

Can Contextualists Maintain Neutrality?

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Abstract: Several critics of contextualism claim that this view cannot consistently maintain its advertised neutrality between skepticism and anti-skepticism. Some critics contend that contextualists are forced to side with the skeptic, since any defense of contextualism unavoidably puts in place the skeptic's high requirements for knowledge; others hold that the contextualists' claim to have knowledge of what their own view entails forces them to reject the skeptic's knowledge denial. I show that these arguments misconstrue the role of context in contextualism, and explain how we are to understand the contextualist's proposed agreement with both the skeptic's knowledge denial and the anti-skeptic's knowledge attribution.

Several critics have recently argued that contextualists cannot consistently maintain their advertised neutrality between skepticism and anti-skepticism. This spells trouble for contextualism, since part of this view's appeal is that it avoids taking sides in the seemingly intractable debate about skepticism. The skeptic's knowledge denial is plausible, since it seems correct to deny knowledge to a subject who cannot eliminate possibilities of error; yet, in everyday contexts, we readily attribute knowledge to subjects who have acquired their beliefs on the basis of fallible evidence. Contextualism proposes to have it both ways. On this view, the truth conditions of a knowledge claim depend in part on the epistemic standards that are in place in the conversational context. The

skeptic's knowledge denial made in the skeptical context is true, since such a context involves epistemic standards that are impossible to meet. But this does not mean that our ordinary knowledge attributions are false: since low epistemic standards prevail in quotidian conversational contexts, we can truthfully claim to have knowledge in such contexts. Contextualism is thus neutral, in the sense that it makes both the skeptic's knowledge denial and the ordinary speaker's knowledge attribution come out true.

This paper has two parts. I will first discuss arguments to the effect that contextualists cannot maintain neutrality, because they are forced to side with the skeptic. Then, I will look at an argument that purports to show that contextualists must forego neutrality, because they are committed to rejecting skepticism. These arguments, I will show, are based on various misconceptions about the role of context in contextualism. Once these misconceptions have been dispelled, it will become clear that there is nothing inconsistent or unstable about the contextualist's proposed agreement with both the skeptic's knowledge denial and the anti-skeptic's knowledge attribution.¹

1. Is Contextualism Too Skeptic-Friendly?

Critics of contextualism often object that this view is too skeptic-friendly. I will examine four variants of this objection. First, some critics complain that according to contextualism, as soon as skeptical possibilities have been presented, conversational participants can no longer truthfully claim to have knowledge. This is because mentioning an error possibility automatically raises the standards to a level at which a

¹ I will not be presenting arguments in support of contextualism here. See Cohen (1999), DeRose (1992, 1995, 2002) and Lewis (1996) for such arguments.

subject counts as knowing only if she can eliminate this error possibility.² This, critics point out, is an unfortunate result. It shows there is an important asymmetry in the conversational mechanisms by which epistemic standards are raised or lowered: on a contextualist perspective, it is just too easy for skeptics to impose their high epistemic standards.

Worse, some critics argue, an anti-skeptic who wishes to assert knowledge that skeptical hypotheses do not obtain is bound to fail.³ The anti-skeptic cannot truthfully assert that she knows that she is not a brain in a vat, for instance, since as soon as she does that, she raises the standards to a level at which she cannot truthfully claim to know. A third, related objection points out that this entails that the naïve subject who is oblivious of skeptical hypotheses is sheltered from skepticism, whereas the conscientious, reflective epistemologist who worries about such hypotheses is doomed to lose knowledge. As Fred Dretske puts it, “Asking Clyde whether he can see whether they, the

² For recent instances of this criticism, see Barke (2004: 357-358) and Brendel (2005).

The construal of contextualism this criticism assumes is encouraged by Lewis’s (1996) *Rule of Attention*, according to which an error possibility that is not ignored in a conversational context must be eliminated for the subject to count as knowing.

³ See, among others, Davis (2004: 260) and Feldman (2001: 72). To support this claim, critics invoke DeRose’s *Rule of Sensitivity*, which states that ‘[w]hen it is asserted that some subject S knows (or does not know) some proposition P, the standards for knowledge [...] tend to be raised, if need be, to such a level as to require S’s belief in that particular P to be sensitive for it to count as knowledge’ (1995: 36). But note the presence of the expressions ‘tend’ and ‘if need be’ in the formulation of the rule.

things he knows to be oranges, are not wax imitations, destroys the knowledge he had. He no longer knows what he knew before he was asked this question” (2004: 181).⁴

According to a fourth objection, contextualists are hoist with their own petard, since contexts in which discussions about contextualism are conducted —call these *contextualist contexts*⁵—unavoidably involve the presentation of skeptical hypotheses, and thus raise epistemic standards to an unattainable level. Hence, in contextualist contexts, the contextualist must conclude that she does not know that *p*, where *p* is any proposition about the external world one would ordinarily think one knows. Contextualists are thus unable to maintain their advertised neutrality between skepticism and anti-skepticism: in any context in which they present their view, they are compelled to agree with the skeptic’s knowledge denial and disagree with the anti-skeptic’s positive knowledge attribution.⁶

A common response to these objections has been that not all contexts in which skeptical hypotheses are discussed are skeptical ones.⁷ Mentioning a skeptical hypothesis, some contextualists insist, merely *tends* to raise epistemic standards. Hence, the upward

⁴ This objection is echoed by Engel (2004: 211).

⁵ By ‘contextualist context,’ I do not mean a context in which the contextualist *succeeds* in imposing her view; so using this expression begs no question against invariantism. Contextualist contexts are simply those in which contextualism is discussed.

