.” (Swoyer, 2008, Section 2.4.1)

“An account of what makes a system of reasoning or belief revision a good one is relativistic if it is sensitive to facts about the person or group using the system. It may then turn out that one system is best for one person or group, while a quite different system is best for another.” (Stich, 1998, p. 360)

Understood along such lines, relativism is directed at what we’ve called above the ‘metaphysical’ strand in orthodox epistemology, concerning the fixedness or ‘absoluteness’ of epistemic facts or standards. (The normative orientation of some of the preceding characterizations follows from the factual claims together with what’s usually

thought to be the normative aspect of the concepts involved.) As Paul Boghossian puts it, relativism in its “traditional” guise is a “factual”, rather than a “semantical or linguistic” thesis (Boghossian, 2008, p. 412): it concerns (for instance) the knowledge relation, rather than anything about ‘knows’. Boghossian’s own preferred characterization of just what relativism, so understood, involves is given by three clauses:

A. There are no absolute facts about what belief a particular item of information justifies [but only relational facts of the form ‘Information E justifies belief B relative to epistemic system, C’] (Epistemic Non-absolutism)

B. If a person, *S*’s, epistemic judgments are to have any prospect of being true, we must not construe his claims of the form

“E justifies belief B”

as expressing the claim

*E justifies belief B,*

but rather as expressing the claim:

*According to the epistemic system C, that I, S accept, information E justifies belief B* (Epistemic Relationism)

C. There are many fundamentally different, genuinely alternative epistemic systems, but no facts by virtue of which one of these systems is more correct than any of the others. (Epistemic Pluralism) (See Boghossian, 2006, p. 73; 2008, pp. 412-3.)

Now, it is actually not clear whether a commitment to Epistemic Relationism (B) is essential – or advisable, even – for the relativist. The stated rationale for its inclusion is that since, given Epistemic Non-absolutism (A), there is no non-relative fact that might make a claim like “E justifies belief B” true, that claim must be reconstrued so as to amount to a judgment that explicitly reflects the non-absolute fact that *is* available as a truth-maker (Boghossian, 2006, p. 73). Counter to this, however, Wright (2008b, Section 3) argues (among other things) that this argument assumes that what the relativist wants to preserve is the *absolute* truth of epistemic claims; for the explicit relativization serves to do just that: the judgment, *According to the epistemic system C, that I, S accept, information E justifies belief B*, is true, if it is, without reference to any particular evaluational standards. Whereas, once the familiar relativistic device of ‘relative truth’ – i.e., truth (only) relative to some standard – is admitted, epistemic claims can be admitted at face value: “E justifies belief B,” for instance, does express the claim, *E justifies belief B*; but that claim, like any epistemic claim, is only relatively true (in the sense just indicated).

Also against the idea of including Epistemic Relationism as an essential part of epistemic relativism is simply that it embodies the strategy of relativizing content -- and that, as we’ve seen, is the hallmark of contextualist views, to which relativism is usually intended to be an alternative. Granted, the envisaged relativization isn’t, or needn’t be, quite to ‘context’ as the contextualist conceives of it (i.e., to features of or facts about the maker of the claim) – at least, not to that person *qua* attributor, as opposed to *qua* evaluator. Even so, among contemporary epistemic relativists who consider the matter directly, the majority view appears to be a rejection of relativism about content (see, e.g.,

MacFarlane, 2005a and forthcoming; Egan *et al.*, 2005): relative truth, they believe, is to be preferred. Whereas, once again, incorporating Epistemic Relationism into our characterization of epistemic relativism makes it non-optional.

Finally, notice that Epistemic Relationism *is* made optional by the following statement by Boghossian of the ‘intuitive idea’ behind epistemic relativism, if only implicitly; for it does not figure in spelling that idea out:

“The intuitive idea behind epistemic relativism...is that there are no absolute facts about what justifies what; and, hence, that a particular judgment about whether some belief is justified by some item of information (or total informational state) is never simply true or false. At best it is true or false relative to an epistemic system – a framework of epistemic principles.” (Boghossian, 2007, pp. 49-50).

