

When Do the Truth-Conditions of *S knows that p* Change?

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Epistemic Contextualism

- Epistemic contextualism has become one of the most prominent positions in contemporary epistemology. According to this theory a proper analysis of our ordinary linguistic practices would establish a viewpoint on the semantic behaviour of knowledge ascriptions that can improve our understanding of some remarkable epistemological questions (as, for example, the sceptical problem).
- In the last years the debate on contextualism especially focused on these aspects of the theory, neglecting some other relevant issues that arise from its internal structure. Here we will concentrate our attention precisely on one of those issues: we will try to single out which conversational and epistemic mechanisms are involved in the variation of the truth-conditions of knowledge ascriptions.

Epistemic Contextualism

- Epistemic Contextualism is the semantic thesis that the truth-conditions of knowledge ascribing and knowledge denying sentences (as “ S knows that p ” or “ S doesn’t know that p ”) depend upon certain features of the context of the person who is making the assertion

(*a*). Christian knows that he is looking at a dandelion

can be true in a context C_1 and false in another context C_2 at the same time t since the two utterances of the same sentence express two different propositions.

Epistemic Contextualism

Strength of epistemic position

- being in a strong epistemic position with respect to a certain proposition one believes is for one's belief in that proposition to have an adequate amount of the properties the having enough of which is what's needed for a true believe to constitute a piece of knowledge

Epistemic standard

- is “the standard for how strong a position a subject must be in with respect to a proposition ... for a sentence attributing knowledge to her in the context in question to be true” (DeRose, 2009: 7).

Epistemic Contextualism

(α). Christian knows that he is looking at a dandelion



Context C_1

Context C_2

Ordinary conversation

Botanical Symposium

In order to make true (α) Christian has to be able to tell the difference between a dandelion and an oxeye daisy

In order to make true (α) Christian has to be able to list all the relevant botanical characteristics of a dandelion

Epistemic Contextualism

The analogy with gradable adjectives

- Consider gradable adjectives as “**tall**” or “**flat**”:

The truth-conditions of this kind of adjectives vary in different contexts since it is the context of utterance that establishes the parameter that defines how those terms apply

e.g. a context can determine the maximum height in order for a person to count as “short”.

Therefore, since knowledge ascriptions seem to vary in degree of “strength” or “goodness”, each context can define the strength or the goodness of the epistemic position of a subject S such that S can count as a knower in that context.

Epistemic Contextualism

The analogy with indexical expressions

- Consider indexical expressions as “I” or “here”:

to this kind of expressions are connected the well-known notions introduced by David Kaplan (1989) of “character” (the rule associated by convention to an expression that sets the contextual parameters to locate the reference of the occurrences of the expression in contexts) and “content” (the intension, or the semantic value of the expression).

Making use of this distinction, we can thus associate to a knowledge ascription of the form “S knows that p” a character such as “S has a true belief that p and she is in a strong (or good) enough epistemic position with respect to p”.

Epistemic Contextualism

Contexts as segmentations of alternatives

- According to the theory of relevant alternatives in order to count as knowing a certain proposition p a subject S should rule out all the relevant alternatives to p (Goldman, 1976; Schaffer, 2005). We can thus regard each context as a segmentation of alternatives that are considered to be relevant in that context.
- If we consider our example involving (a) , we can outline the two contexts in the following way: in the first case (the one sets in an ordinary context) to Christian it will be asked to rule out certain ordinary alternatives, while in the latter (the botanical symposium context) he could have to rule out much extreme alternatives.

The Fluid View

David Lewis' fluid view:

- According to the fluid view the variations of the truth-conditions of knowledge ascriptions are induced by certain conversational manoeuvres.
- In particular, the mere mention of an epistemic alternative would be sufficient to install a certain epistemic standard in a context (Lewis, 1996: 559).

The Fluid View

The conversational score:

For a better understanding of this proposal we should consider it in the light of Lewis' claim that at any stage of a well-run conversation is associated a "conversational score":

"Sentences depend for their truth value, or for their acceptability in other respects, on the components of conversational score at the stage of conversation when they are uttered. Not only aspects of acceptability of an uttered sentence may depend on score. So may other semantic properties that play a role in determining aspects of acceptability. For instance, the constituents of an uttered sentence - subsentences, names, predicates, etc. - may depend on the score for their intension or extension" (Lewis, 1979: 345).

The Fluid View

The Rule of Accommodation:

- The conversational manoeuvres of the speakers can manipulate and change the values of the score during the conversation.
- Conversational contexts are governed by a **rule of accommodation** which posits that:

“If at time t something is said that requires component s_n of conversational score to have a value in the range r if what is said is to be true, or otherwise acceptable; and if s_n does not have a value in the range r just before t ; and if such-and-such further conditions hold; then at t the score-component s_n takes some value in the range r ” (Lewis, 1979: 347).