⁶ See, among others, Brueckner (2004) and Veber (2004: 271).

⁷ See, for instance, Cohen (1999: 85, n. 27) and DeRose (2000: 94-95). This means that Lewis’s Rule of Attention should not be regarded as an essential ingredient of contextualism.

pressure on epistemic standards created by the presentation of error possibilities can be resisted. This means that the anti-skeptic and the contextualist are free to discuss the skeptic's high epistemic standards without importing such standards to their own contexts.

Some opponents of contextualism are dissatisfied with this rejoinder. Anthony Brueckner, for instance, writes that it seems out of keeping with the spirit of contextualism: "Whenever I think about the sceptical possibilities, while in a careful, reflective philosophical context like this, it strikes me that I do *not* know that they do not obtain. That's one of the main motivations for attempting to formulate a successful contextualist theory in the first place" (2004: 404). Hence, it seems ad hoc for contextualists to claim that some presentations of skeptical scenarios, namely, the anti-skeptic's and their own, do not raise epistemic standards, whereas others, to wit, the skeptic's, do.

I would argue, to the contrary, that the contextualists' rejoinder is perfectly in the spirit of their view. In presenting their view, contextualists often point out that the context sensitivity of knowledge attributions is similar to that exhibited by tallness ascriptions, except that the latter is more easily recognized by ordinary speakers.⁸ Now, the correct

⁸ As DeRose (2005: 192) points out, the analogy with tallness ascriptions is not meant as an argument in favor of epistemic contextualism. As a matter of fact, my goal in this paper is not to put forward an argument for contextualism, but to explain how its proponents can respond to a certain class of objections. Now, if epistemic contextualism is correct, then the truth conditions of knowledge claims, just like those of tallness ascriptions, depend on the contextual provision of certain elements—epistemic standards

interpretation of a given tallness ascription is generally *suggested* by the salient features of the conversational context. However, there is nothing compulsory about the relation between the salient features of a conversational context and the correct interpretation of a tallness ascription made in that context, since speakers can cancel the effect of these salient features by making appropriate conversational maneuvers that reflect their purposes, intentions and other practical interests.

Suppose that Vince is playing pickup basketball in the neighborhood park. At 6'4", he is the tallest player on the court, and catches most of the rebounds. Among the people watching the game is an NBA scout. Another onlooker, enthusiastic about Vince's performance, asks the NBA scout about his impressions. After mentioning that Vince's dribbling, passing and shooting skills are much below those of recent NBA recruits, the NBA scout adds, 'The only position I would consider him for is center, but unfortunately, he is not tall. These days, you don't find many NBA centers under 7 feet.' Obviously, the content of the NBA scout's utterance of 'He is not tall' is not that Vince is not tall compared with the other players on the court with him, but that he is not tall compared with NBA centers. In other words, the relevant comparison class is not the one that was salient before the NBA scout was asked for his opinion, but the one he indicated by his conversational maneuvers, which were meant to reflect his purpose of assessing Vince as

with respect to knowledge claims, and comparison classes with respect to tallness ascriptions. Hence, it is reasonable for the epistemic contextualist to hold that the mechanisms by which epistemic standards are contextually supplied are similar (at some abstract level) to those by which comparison classes are.

a potential NBA recruit. In general, tallness ascriptions should be interpreted according to the speakers' practical interests, that is, their purposes, presuppositions, intentions, etc.

Things should not be any different with respect to knowledge claims. According to epistemic contextualism, knowledge claims, like tallness ascriptions, depend on the practical interests of speakers. A speaker who asserts 'S knows that p ' means, roughly, that S knows that p according to epistemic standards E , where the value of ' E ' is determined by the speaker's practical interests, as manifested by her conversational maneuvers.⁹ Now contextualists may disagree about precisely how practical interests fix epistemic standards. They may disagree, for instance, about cases in which participants in the same conversation have divergent practical interests, cases in which the various interests of the same speaker are at odds with one another, or cases in which speakers' knowledge claims or conversational maneuvers do not accord with their practical interests. Fortunately, for the purposes at hand, it will not be necessary to settle these matters, since, as we will see, none of the cases that are relevant to the current debate exhibit these difficulties.

Before I address Brueckner's point about the epistemic standards in place in contextualist contexts, let me present a case in which speakers can make it clear that they

⁹ This view about how epistemic standards are contextually fixed is meant to be in line with what the main proponents of contextualism hold. Cohen writes that "the truth-value of a sentence containing the knowledge predicate can vary depending on things like the purposes, intentions, expectations, presuppositions, etc., of the speakers who utter these sentences" (1999: 57). DeRose (2006: 319) writes that the epistemic standards in place in a context vary according to the practical interests of the speakers.

disregard certain salient error possibilities in making their knowledge claims. Suppose that a few history students are working together on an essay concerning the extent of Richard Nixon's knowledge, during his presidency, about the Watergate cover-up. Tony, one of the students, remembers an epistemology class about skepticism he recently attended, and says, 'But wait! Was he in a position to rule out the possibility that he was a brain in a vat?' Clearly, Tony is losing sight of the *purpose* of their assignment, which makes it legitimate to *presuppose* that there is an external world out there about which they, as well as Nixon, are not massively mistaken. Tony's conversational partners point this out to him, and the mentioned error possibility is quickly dismissed by all as irrelevant. (Perhaps a mere 'C'mon, you've got to be kidding,' uttered with the right tone of voice, would suffice here.) The key contextual feature here is that given their current task, the possibility of being brains in vats is not a serious practical question. Later on, after having consulted a number of articles and books, they conclude that historical documents, in particular the tapes of the "smoking gun" conversation, show that as early as June 1972, there were many things that Nixon knew about the Watergate cover-up. Clearly, in this case, the standards the speakers are associating with their claim about what Nixon 'knew' are lower than those of the skeptic.¹⁰ The correct interpretation is one