That said, Boghossian’s own discussion does serve to highlight the fact that the linguistic and metaphysical issues relevant to relativistic thinking, though distinguishable, aren’t easily disentangled. And of course, a natural connection between the two suggests itself: the reason that epistemic claims are true only relative to this or that standard, where no such standard is the ‘correct’ one, is because there are no absolute facts about whether/when the knowing relation obtains, and/or no fixed, objectively correct standards for evaluating whether it does. In short, as Boghossian suggests (2008, p. 415), the relativistic epistemic metaphysics rationalizes the relativistic semantics for knowledge (e.g.) claims. (By comparison: it’s not clear that the contextualist’s semantical claim has any bearing on, or is the natural counterpart to any claims about, the nature of knowledge, e.g.) Still, as we’ve seen, the semantical claims need not, and perhaps should not, include Epistemic Relationism.

In any case, the point here is not to push for the (absolute!) correctness or incorrectness of this or that characterization of the relativist view; for, as should by now be clear it's implausible that there is such a thing as *the* relativist view. (By comparison again: the core contextualist claim *is* very much settled -- though not always clearly stated.) Our concern has been, rather, to clarify just what is central to each of the contextualist's and relativist's positions so as to make the differences between them apparent. At this point, it might be useful to briefly summarize our results. So:

Against traditional epistemological orthodoxy, the relativist and contextualist each posits a crucial and neglected sort of relativity. In their claims about just what, contrary to that orthodoxy, is really relative to what, however, the two views quickly diverge. Contextualists hold that the truth-conditional contents of sentences used to attribute/deny knowledge can shift with changes in such things as the interests, purposes, and so forth, of knowledge attributors; absent the latter such factors, the relevant sentences don't express complete (truth-evaluable) propositions; but no standard furnished by the psychology of the attributor is the 'right' one (in any extra-conversational sense). The relativist's semantical claim is that the truth-values of knowledge sentences do indeed shift as the contextualist suggests, but that (a) contrary to the contextualist this is not because of context-variable contents; and that (b) contrary to the contextualist, such variations track variable standards of assessment (none of which is the 'right' one), as opposed to variable features of attributors *qua* attributors. The complementary 'metaphysical' (or 'factual') claim by the relativist is that there are no absolute facts about what knowledge is, or whether a belief is justified (and/or no fixed, objectively

correct standards for evaluating whether it does), any more than there are absolute facts about (/standards for assessing) what's to the left of what, or whether gambling is legal.

#### 4. Relativism and Contextualism: A Quick Look at Some Sample Views

As noted near the outset, among the barriers to achieving clarity about the distinction between contextualism and relativism are terminological ones. We encounter this not only when we look (as we've just done) at specific things that have been said by about the two views and /or by their proponent; we run into it too when we look at the labels that theorists themselves use for their positions.

Thus, for instance, perhaps the first explicit statement of a “contextualist” epistemic theory is by David Annis (1978). Coming from the discussion of the previous Section, however, we're now well-positioned to see that Annis' position is – in our terms, anyway -- actually a relativistic one. For Annis' concern isn't to advocate for any claims about specifically linguistic matters; his motivation rather is to push the epistemological implications of the fact that “man is a social animal.” “When it comes to the justification of beliefs,” Annis says, “philosophers have tended to ignore this fact” (1978, p. 215) — in particular, they have been blind to the existence of “contextual parameters essential to justification” (*ibid.*, p. 213). So, as Annis sees it, foundationalists and coherentists both treat justification as a function of certain facts about the subject alone, considered in isolation from his/her social environment (‘context’). In other words, they assume absolutism about epistemic facts. But, according to Annis, this way of thinking about epistemic matters overlooks what is in fact the social character of justification. For instance, he says, whether a person is justified in believing that polio is caused by a virus

depends upon the ‘issue-context’ – whether it’s just his general knowledge that’s being assessed or examined for the M.D. degree. (*ibid.*, p. 215). There are no deeper or situation-invariant facts about whether the person’s belief is justified.

A similar example is furnished by the recent work of Michael Williams (1991, 2001), whose concern is with providing an alternative to “epistemological realism”, as he calls it. According to the latter view, which has lain behind so much of traditional epistemology, the objects of epistemological inquiry – most centrally, various items of knowledge, justified belief, and so forth -- have in virtue of their content some underlying “structural unity” that *makes them* all instances of a particular kind (1991, pp. 108-9). And it does so, it’s thought, independently of any “situational, disciplinary and other contextually variable factors” (*ibid.*, p. 119; 2001, pp. 159ff.). By contrast, Williams articulates and defends a kind of ‘contextualism’, precedence for which he finds in the work of Dewey, Popper, Austin, and Wittgenstein, among others. According to this view, it is only in relation to the latter type of factors – i.e., situational, disciplinary and other contextually variable ones -- that a proposition has any epistemic status at all (*ibid.*), and that there is no need to suppose that the objects of epistemological inquiry have some deep structural unity which binds them all together.