The Fluid View

The Rule of Accommodation:

- So, if during a conversation a speaker utters the sentence “Smith’s Ford is in the parking lot” this utterance will immediately manipulate the conversational score posing the presupposition that Smith owns a Ford and, consequently, making rather odd a caveat as “... and he owns a Ford”.

(*b*). Christian doesn’t know that he’s looking at a dandelion

The mention of (*b*) will manipulate the conversational score changing the epistemic standard in place in the context so that (*b*) can be true.

The Fluid View

The Rule of Attention:

- We could expect that in the same way in which the standards can be raised they can also be lowered.
- If the standards for many terms can be both raised and lowered in many occasions, the same manoeuvre cannot be employed when it concerns the epistemic standards.

The Fluid View

The Rule of Attention:

- According to Lewis in order to count as knowing a certain proposition p , a subject S must rule out any epistemic alternative that he is not properly ignoring.
- However, according to the *rule of attention* (Lewis, 1996: 559) an epistemic alternative is properly ignored only when it is, in fact, ignored simpliciter - that is, if the subject is attending to it then the alternative is not properly ignored.
- Therefore, since the statement of an epistemic alternative entails the fact that this very alternative has been attended by the subject, it follows that when the epistemic standard has been raised it cannot be lowered anymore.

Against The Fluid View

The contextualists' reactions:

It should be noted that Lewis' proposal did not obtain a positive outcome among other contextualists. Here are some examples:

- Michael Ashfield has defined the fluid view as depicting “a worst-case-scenario for the contextualist” (2013: 122);
- Both Keith DeRose (and Stewart Cohen) deny their support to the rule:

“... actually I have a lot of sympathy for the thought that the mere mention of the alternative is not sufficient for making it relevant ...” (DeRose, 2000);

“Nor do either of us [DeRose and Cohen] accept the view that is the next most commonly ascribed to the contextualist: that, in the situations under consideration, the sceptic's extraordinarily high standards prevail” (DeRose, 2004).

Against The Fluid View

Antonia Barke's objections (1996):

- b) A remark posed by Barke concerns the ease that characterised the conversational move of rising the standard.
 - For many other context-sensitive terms we can manipulate the score in both ways: we can tighten the standard for tallness speaking about basketball players and then we can broad it driving the conversation to eight years old children; in the case of knowledge ascriptions, instead, a return to a loose standard cannot be achieved by mentioning a low-standard knowledge ascription.

Against The Fluid View

Antonia Barke's objections (1996):

- b) A remark posed by Barke concerns the ease that characterised the conversational move of rising the standard.
- This difference between the conversational mechanics of terms as “tall” or “flat” and knowledge ascriptions depends upon the assumption of the epistemic rule of attention.
 - As Lewis claims, “speaking of knowledge despite uneliminated possibilities of error just sounds contradictory” (1996: 549) and the statement of a not ruled out epistemic alternative seems to prevent an effective ascription of knowledge: it seems that we would not say that Christian is looking at a barn if we would know that the countryside in which Christian is it's full of fake barns that are indistinguishable from real barns.

Against The Fluid View

Antonia Barke's objections (1996):

- Yet, according to Barke this explanation of the asymmetry between the manoeuvres of rising and lowering the standards is not promising for she considers the rule of attention highly implausible.
- According to Barke “discussing our presuppositions and agreeing on the question of which ones are reasonable ... and which ones are not it’s an integral part of our epistemic practices” (2004: 358), and clearly Lewis’ position does not vindicate this part of our epistemic custom.
- Since contextualists generally aim to construe **a theory that it’s in consonance with our ordinary knowledge-attributing practices** (Kompa, 2014: 59; Rysiew, 2016), the asymmetry between the manoeuvres of rising and lowering the standards that results from Lewis’ view seems to suggest that an alternative account of these mechanisms should be preferred.

The Veto Power View

- Our ordinary epistemic practice seems to grant to us the possibility to stop that conversational manoeuvres that attempt to rise the epistemic standards.
- Appealing to this intuitions, many contextualists have contested the rule of attention maintaining that, just as in the case of other context-sensitive terms, the attempt of raising the standards can be resisted also when knowledge ascriptions are involved.