¹⁰ Note that I am supposing that no conversational participant is resisting the imposition of low epistemic standards. As I pointed out above, the issues discussed in this paper do not require a treatment of conversations in which the participants are pushing the standards in different directions. A number of views are open to the contextualist in such cases, and, as DeRose (2004) points out, not all of them favor the skeptic's high standards.

that respects the speakers' practical interests (purposes, presuppositions, intentions, etc.), which they have made manifest by their conversational maneuvers, including their dismissal of Tony's brief attempt at raising epistemic standards.

It should be clear that these considerations do not threaten to undermine the main motivation for contextualism. As DeRose (2005) points out, the best argument in favor of contextualism rests on the construction of a pair of cases, a low-standards case where the speakers' practical interests and conversational maneuvers make their knowledge attribution intuitively plausible, and a high-standards case in which it is a knowledge denial that is compelling, given the speakers' practical interests and conversational maneuvers.¹¹ In a properly constructed high-standards context, the mentioned error possibilities are reasonable, given the speakers' presuppositions, purposes and other practical interests, and, if uneliminated, are sufficient to truthfully deny knowledge. By contrast, the error possibility mentioned by Tony in the previous example is at odds with the participants' practical interests, as the conversational maneuvers that follow Tony's remark make manifest. Hence, the claim that skeptical standards do not prevail in all contexts in which skeptical hypotheses are mentioned does not undercut the contextualist point of view.

Does this mean that an anti-skeptic can truthfully conclude that the skeptic's point of view about knowledge is incorrect, simply by declaring skeptical hypotheses irrelevant? Not at all. Contextualism concerns not whether speakers have knowledge or not, but how knowledge claims are to be interpreted. According to contextualism, there is no such thing as knowing that *p*, period: the same subject may know that *p* relative to

¹¹ See, for example, DeRose's (1992) bank case and Cohen's (1999) airport case.

some low epistemic standards, and fail to know that p relative to higher standards.

(Compare: There is no such thing as being tall, period. Thus, Vince is tall for a man, but not tall compared with NBA centers.)

The contextualist point of view can be elucidated by talking of propositions. Contextualism holds that knowledge sentences of the form ‘S knows that p ’ fail to express complete propositions independent of a context of utterance. In other words, the sentence ‘S knows that p ’ is not truth-evaluable as it stands: epistemic standards must be contextually provided for an utterance of ‘S knows that p ’ to convey a (truth-evaluable) proposition. Fully spelled out, an utterance of ‘S knows that p ’ is to the effect that S knows that p relative to E , where ‘ E ’ stands for the epistemic standards in place in the context of utterance.

Hence, by uttering ‘I know that p ,’ the anti-skeptic asserts¹² that she knows that p *relative to low epistemic standards*, whereas by uttering ‘I don’t know that p ,’ the skeptic asserts that she does not know that p *relative to high epistemic standards*. One should note that the contextualist’s report of these two assertions is itself context-independent, for statements of the form ‘S knows that p relative to such-and-such epistemic standards’

¹² Here and in the rest of the paper, I use ‘what a speaker asserts’ and ‘the content of an utterance’ to refer to the propositional, or truth-conditional, content of the speaker’s utterance. According to contextualism, there is no such thing as the proposition that S knows that p . Therefore, when we want to state the propositional, or truth-conditional, content of a knowledge claim, we must specify the epistemic standards relative to which the claim is made.

have context-independent truth conditions (provided that ‘S’ and ‘p’ contain no indexicals). As Kent Bach writes,

[According to contextualism,] a sentence of the form ‘S knows at t that p’ does not express a complete proposition except relative to a standard, and the standard is determined (somehow) by the context [...] But it must also be stressed that no matter how context “determines” the standard that figures in the content of a knowledge-ascribing sentence, the content is not hostage to the context. This content is a proposition that can be expressed in a context-independent way by means of a more elaborate knowledge-ascribing sentence that makes the relevant standard explicit, either indexed (‘S knows_D at t that p’) or relativized (‘S knows at t relative to D that p’). So even if which proposition a simple knowledge-ascribing sentence expresses depends on the context, the proposition thus expressed is context-independent. (2005: 59)¹³

In this passage, Bach mentions two options for the contextualist. First, she could hold that the predicate ‘know’ is context-sensitive and designates a binary relation (between a person and a proposition) corresponding to different epistemic standards in different contexts. Second, the contextualist can hold that ‘know’ designates a ternary relation between a subject, a proposition and (context-dependent) epistemic standards.¹⁴ Although I will continue throughout the paper to use the convenient way of expressing the content

¹³ See also Cohen (2005: 202-203), Ludlow (2005) and Schiffer (1996: 318-319), for similar remarks.

¹⁴ These two views are also discussed by Cohen (1999: 61) and Schiffer (1996: 326-327).

of knowledge claims recommended by the ternary account, I wish to remain neutral between this view and the binary account.