This all sounds clearly relativistic; and, at the same time, it doesn’t sound very contextualistic. (In terms, at least, of the discussion of these views in the previous Section.) However, Williams himself explicitly rejects the ‘relativistic’ label. “Why (Wittgensteinian) Contextualism Is Not Relativism” (2007) reads the title of one recent paper (though he has been arguing for the distinction for some time now). However, a case can be made that Williams is led to reject the relativistic label because, as others

have suggested, he builds into the view certain features that are not in fact essential to it - for example, a reification of epistemic systems or 'frameworks' that, in its own way, repeats the (as Williams sees it) errors of foundationalism (1999, Chapter 19); an unnecessarily *subjectivist* orientation (see Schmitt's introduction (2007, pp. 5-7) to Williams' (2007), and the claim that "[epistemic relativism] involves the view that a belief's status as justified depends on the believer's epistemic system" (*ibid.*, p. 93)); or, relatedly, an overly-tolerant attitude, whereby any number of epistemic systems or frameworks enjoy an immunity from rational criticism, with none being any better than the others (see Graham, 2008, p. 413).

But one can reject the idea of any absolute facts about justifiedness, for instance, while taking there to be some epistemic systems that are clearly, and objectively, better than others. An example is provided by another – and this time cheerfully self-avowed! – epistemic relativist, Stephen Stich. According to Stich,

“in evaluating systems of cognitive processes, the system to be preferred is the one that would be most likely to achieve those things that are intrinsically valued by the person whose interests are relevant to the purposes of the evaluation”  
(1990, p. 131)

On this view, various cognitive systems are indeed perfectly criticizable, and on objective grounds. However, *absolutism* about epistemic evaluations will have been jettisoned. And given that those whose interests are relevant to the purposes of evaluating various systems are likely to be diverse in their goals and values, Stich's 'pragmatic account of cognitive evaluation' naturally gives rise to a relativistic account thereof (*ibid.*, pp. 135-40)

As the discussion of the last few paragraphs makes clear, there are a variety of specific ways of implementing the general relativistic view discussed in the previous Section. And the same is true of contextualism and the specific suggestions about how we should think of the relevant (alleged) linguistic phenomena. For example, while contextualists regard ‘know(s)’ as a context-sensitive term, there has been relatively little discussion, much less agreement, about just what linguistic model best captures this fact. ‘Know(s)’ has been referred to as “an indexical” (Cohen, 1988, p. 97), likened to ‘large’ (Hambourger, 1987, p. 262), and said to be vague (Heller, 1999a, p. 206; 1999b, p. 121). Other contextualists are even less committal: while he at one point (1992, pp. 920-1) uses an analogy with the demonstrative “this”, Keith DeRose tends to prefer to talk about such things as the context-dependency of about what “counts as” knowledge (1995) or the “the standards for knowledge” (1999b) (see Bach, 2005, pp. 56-7).

So too, there is disagreement among contextualists about how to understand the supposed mechanisms by which changes in the attributor’s psychology can effect changes in the content of the sentences they utter, as well as about how best to conceive of the varying strength of epistemic position that sentences attributing ‘knowledge’ express. So, for example, DeRose (1995) suggests that our conversations are governed by a ‘Rule of Sensitivity’, in the fashion of one Nozick’s (1981) condition on propositional knowledge. Similarly ‘externalistic’ is Mark Heller’s (1995) suggestion that *just how* reliable a belief-forming process must be for an attribution of knowledge to be ‘correct’ depends upon context, in the attributor sense introduced above.

Taking a different (and more ‘internalistic’) line, Stewart Cohen claims ‘knowledge’ *inherits* its “indexical” nature (1988, p. 97) from that of ‘(is) justified’:

justification, of course, comes in degrees; and what counts as justification *simpliciter* — i.e., justification to the level required for an attribution of knowledge to express a truth — is governed by a rule of *salience*, whereby one's evidence/reasons must be good enough to preclude salient possibilities of error; with shifts in salient possibilities of error, we get shifts in what the relevant sentences express.

