

PHIL 2606: Knowledge, Reason and Action

Lecture 11: Contextualism

1. DeRose and Lewis (next lecture) are *contextualists* about knowledge ascriptions (that is, utterances of ‘S knows that P’), and offer *contextualist responses* to the skeptical argument. In this lecture we will talk about the general contextualist approach.¹
2. A contextualist about ‘S knows that P’ believes that it’s possible for one speaker to utter ‘S knows that P’ and another to utter ‘S does not know that P’ and yet for there to be *no disagreement* between them, because the propositions that they express are *not contradictory* (even though the sentences that they use make them seem so).
3. So, they think that ‘S knows that P’ is like ‘It is cold here’: there need not be any disagreement between a speaker who utters ‘It is cold here’, and one who utters ‘It is not cold here’ – the propositions that they express depend on the context in which they are in (specifically, upon the *location* of the context), and those propositions need not be contradictory.
4. Actually, they think it is more like ‘Tristan is tall’: there need not be any disagreement between a speaker who utters ‘Tristan is tall’ and one who utters ‘Tristan is not tall’ (suppose that I utter the first, and the coach of the Sydney Kings utters the second) – the propositions that we express depend on the *standards for tallness* operative in our contexts (mine are lower than his). Also ‘Bourke is flat’ and ‘Bourke is not flat’.
5. Contextualists about ‘S knows that P’ believe that which proposition a speaker expresses in uttering it depends upon the *standards for knowledge* (or *epistemic standards*) operative in the speaker’s context.

In ordinary contexts the standards for knowledge are *low*; in skeptical contexts (or epistemology lectures) the standards for knowledge are *high*; a speaker who utters ‘S knows that she has hands’ in an ordinary context is not in disagreement with a speaker who utters ‘S does not know that she has hands’ in a skeptical context – the propositions that they express are *not contradictory*.

6. Contextualism about ‘S knows that P’ contrasts with *invariantism* about it, according to which a speaker expresses the *same proposition* by it, no matter what the context. So speakers who utter ‘S knows that P’ and ‘S does not know that P’ are *always* in disagreement.
7. Note that this is *attributor* contextualism, not *subject* contextualism. The epistemic standards in play are those of the *attributor*, not the *subject*.
8. How does a contextualist respond to the skeptical argument that we are considering? Recall the argument:

P₁ You don’t know that you are not a BIV.

P₂ If you don’t know that you are not a BIV then you don’t know that you have hands.

C Therefore, you don’t know that you have hands.

¹ See also DeRose, Keith (1999), ‘Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense’, in John Greco and Ernest Sosa (eds.) (1999), *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell), ch. 8.

The contextualist response goes like this: when the skeptic utters the sentences in P₁, she raises the epistemic standards to such a level that the proposition she expresses is true; we are reluctant to accept this proposition, because we recognize that the proposition expressed by the sentence in C in *ordinary contexts* is *false*.

9. Contextualists respond to the skeptical argument in the same way we might respond to the following arguments:
 - a. It's raining here.
Therefore, It's raining here.
 - b. This sentence has five words.
Therefore, this sentence has five words.
 - c. Bourke is not flat.
If Bourke is not flat then Surfers Paradise is not flat.
Therefore, Surfers Paradise is not flat.
 - d. Michael is not tall.
If Michael is not tall then Tristan is not tall.
Therefore, Tristan is not tall.
10. Why doesn't the skeptic just utter the sentence in C? Because she needs to raise the epistemic standards, and just uttering the sentence in C would not do that. Uttering the sentence in P₁ does it.
11. Two important questions: (a) What exactly are *epistemic standards*? (b) How (by what mechanism) does the skeptic raise the epistemic standards (or at least threatens to)? (These are related.)
12. We will see two answers to the first question in the next lecture.
13. Here is one answer to the second – Lewis's 'Rule of Accommodation': when a speaker utters a sentence the epistemic standards are raised to whatever level is required to ensure she expresses a proposition that is true.²

Analogies: 'It is raining here', 'Tristan is tall', 'Bourke is not flat'.

14. But DeRose points out problems for this rule:

Why, then, is it not persuasive to just utter 'You don't know that you have hands' (without argument)? According to the Rule of Accommodation, this ought to raise the epistemic standards and be judged true.

Why, then, does the boastful zoologist who utters, 'I have examined the animals closely, and I know that they are zebras', also raise the epistemic standards? According to the Rule of Accommodation, he ought not.

15. Problem: why don't we notice the shift in context?

² Lewis, D. (1979), 'Scorekeeping in a Language Game', *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8, pp. 339-59.