As the foregoing considerations show, contextualism does not hold that the anti-skeptic has knowledge that the skeptic lacks:¹⁵ both the anti-skeptic and the skeptic know that they have hands *relative to low standards*,¹⁶ and neither the anti-skeptic nor the skeptic knows that they have hands *relative to the skeptic's high standards*. To repeat, the difference between low- and high-standards contexts concerns how knowledge claims of

¹⁵ This is one important respect in which contextualism differs from *subject-sensitive invariantism*, a view defended by Hawthorne (2004) and Stanley (2005) according to which the question whether or not a subject knows that *p* depends on the epistemic standards in place in the *subject's* context. On this view, a subject in a low-standards context knows that *p* (period), whereas a subject in a high-standards context lacks that knowledge.

¹⁶ Given that contextualists generally accept epistemic closure, this means that the anti-skeptic (as well as the skeptic) knows that she is not a brain in a vat *relative to low standards*. Various accounts can be provided for this low-standards knowledge, depending on the theory of knowledge one endorses. According to DeRose's (1995: 35-38) subjunctive conditionals account, S knows that *p* relative to low standards if S's belief that *p* is truth-tracking in nearby possible worlds, that is, S's belief as to whether *p* is true matches the fact of the matter as to whether *p* is true in nearby possible worlds. The anti-skeptic's belief that she is not a brain in a vat is truth-tracking in nearby possible worlds, since worlds in which she is a brain in a vat are quite distant. Hence, the anti-skeptic knows that she is not a brain in a vat relative to low standards.

the form ‘S knows that *p*’ and ‘S does not know that *p*’ are to be understood, not whether knowledge is maintained or lost.

Let us take stock. I have shown that contrary to what is often remarked (first and second objections), contextualists need not hold that epistemic standards are raised every time a speaker presents an error possibility, or claims to know that a skeptical scenario does not obtain. When their practical interests warrant it, speakers can correctly dismiss some salient error possibilities in making knowledge attributions. There is nothing ad hoc about this response, since the same can be said with respect to other context-sensitive ascriptions such as tallness ascriptions.¹⁷ I have also shown, in response to the third objection, that contextualism does not entail that the epistemic position of the ordinary speaker who can truthfully claim to ‘know’ is superior to that of the conscientious epistemologist who concludes that she does not ‘know,’ after having carefully examined error possibilities that, she realizes, she cannot rule out: both subjects know that *p* relative to low epistemic standards, and fail to know that *p* relative to high epistemic standards. Contextualism concerns only the question how the knowledge claims made by these subjects are to be understood.

¹⁷ It is quite possible that we find it more difficult to *prevent* an increase in epistemic standards than to *generate* one, perhaps because once error possibilities are salient, we find it hard not to take them into account in our knowledge claims. But this is a psychological fact about ourselves that is compatible with the normative point I am making concerning the kinds of case that *authorize* speakers to truthfully attribute knowledge.

The fourth objection against contextualism holds that contextualists must forego neutrality between skepticism and anti-skepticism, since any defense of contextualism involves the presentation of skeptical hypotheses, which unavoidably puts in place the skeptic's high standards, and thus forces the contextualist to agree with the skeptic's knowledge denial and disagree with the ordinary speaker's knowledge attribution. The main problem with this objection is that it wrongly assumes that high epistemic standards must be in place in a contextualist context.¹⁸ This assumption is questionable, for in order to defend their view, contextualists need not embrace the skeptic's high standards; they simply need to point out that such standards are sometimes adopted by speakers.

Once again, the analogy with tallness ascriptions is apt. Imagine a conversational context in which a contextualist account of tallness ascriptions is put forward. The conversational participants point out that tallness ascriptions may be associated with different comparison classes, such as the class of jockeys, the class of human beings, the class of professional basketball players, etc. They then arrive at the conclusion that there is no such thing as being tall, period, and that the truth conditions of tallness ascriptions are context-sensitive. Now, what is the prevailing comparison class for tallness ascriptions in this context? The tallest comparison class among those that have been

¹⁸ Another serious problem with this objection is that it assumes that when they find themselves in a high-standards context (or more generally, in a context in which epistemic standards are fixed), contextualists cannot maintain neutrality. I will examine this issue in detail in the next section, and show that whether they are in high- or low-standards contexts, contextualists can agree with both the skeptic's knowledge denial and the anti-skeptic's knowledge attribution.

mentioned? The tallest possible comparison class? Clearly, a conversation about contextualism regarding tallness ascriptions, *as such*, does not entail a particular position in this matter. The most reasonable view, it seems, is to hold that no particular comparison class can be considered to prevail in such a context. This conforms to the practical interests of the contextualist about tallness ascriptions: in defending her view, she need not recommend any specific comparison class. This means that a participant in this context who wishes to make a tallness ascription should be explicit and say, for example, ‘Willie is tall compared to jockeys, but he is not tall compared to basketball players.’

Nothing prevents epistemic contextualists from holding a similar view about contextualist contexts, it seems.¹⁹ In presenting her view, the contextualist needs to discuss uneliminated error possibilities; however, unlike the skeptic, she is not urging for epistemic standards according to which one needs to eliminate these error possibilities in order to count as knowing. The contextualist’s practical interests (that is, her purpose, presuppositions, attitudes, etc.) clearly differ from those of the skeptic. The contextualist’s *purpose* is not to question whether we count as knowing anything about the external world, but to explore the effects of context on our use of ‘know.’ Furthermore, the contextualist does not *presuppose* that one needs to eliminate all error possibilities in order to count as knowing; as a matter of fact, she rejects the idea that there are context-independent epistemic standards a subject has to satisfy in order to