Similar to Cohen's rule of sensitivity is David Lewis' (1996) account of the context-sensitive behavior of 'knows'. According to Lewis:

“Subject *S* knows proposition *P* iff *P* holds in every possibility left uneliminated by *S*'s evidence; equivalently, iff *S*'s evidence eliminates every possibility in which not-*P*.” (1996, p. 551)

Lewis claims that “every” is restricted to a particular conversational domain (*ibid.*, pp. 553-4) and that in any given conversation certain not *-p* possibilities will be “properly ignored” in any given situation. Lewis goes on to sketch various rules governing whether a given possibility is ‘properly ignored’. But, whatever the details, the basic idea is straightforward: change which not-*P* possibilities are/aren't being ‘properly ignored’, and you change what meant in saying that *S* knows [/doesn't know] that *p*.

#### V. Flexibility and Disagreement, Charity and Error: A Common Motivating Idea, and a Common Objection

The preceding quick tour of some specific relativist and contextualist views serves to give a sense of the sort of thing that proponents of one or the other view actually say. Critical discussions of either view, however, tend to be carried out in the more general terms used above in Section 3. And each of contextualism and relativism *has* of course

come in for heavy criticism. The central issues that arise are far beyond the aim and scope of the present paper. (For general critical surveys of relativism and contextualism, respectively, see, e.g., Siegel this volume and Rysiew 2007a.) Still, having spent a lot of time differentiating between the views, it is worth visiting one of the central fronts in the debate between contextualists and relativists: how best to accommodate the flexibility in our willingness to attribute knowledge. (Another such front concerns the proper handling of ‘epistemic modals’; for a good window onto that debate, see Egan *et al.* 2005 and/or Egan this volume.) As we’ll see, this in turn leads naturally to a common or kindred objection that both views face. But let’s begin by reviewing one sort of consideration that is said to motivate both views.

One of the great apparent strengths of relativism is its easy accommodation of cases of ‘no-fault disagreement’ (Williamson, 2005, p. 91) – “of certain (potentially) intransigent disputes where we have to hand no ready conception of a further fact which would make one party right at the expense of the other” (Wright, 2005, p. 240). Matters of personal taste are perhaps as good an example as any of such ‘faultless disagreement’ (Kölbel, 2004; see too Lasersohn, 2005; Glanzberg, 2007 criticizes such a relativistic account and counters with a contextualist semantics for predicates of personal taste). You say “Espresso is awful”, I say “It’s delicious”. We seem to be disagreeing about *something*; yet, there seems to be some good sense in which we can both be right. Relativism explains this: your judgment is true relative to your standards, and mine are to mine; linguistically, ‘Espresso is awful’ is true for you, ‘It’s delicious’ is true for me.

Transposing these ideas into the epistemic domain, some recent epistemic relativists have suggested that it makes the best sense of certain patterns of speech (and/or

judgment) involving epistemic terms. So, for example, while “leav[ing] it completely open...what an epistemic position is, how an epistemic standard might be specified, and what features determine which epistemic standard is relevant in a given context or circumstance” (2005a, p. 199), John MacFarlane argues that an “assessment-variable”, relativistic semantics for ‘know’ makes the best sense of such things as the variability in our willingness to attribute/deny knowledge:

“Normally, I am perfectly happy to say that I know that my car is parked in my driveway. I will say this even when I’m at work, several miles away. But if someone asks me how I know that my car has not been stolen (and driven away), I will admit that I do not know this. And then I will have to concede that I do not know that my car is in my driveway: after all, if I knew this, then I would be able to deduce, and so come to know, that it has not been stolen.” (*ibid.*, p. 200)

What explains this? An orthodox epistemology, with its commitment to a (strict, standard, etc.) invariantist semantics will have to regard either my self-attribution or my denial of knowledge to myself as false. But then why do ordinary folks make such mistakes, and make them as often as the prevalence of the variability in the relevant linguistic behavior suggests (given invariantism) that they must? Relativism by contrast, has an easy answer: like ‘to the left of’, “know” expresses a two-term relation; but, as we saw with the former sort of expression (recall (3a-c), above), any assessment such a claim is sensitive to the epistemic standards in play at the context of assessment. Thus, we can explain the data without saddling speakers with lots of perhaps-inexplicable error:

“Why is it that I’ll happily assert “Joe knows that his car is parked in his driveway” when standards are low, and “Joe doesn’t know that his car is parked

in his driveway” when standards are high? The relativist semantics affords a simple explanation: the former sentence is true as used and assessed in a context where standards are low, and the latter is true as used and assessed in a context where standards are high.” (*ibid.*, pp. 218-9).