The Veto Power View

- According to this view, to the speakers is conferred a **veto power** over the changing of the conversational score (DeRose, 2009: 140).
- Cohen describes this plausible conversational manoeuvre in these terms:

“The pressure toward higher standards can sometimes be resisted. One device for doing this is adopting a certain tone of voice. So in response to the sceptic, one might say, "C'mon, you've got to be kidding - I know I am not a brain-in-a-vat!". If this is the dominant response among the conversational participants, then everyday standards may remain in effect. In such a case, the speaker unmoved by skeptical doubt is not failing to adjust his ascriptions to contextually determined standards. Rather, such a speaker is managing to keep the standards from rising” (Cohen, 2001: 93).

The Veto Power View

- The veto power view seems to perfectly conform to our ordinary epistemic custom. Moreover, it vindicates the contextualist's claim according to which **the standards are determined** not by a rule as the rule of attention, but **by the presuppositions, the purposes and the practical interests of the speakers** (Cohen, 2001; Kompa, 2014).

The Veto Power View

Taking seriously an epistemic alternative

- According to Michael Blome-Tillmann the rule of attention should be restated for simply attending to a certain epistemic alternative it's not enough for making it impossible to ignore in a “**epistemologically relevant sense**” (Blome-Tillmann, 2009: 247).

“Imagine you saw your teenage son sneaking away through the window of his room late at night. When you confront him the next morning he replies some-what desperately: ‘How do you know I left the house? I mean, for all you know you might have dreamt it. It was late at night, wasn't it?’” (Blome-Tillmann, 2009).

The Veto Power View

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- Now, according to the rule of attention the objection of the son would have the automatic consequence of raising the epistemic standard to a sceptical level; this consequence, however, seems to be extremely implausible to Blome-Tillmann since he maintains that *in order to make a certain epistemic alternative relevant we should take it seriously*.

The Veto Power View

The problem of disagreement

- The veto power view seems unable to account for cases of radical disagreement concerning the application of the epistemic standards.
- Imagine a dispute between a common-sense epistemologist and a sceptic: when the sceptic will try to raise the standard the common-sense epistemologist will immediately employ the veto power. Now, can the sceptic employ the veto power too preventing the lowering of the standard? Who wins? The one who first employed the conversational manoeuvre? But in such a situation it seems extremely implausible to tie the efficacy of the veto power to the temporal sequence of its employment in the conversational context.

The Veto Power View

The problem of disagreement

The result of this peculiar case of disagreement seems to be an opaque impasse since it's not clear which value should assume the conversational score according to the veto power view (DeRose, 2009: 141).

Dealing with Disagreement

The Gap View

- In order to give to the speakers the possibility to freely manipulate the truth-conditions of knowledge ascriptions we should thus opt for an account able to explain the outcomes of the cases of disagreement about the epistemic standard.

Dealing with Disagreement

The Gap View

- DeRose proposes an account along these lines (the gap view) according to which in the cases where two speakers (e.g. a sceptic and a common-sense epistemologist) do not agree on which standard should be applied in their conversational context an utterance of “S knows that p” assumes the following truth-conditions:

the sentence is true if S meets the extremely high standard of the sceptic, false if S doesn't meet the common-sense epistemologist ordinary standard and neither true or false if S does not meet the sceptic standard and meets the common-sense epistemologist standard.

Dealing with Disagreement

The Gap View

This view has the remarkable virtue of respecting two strong intuitions that we have about the cases of disagreement in question:

- the first, according to which the two speakers are contradicting each other;
- the latter that posits that the truth-conditions of each speaker's assertion should match his personally indicated content.

Dealing with Disagreement

Two thorny problems for the Gap View

- 1) DeRose's proposal could be considered a **sceptical-friendly approach**: in a dispute between a sceptic and a common-sense epistemologist, even if the sceptic does not manage to install his extremely high standard in the conversational context, at least he is able to prevent the knowledge ascription of the common-sense epistemologist.
- 2) Furthermore, according to Martin Montminy (2013) the gap view would entail another serious problem related to those subjects (that Montminy labels as **dogmatic Mooreans**) who impose low epistemic standards and refute any raising of them.

Dealing with Disagreement

The Intentionalist View

- For the abovementioned reasons Montminy claims that the gap view should be abandoned. Montminy proposes an alternative position, the **intentionalist view** (2013: 2351-64), according to which the epistemic standard involved in the content of an utterance of “S knows that p” is defined only by the speaker’s intention.
- Clearly, contrary to DeRose’s position, Montminy’s proposal is a multi-scoreboard view for every speaker has his own conversational scoreboard.