¹⁹ Things may not be that simple, though. As I will explain in the next section, if the knowledge account of assertion is correct, contextualists may need to be in a *low*-standards context in order to *properly* assert what their view entails.

count as knowing. The contextualist's *attitude* concerning 'know' thus clearly diverges from that of the skeptic (and that of the anti-skeptic, for that matter): since the contextualist does *not* favor one set of epistemic standards over another, the reasonable position is to hold that epistemic standards are *unsettled* in the contextualist context. By this, I mean that *as such*, the contextualist's defense of her view does not put in place any specific epistemic standards.²⁰ This poses no problem, as long as the participants in contextualist contexts who wish to make knowledge claims are explicit about the standards they associate with such claims. For instance, a speaker who meets the anti-skeptic's low standards, but not the skeptic's high standards, can be fully explicit and say, 'I know that *p* relative to low epistemic standards, but not relative to high epistemic standards.'²¹ This statement is no more contradictory than the claim 'Willie is tall

²⁰ Consider a context *C* in which a speaker explains that 'she' is an indexical. Suppose that the speaker only *mentions* 'she,' and never *uses* this word. The speaker gives a few examples of utterances containing 'she' made in different contexts, and concludes, 'See, what "she" refers to varies from one context to another.' Now, it would be very strange to insist that 'she' must have a specific reference in context *C*. It is simply not required to assign a reference to 'she' in order to make the point that 'she' is context-sensitive. Similarly, it is not necessary to put in place specific epistemic standards in order to present the view that knowledge claims are context-sensitive.

²¹ Recall Bach's remark that contextualism is compatible with there being a context-independent way of making a knowledge claim, namely by making the relevant epistemic standards explicit. Such an explicit appeal to epistemic standards may strike some as unusual, but as Ludlow's (2005) internet search reveals, ordinary speakers do use

compared to jockeys, but not tall compared to basketball players.’ Hence, by being explicit, contextualists can show how they can maintain neutrality and simultaneously endorse both the anti-skeptic’s claim that p is known relative to low epistemic standards and the skeptic’s claim that p is not known relative to high epistemic standards.

In this section, I have considered four versions of the objection that contextualism is too skeptic-friendly, and shown that they are based on misconceptions of this view. Contextualists are not committed to holding that any context in which skeptical hypotheses are discussed puts in place the skeptic’s epistemic standards. Furthermore, contextualism is first and foremost a thesis about the truth conditions of knowledge claims, and does not entail that a speaker in a low-standards context is in an epistemic position superior to that of a speaker in a high-standards context. None of the objections I have presented thus threatens the contextualist’s neutrality: both the anti-skeptic’s knowledge attribution and the skeptic’s knowledge denial can be accepted, since p is known relative to low, but not relative to high, standards.

2. Are Contextualists Forced to Side with the Anti-skeptic?

In a recent paper, Crispin Wright (2005) contends that contrary to what they claim, contextualists are unable to offer a neutral treatment of the debate between the skeptic

locutions such as ‘know by academic standards,’ ‘know by scientific standards,’ ‘know with reasonable certainty,’ ‘know with some reliability,’ etc. At any rate, even if, for some reason, this way of speaking turned out to be unacceptable, there are other ways speakers can be explicit about the standards they associate with their knowledge claims: one can say, for instance, ‘I know that p , and by this I mean that I meet common sense requirements about knowledge, but not the skeptic’s unattainable standards.’

and the anti-skeptic; however, unlike the critics discussed in the first section, Wright holds that contextualists are forced to side with the anti-skeptic. Wright's argument has two versions, one that targets subject-sensitive invariantism²² (which Wright calls 'subject-contextualism'), and one that is directed at contextualism (which Wright calls 'ascriber-contextualism'). I will be concerned only with the latter here.

Suppose that a contextualist is located in contextualist context C , and reflects about a quotidian context Q in which she claimed to 'know' that p , and a skeptical context S in which she claimed not to 'know' that p . Q and S are of course different contexts, but no assumption is made about C : perhaps C is a low-standards context, in which case $C = Q$, or perhaps it is a high-standards context, in which case $C = S$.²³ In order to maintain neutrality, or 'even-handedness' as Wright puts it, the contextualist must allow the truth of both the knowledge attribution she made in context Q , or $K_Q[p]$ for short, and the knowledge denial she made in context S , or $\neg K_S[p]$.

Now, Wright contends, it had better be possible for the contextualist to *know* that her knowledge claim in Q is true, and her knowledge denial in S is true: "For if contextualism cannot rationally profess that knowledge, it has no point to make!" (2005: 243). Hence, it must be correct for the contextualist in C to claim to have the relevant second-order knowledge, that is, both $K_C[K_Q[p]]$ and $K_C[\neg K_S[p]]$ must hold. But knowledge is factive, that is, $K_Q[p]$ entails that p is true. And surely, it is reasonable to attribute to our contextualist theorist the knowledge that knowledge is factive. We thus

²² See Hawthorne (2004) and Stanley (2005) for defenses of this view.

²³ The equation ' $C = X$ ' should be understood as meaning that the same epistemic standards prevail in C and in X , and not that C and X are one and the same context.

have $K_C[K_Q[p]]$ entails p . Given epistemic closure, this entails that the contextualist in C can truthfully claim to know that p , that is, $K_C[p]$.