But while it might promise to afford us a neat and charitable explanation of our tendency to aver, deny, assert, and retract knowledge claims, the idea of relative truth is notoriously hard to cash out satisfactorily (see the papers in the Section “Relativism and Theories of Truth,” this volume). Hence the attraction of contextualism. As Timothy Williamson puts it:

“...relativity to context in the [truth-conditional content and] truth-value of a sentence allows for absoluteness in the truth-value of what the sentence is used to say in a given context” (2005, p. 92)

So, in terms of MacFarlane’s example, the contextualist can say that the contents of my claim, then denial, of knowledge are only surface-contradictory. As we saw in the previous Section, contextualists disagree as to how strength of epistemic position is best understood. Still, they tend to agree that 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, with standards for how strong the subject’s epistemic position must be in order for the tokened sentence to be true being contextually variable (Conee, 2005, p. 51; Brown, 2006, p. 407). Using subscripts to denote the context-relative standards, we can bring out the (alleged) truth-conditional content of the two uttered sentences as follows:

- (i) ‘Joe has a true belief and is in a strong<sub>C1</sub> epistemic position with regard to the proposition that his car is parked in his driveway’, and

(ii) ‘It is not the case that (*S* has a true belief and is in a strong<sub>c2</sub> epistemic position with regard to the proposition that his car is parked in his driveway)’.

(see Bach, 2005, Section I; Rysiew, 2007b, Section 5)

And of course (i) and (ii) aren’t incompatible at all – any more than paired assertions of (2a-c), above and *their* denials need be. (2c, note, is adapted from DeRose (1992, pp. 920-1), who uses the example to illuminate the lack of contradiction between certain utterances of knowledge sentences.)

This very consequence of the contextualist’s view, however, leads to the complaint that the view establishes too much: the explanation of apparent(ly) reasonable disagreement has the effect of making any *real* disagreement disappear. That it has this result is, according to MacFarlane, a particularly damning feature of contextualism (see 2007; 2005a, Section 2.3). But invariantists are just as quick to point up the troubling nature of this result. Quite apart from the fact that it suggests that invariantism is at no particular disadvantage in positing speaker error, it seems to misconceive or trivialize the perennial debate concerning skepticism: it turns out that skeptics and non-skeptics – or one and the same person, weighing the pros and cons of each view – have been merely talking past one another (e.g., Feldman, 2001; Kornblith, 2000; Bach 2005). Yet, there persists the sense that our ordinary claims to know various things *do* conflict with the skeptic’s denial that we know any such things — that is why skepticism has seemed to pose a problem to which contextualism is said (DeRose, 1995; Lewis, 1996, e.g.) to constitute a novel solution. The contextualist seeks to explain why we might think this — more generally, why we might think that what is said in a given ‘high stakes’ case is in

fact compatible with what is said in its ‘low stakes’ counterpart — by adopting a certain kind of error theory:

“...competent speakers can fail to be aware of these 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. This misleads them into thinking that certain knowledge ascriptions conflict, when they are in fact compatible.” (Cohen, 1999, p. 77; 2005, p. 60; cf. DeRose, 1999a, p. 194; 1995, pp. 40-1.)

A number of people (e.g., Schiffer, 1996; Hofweber, 1999; Rysiew, 2001; Conee, 2005) have suggested that this error theory is problematic. For instance, we have no trouble at all recognizing the compatibility between certain relativized versions of (2a-c) – e.g., ‘Its raining [in London]’; ‘It’s not raining [in Kansas]’ – and recognizing those relativizations as what was intended all along; but contextualism about knowledge sentences, by contrast, isn’t clearly correct. What’s more, to the extent that the context-sensitivity of the relevant expression(s) can remain deeply hidden, even after careful reflection, it becomes less clear than it already was that in the cases of concern – for instance, in MacFarlane’s driveway example, above -- what’s responsible for the relevant linguistic behavior is our sensitivity to precisely that context-sensitivity.