We can represent Wright's argument as follows:

- (1) $K_Q[p]$
- (2) $\neg K_S[p]$ ²⁴
- (3) $K_C[K_Q[p]]$
- (4) $K_C[K_Q[p]]$ entails p
- (5) $K_C[p]$

Conclusion (5) follows from (3), (4) and epistemic closure. But (5) blows away the contextualist's intended even-handedness, says Wright, for she is forced to take sides with common sense against skepticism. The contextualist must regard as known in her context C what she claims to know in a quotidian context and what she holds to be beyond knowledge in a skeptical context. Hence, says Wright, the contextualist is "committed to regarding scepticism as a kind of perfectly rationally avoidable—even self-indulgent—form of ignorance, rather than a view which is correct in a perfectly legitimate context" (2005: 241). Matters are even worse, Wright points out, if we consider what happens when the contextualist is in a skeptical context, that is, when $C = S$. In such a context, (2) entails that $\neg K_C[p]$, which contradicts the conclusion that $K_C[p]$. Therefore, when it is defended in a skeptical context, contextualism not only fails to be even-handed, but is inconsistent.²⁵

²⁴ (2) does not play a role in this particular argument; however, as we will see shortly, Wright argues that (2) poses a problem for the contextualist when $C = S$.

²⁵ For a similar objection, see Brendel (2005) and Veber (2004: 269).

Wright's argument is defective, though. The defect can be made manifest by being explicit about what is asserted by the various knowledge claims. As we saw in the previous section, in uttering 'I know that p ' in quotidian context Q , the contextualist asserts that she knows that p relative to low epistemic standards. (Let us write that she knows relative to LOW that p , for short.) This assertion is true, since by assumption, the contextualist has a true belief that p , and satisfies low standards with respect to p . The content of the contextualist's utterance of 'I don't know that p ' made in skeptical context S , on the other hand, is that she does not know that p relative to high epistemic standards, or that she does not know relative to HIGH that p . This utterance is also true, since by assumption, the contextualist does not satisfy high standards with respect to p .

Now, what about the second-order knowledge claim that, according to Wright, the contextualist must profess in context C ? If she wants to make it clear that her knowledge claim is about the knowledge attribution she made in a quotidian, low-standards, context, the contextualist must assert something like:

(3') I know that my utterance of 'I know that p ' made in context Q is true.

And given that according to contextualism, the content of an utterance of 'S knows that p ' is that S knows that p relative to E , where ' E ' stands for the epistemic standards in place in the context of utterance, (3') entails:

(3'') I know that I know relative to LOW that p .

Now, can the contextualist truthfully assert (3'') in context C ? The answer depends on the standards in place in C , since these will determine how the first occurrence of 'know' in (3'') is to be understood.

Suppose, first, that $C = Q$. In other words, low standards prevail in C . In such a case, the contextualist can truthfully assert (3"), since in doing so she would be asserting that she knows relative to LOW that she knows relative to LOW that p . (I am assuming that the contextualist satisfies low standards with respect to the proposition that she knows relative to LOW that p .) Wright's argument can thus be carried through: since the contextualist also knows relative to LOW that knowledge is factive, that is, she knows relative to LOW that her knowing relative to LOW that p entails that p , we may conclude that the contextualist knows relative to LOW that p .

Does this conclusion compromise the contextualist's neutrality? Not at all. Holding that she knows relative to LOW that p does not prevent the contextualist from holding that she does not know relative to HIGH that p . Hence, pace Wright, the contextualist is not committed to regarding skepticism as an "avoidable form of ignorance": she can agree with her skeptical assertion that she fails to know relative to HIGH that p . This means that the contextualist is not compelled to regard what she considers beyond knowledge in S as being known by her in C : *regardless of the conversational context she is occupying*, the contextualist knows relative to LOW, but not relative to HIGH, that p . The only difference between the contextualist in $C = Q$ and the contextualist in S concerns the way their respective knowledge claims are to be understood.

Consider now what happens if $C = S$, that is, if high standards are in place in C .²⁶ In such a case, the contextualist cannot truthfully assert (3"). This is because in asserting

²⁶ In his defense of contextualism against Wright's objection, Kallestrup (2005) contends that it cannot be the case that $C = S$. Unfortunately, Kallestrup offers no justification for

(3"), the contextualist would mean that she knows relative to HIGH that she knows relative to LOW that p . This is not true, since it is not the case that the contextualist knows relative to HIGH that (i) she believes that p , that (ii) p is true, and that (iii) she satisfies standards LOW with respect to p . (Recall that by assumption, the contextualist does not know relative to HIGH that p .) Therefore, Wright's argument does not go through when $C = S$: in such a context, an assertion of (3") would be false. This means that conclusion (5), which, in this case, would amount to the claim that the contextualist knows relative to HIGH that p , cannot be derived. Hence, the contextualist can maintain neutrality, and also avoid inconsistency, when she is discussing her view in a high-standards context: in such a context, she can agree with both her assertion made in Q,

this contention, which seems false: if, as the contextualist holds, there are skeptical contexts, then surely she can in principle find herself in one. (Note, by the way, that Kallestrup's contention is much stronger than the claim I made at the end of section 1, which was merely that the contextualist can present her view without *automatically* being in a skeptical context.) Furthermore, Kallestrup's handling of the case in which $C = Q$ commits the kind of mischaracterizations of contextualism discussed in section 1. He writes that contextualism "is the view that knowledge is context-dependent" (2005: 251), and that when one is in a skeptical context, one "loses knowledge" that is "gained" in a quotidian context. Hence, for Kallestrup, the contextualist should not be blamed for holding (5), for p "is known in C if $C \neq S$ " (ibid.). But as the discussion of section 1 makes plain, this response to Wright's objection seriously misconstrues the contextualist position.

according to which she knows relative to LOW that p , and her assertion made in S, according to which she fails to know relative to HIGH that p .²⁷

²⁷ In his response to Wright, Baumann (forthcoming) holds that the contextualist can truthfully assert (3") when she is in context $C = S$, even though she does not know relative to HIGH that p . This is because, Baumann explains, one can know relative to HIGH that a subject knows relative to LOW that p , without knowing relative to HIGH that p . Baumann thus rejects closure, at least in the form that is usually accepted by contextualists. I find this position problematic for two reasons. First, according to Baumann, the contextualist knows relative to the radical skeptic's standards that ordinary speakers' knowledge attributions are true (or that ordinary speakers know many things relative to LOW). But this seems false, for we do not even know that there are other speakers relative to the radical skeptic's unattainable standards. Second, according to Baumann, one can know relative to HIGH that a subject knows relative to LOW that p , and know relative to HIGH that a subject's knowing relative to LOW that p entails that p , without knowing relative to HIGH that p . This means that I can know relative to HIGH that Smith knows relative to LOW that, say, neutrinos have mass, even though I do not know relative to HIGH that neutrinos have mass. Hence, I can truthfully assert (in a high-standards context), 'I know that Smith's claim to know that neutrinos have mass is true, even though I don't know that neutrinos have mass.' But such an assertion is not unlike what DeRose (1995) calls the "abominable conjunctions" that the denial of closure leads one to endorse. Baumann's tinkering with the principle of closure thus has counterintuitive consequences.

Now, Wright may object that if she cannot profess knowledge of what her view entails while she is in context $C = S$, then the contextualist has ‘no point to make.’ But such an objection would be unfair. It is crucial to understand that unlike the low-standards invariantist, the contextualist allows for skeptical contexts in which the epistemic standards are at a level at which one cannot truthfully assert ‘I know that p ,’ for *any* proposition p about the external world, including the proposition that one has hands. So it would be inconsistent for the contextualist to hold that when she is herself located in a skeptical context, she can truthfully claim that she ‘knows’ things about the external world, for instance, that her knowledge attributions made in quotidian contexts are true. Hence, the current objection gets off the ground only if we presuppose that one should always be in a position to truthfully profess knowledge about the external world, regardless of the context in which one is located. But this presupposition, of course, cannot be taken for granted, for it begs the question against contextualism.

It is important to be clear about the situation of the contextualist who is in $C = S$. In such a context, the contextualist cannot truthfully assert ‘I know that my knowledge attributions made in quotidian contexts are true,’ for that would mean that she knows relative to HIGH that her knowledge attributions made in quotidian contexts are true. But this does not negate the fact that she knows relative to LOW that her knowledge attributions made in quotidian contexts are true. This means that when she is in a skeptical context, the contextualist can truthfully assert ‘I know relative to LOW that my knowledge attributions made in quotidian contexts are true.’ Hence, the contextualist who is located in a skeptical context can not only preserve neutrality and consistency, but also

make her point: she can profess knowledge of what her view entails, provided that she makes it explicit that this professed knowledge is low-standards.²⁸

It is worth discussing a variant of Wright's objection at this point.²⁹ This objection is based on the *knowledge account of assertion*. According to such an account, one can properly assert that *p* only if one knows that *p*.³⁰ However, according to contextualism, there is no such thing as knowing that *p*, period. Hence, contextualists who are sympathetic to the knowledge account of assertion should slightly alter its standard formulation as follows: S may properly assert that *p* in context C only if S knows that *p*

²⁸ This shows that contextualists do not agree with *all* aspects of the skeptic's point of view, since the latter holds that everyday knowledge attributions are false. The skeptic would assert, 'Regardless of the context in which we are, we don't know, contrary to what we say.' Hence, although contextualism offers a *concessive* response to skepticism, this concession is not unmitigated, for the skeptic's meta-linguistic claim that everyday knowledge attributions are not true is rejected. However, this rejection does not compromise the contextualist's neutrality, since she also rejects the anti-skeptic's claim that knowledge denials made in the skeptic's context are false. There is thus no asymmetry in the way contextualism treats the skeptic's and anti-skeptic's meta-linguistic judgments. Wright (2005: 245-249) seems to miss this point.

²⁹ What follows is inspired by similar objections raised by Brueckner (2004: 403), Engel (2004: 212-213) and Williamson (2001: 26).

³⁰ See Unger (1975) and Williamson (2000).

relative to the standards in place in C.³¹ Now, the contextualist holds that her claim ‘I know that *p*,’ made in a low-standards context, is true. But since by factivity, this claim entails that *p*, the contextualist is also committed to the truth of *p*. The problem is that if the contextualist is located in a skeptical context, then, according to the knowledge account, she cannot properly assert what she is committed to, for she does not know relative to HIGH that *p*. Contextualism is undermined, the objection goes, if its proponents are not positioned well enough to properly assert what their view entails.³²

This objection, like the previous one, is unfair. If one accepts contextualism and the knowledge account of assertion, then there are contexts in which one cannot properly assert *anything* about the external world. However, this does not undermine our views about the external world: it only entails that when one is in a context in which the skeptic succeeds in imposing her epistemic standards, such views are not properly assertible. The

³¹ See DeRose (2002: 182). Cohen (2004: 486) proposes the following, equivalent formulation: S may assert *p* in C only if ‘S knows that *p*’ is true at C.