So, it is by no means clear after all that charity favors contextualism: in the attempt to charitably accommodate the obvious flexibility in our knowledge-attributing behavior, the contextualist adopts an error theory too, one moreover that might be particularly problematic. Of more immediate relevance to the present discussion, however, is the fact that it’s not clear that relativism fares better in this regard.

Of course, if the relativist's recommendation were that we recognize the relativistic content of knowledge sentences, we'd have a route to relativism's making disagreement disappear that mirrored the manner in what contextualism is said to do so: the actual content of the skeptic's claim is *You don't know relative to the standards I accept* (or some such thing), while the anti-skeptic would 'counter', *I do know relative to the standards I accept, and those ordinarily in force*. But as we saw above (Section 3) such a relativization of content is not only optional for the epistemic relativist, but actually contrary to what proponents of the view wish to say – namely, that the proper view is to recognize the existence of relativized truth, not relativized content. *That is why there is some good sense in which parties to such a dispute have some common propositional object about which they are disagreeing* (Richard, 2004, p. 225). And yet, it's not clear whether this suffices to preserve or enable genuine disagreement. As Boghossian says:

“If, when I judge, ‘S ought to f’ I am judging something to be true by my standards and if when you judge ‘S ought not to f’ you are judging something to be true by your (different) standards, then we are clearly not disagreeing in any significant sense. Nor are we necessarily agreeing in any significant sense when we affirm tokens of one and the same sentence type.” (2008, p. 416)

Again, the point here is independent of the issue of whether the contents of knowledge sentences are to be relativized: the relevant sentences needn't encode, and you and I needn't be thinking, anything about our own or each other's standards. We might clarify the concern as follows, for example. As a rough first pass, we might say that there is disagreement when people have conflicting opinions – when they take contrary things

to be the case, or make judgments or claims that can't both be correct (cf. MacFarlane 2007, 24-5). But, one might think, to have a workable notion of *contrary things*, say, or of two things being incapable of simultaneously being correct, there needs to be not just shared content but some shared standard of correctness (e.g., some univocal notion of truth) for the relevant claims or propositions. But of course *that* is just what's said by the relativist to be lacking in the relevant cases. What we have, instead, are different judgments the truth of which are, thanks to differing contexts of assessment, in fact relative.

In this way, relativism can seem to threaten the disappearance of disagreement no less than does contextualism. To the extent that it does this, we're back to the question the contextualist faces, of why we *think* there's more disagreement than the proposed semantics makes real. Even for the relativist, it seems, we must be wrong about something. One idea, for instance, would be that we are to some significant extent ignorant of the relativist's notion of relative truth, or of the relation between it and our ordinary (seemingly) absolute predicate, 'true' (cf. Egan *et al.*, 2005, pp. 160-1).

Some (e.g., Montminy, 2009; cf. Zimmerman, 2007) take the preceding type of worry to constitute a serious problem for relativism. Whether or not they are correct, it is not surprising that proponents of contemporary relativism of the sort described above have tried to clarify, not just the idea of relative truth (e.g., MacFarlane, 2005b), but also how to conceive of disagreement (e.g., MacFarlane, 2007; Richard, 2004, Section 9). Discussions along these lines have involved still more proposed innovations – e.g., (as alluded to just above) the introduction of more than one concept of truth, and the suggestion that we reconceive the aim of assertion (MacFarlane, *passim*).

The invariantist, meanwhile, is happy to point out, not only that she has a most straightforward account of wherein disagreement consists, but also that all parties to the discussion end up positing *some* kind of error. As to how best to explain relevant patterns of knowledge-attributing behavior, various invariantist explanations have been proposed (see Rysiew, 2007a, Section 4.6, for a brief overview).

## V. Conclusion

Relativism and contextualism both mark significant departures from more standard and traditional ways of epistemological thinking. While they are, in this respect and others, similar, there are very important distinctions between them. Still, relativism and contextualism are easily confused, thanks in no small part in a lack of precision in how they are sometimes described. The primary goal here has been to set out the two views so as to make it clear just how they differ. As we've also seen, however, the two approaches are motivated in part by the same desire to charitably accommodate the flexibility in our willingness to attribute knowledge. Whether, in this regard, either of the views enjoys a clear advantage over the other -- or indeed over a more traditional, orthodox epistemological view -- is a matter of much current debate.

*[word count: 8,980]*

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