³² Here is a variant of this objection. I wrote above that when she is in a skeptical context, the contextualist can truthfully assert, ‘I know relative to LOW that my knowledge attributions made in quotidian contexts are true.’ But if the knowledge account of assertion is correct, then the contextualist cannot *properly* assert that, since she does not know relative to HIGH that she knows relative to LOW that her knowledge attributions made in quotidian contexts are true.

low-standards invariantist who insists that the skeptic can never so succeed is simply begging the question against contextualism.³³

However, the objection based on the knowledge account shows that if the contextualist version of this account is correct, then contextualists need to be in a low-standards context in order to properly assert what their view entails.³⁴ But it is important to note that this constraint on contextualists affects not the *truth*, but only the *propriety* of their assertions about what their view entails. Thus, for instance, the contextualist's claim 'My quotidian knowledge attributions are true,' though not properly assertible, remains

³³ Of course, the current objection would have more force if, as Brueckner, Engel and Williamson contend, high standards *had* to be in place in contexts in which contextualism is defended. But as we saw in section 1, this contention is false.

³⁴ I should point out that contextualists need not accept this conditional. A contextualist could grant that in contexts in which epistemic standards are clearly in place, the knowledge account of assertion holds, but point out that this does not rule out the possibility of contexts in which epistemic standards are *unsettled*. (Recall my discussion of contextualist contexts at the end of section 1.) In such contexts, the contextualist could hold, a speaker can properly assert that *p* only if she knows that *p* relative to the standards she has explicitly claimed to satisfy. On this view, the contextualist can properly assert what her view entails in a context in which epistemic standards are unsettled (e.g., a contextualist context), provided that she knows the relevant propositions relative to the standards she has indicated.

true when made in a high-standards context,³⁵ and this claim is just as well supported in a high-standards context as it is in a low-standards context, since regardless of the context in which she is located, the contextualist knows relative to LOW (but not relative to HIGH) that her quotidian knowledge attributions are true. Hence, it's not that being in a high-standards context makes the contextualist 'lose' knowledge of what her view entails. But more importantly for our purposes, the idea that contextualists can properly assert what their view entails only if they are in a low-standards context does not compromise their neutrality. As we saw above, being in a low-standards context does not prevent the contextualist from accepting the skeptic's knowledge denial, since such a denial is to the effect that *p* is not known relative to HIGH. Hence, when she is in a low-standards context, the contextualist can agree with both the anti-skeptic's and the skeptic's knowledge claims.³⁶ It may thus be that the norms of proper assertion force contextualists to defend their view in low-standards contexts, but this does not constrain them to take sides with the anti-skeptic against the skeptic.

3. Conclusion

³⁵ Similarly, the contextualist's claim 'I know relative to LOW that my knowledge attributions made in quotidian contexts are true' is true, although not properly assertible in a skeptical context.

³⁶ The contextualist who is in a low-standards context must of course reject the skeptic's meta-linguistic claim that knowledge attributions made in a low-standards context are false. But as we saw in fn. 28, this does not compromise the contextualist's neutrality, since she also rejects the anti-skeptic's claim that knowledge denials made in skeptical contexts are false.

Contextualists achieve neutrality between skepticism and anti-skepticism by holding that the truth conditions of a knowledge claim depend in part on the epistemic standards that are in place in the conversational context. I have examined several arguments purporting to show that contextualists cannot maintain their proclaimed neutrality. Many of these arguments can be defused by noting that according to contextualism, there is no such thing as knowing that p , period: knowledge claims of the form ‘S knows that p ’ are to be understood as meaning that S knows that p according to such-and-such epistemic standards. So, for instance, contextualism does not deny knowledge to the conscientious investigator who strives to envisage all sorts of error possibilities, while granting knowledge to the naïve subject who does not fret over such possibilities. What contextualism holds is that the conscientious investigator’s utterance of ‘I don’t know that p ’ is true, since by that utterance, she means that she does not know that p relative to high standards, whereas the naïve subject’s utterance of ‘I know that p ’ may also be true, since by that utterance, she means that she knows that p relative to low standards. There is no suggestion here that the naïve subject’s epistemic position regarding p is superior to that of the conscientious investigator. As a matter of fact, both subjects can be said to know that p relative to low epistemic standards, and fail to know that p relative to high epistemic standards.

The same considerations apply to the contextualist, who *may* find herself in a context in which epistemic standards are fixed. The contextualist does not lose or gain knowledge of her view and what it entails, depending on the context in which she is located: regardless of the context, the contextualist knows relative to LOW, but not relative to HIGH, that her quotidian knowledge attributions are true. Furthermore, being

in a context in which standards are fixed does not force the contextualist to forego neutrality, since her agreement with the skeptic and the anti-skeptic is context-*independent*: whether she is in a low- or a high-standards context, the contextualist endorses both the skeptic's assertion that p is not known relative to HIGH, and the anti-skeptic's assertion that p is known relative to LOW.

Now, it may be that contextualists can properly assert what their view entails only when they are in low-standards contexts. This is because if the knowledge account of assertion is correct, then speakers in a high-standards context are not positioned well enough to properly assert anything about the external world. This entails that high-standards contexts are *practically* inconvenient, since they seriously limit what speakers can properly assert, but it has no adverse impact on contextualism. In such contexts, the contextualist can still *truthfully* assert what her view entails, and be correctly said to know relative to LOW that her quotidian knowledge attributions are true. But more importantly, for our purposes, the contextualist's neutrality is not compromised when she is in a high-standards context (or in a low-standards context for that matter): she can hold that p is known relative to LOW, but not relative to HIGH, and thus agree with both the skeptic and the anti-skeptic.³⁷

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