Dealing with Disagreement

The Intentionalist View

- The intentionalist view is that it isn't a sceptical-friendly approach: indeed, even if the sceptic affirms truly that "S does not know that p" (for he is intending very high epistemic standard) also the common-sense epistemologist is speaking truly when he says that "S knows that p" (for he has in mind ordinary epistemic standard).
- Moreover, this view does not affect the contextualist cases since the objection of the dogmatic Moorean John cannot prevent Mary to adopt high epistemic standards.

Dealing with Disagreement

The Intentionalist View, a clarification

- The distinction that Montminy draws between his intentionalist view and the classical contextualist stance it's not perfectly clear.
- Cohen and DeRose (the two main proponents of contextualism) generally describe their position as one according to which the truth-conditions of a knowledge ascription are determined by certain features of the ascriber's context, features as the ascriber's purposes and practical interests.

Dealing with Disagreement

The Intentionalist View, a clarification

- Cohen explicitly says that the epistemic standards are defined by “the intentions, the expectations, and the presuppositions of the members of the conversational context” (Cohen, 2001: 92).

Dealing with Disagreement

The Intentionalist View, a clarification

- After this clarification, it appears that we can conclude that the true characterizing element of Montminy's proposal is the fact of being a multi-scoreboard view.
- However, it's by no means certain that a multi-scoreboard view is preferable to a single-scoreboard view.

Single vs. Multiple Scoreboard Semantics

The problems of the Gap View: genuine problems?

- The Gap View is too sceptical-friendly?
- The answer seems to be negative. The contextualist anti-sceptical argument simply claims that from the fact that we do not know ordinary propositions according to the sceptical standard it cannot be inferred that we do not know that very propositions according to ordinary standards. Thus, what is important for the contextualist is to preserve the legitimacy of our knowledge ascriptions made in ordinary contexts, a legitimacy that the gap view does not prevent.

Single vs. Multiple Scoreboard Semantics

Disagreement and contradiction

- A debatable aspect is tied with the intuition that when two speakers do not agree on which standard should apply to their context they are, in effect, contradicting one another.
- According to DeRose this intuition is confirmed by the fact that, in a case as the one that sees a sceptic opposing to a common-sense epistemologist, each speaker is explicitly indicating that he's contradicting what his opponent is claiming.

Single vs. Multiple Scoreboard Semantics

Disagreement and contradiction

- The gap view seems to do a nice work in accounting for the contradiction that we intuitively recognise in such cases, but what about the intentionalist view?
- Montminy's position an error theory for it maintains that the two conversational partners are mistaken in believing that they are contradicting one another (Montminy, 2013: 2361). As Montminy points out, an error theory is posed also by the classical contextualist view since even according to this position the knowledge ascriptions assessed in different contexts express different propositions, with the only difference that:

“proponents of the [classical] view need to explain away only the intuition of contradiction across contexts, whereas intentionalists have to account for why we are mistaken about there being both inter- and intra-contextual contradiction” (*Ibid.*).

Single vs. Multiple Scoreboard Semantics

Disagreement and contradiction

- Therefore, the intentionalist view has to deny our intuition that in that cases where the speakers do not agree on which epistemic standard should be in place in their context they are, in effect, involved in a genuine dispute. However, it's difficult to imagine how such a denial could be efficaciously supported.
- As we have seen before, our intuitions strongly suggest that the two speakers, the sceptic and the common-sense epistemologist, are contradicting one another.

Single vs. Multiple Scoreboard Semantics

Disagreement and contradiction

- Furthermore, it is quite clear that the sceptic and the common-sense epistemologist are intending to do so: in fact, they do not simply argue, respectively, that their personal assertion of “S knows that p” is false or true according to their personal epistemic standard, but that in the conversational context in which they are - and that includes also their conversational partner, - it should be applied a certain epistemic standard instead of another. The purpose of each speaker is clearly to impose his epistemic standard to his conversational partner.

Single vs. Multiple Scoreboard Semantics

Disagreement and contradiction

- Consider the sentence “Louis is tall”.
- If it seems extremely plausible to assume that there isn’t a real contradiction between two utterances of this sentence made in two contexts in which are in place different standards for “tall”, it seems much less plausible to maintain that, when two speakers are debating on which standard for tallness should be adopted in their conversational context, they are not involved in a genuine dispute.

Conclusion

- The pivotal difference between the Gap View and the Intentionalist View seems to concern their treatment of our intuition regarding that case where the speakers do not agree on which epistemic standard should be in place in their contexts.
- We have maintained that the main virtue of the gap view's single scoreboard semantics strategy consists in its ability to account for the intuition that in the above-mentioned cases the conversational partners are, in effect, contradicting one another.
- The intentionalist view clearly cannot obtain this results and this seems to be its main limit: indeed, the intuition that in the cases in question the speakers are contradicting one another seems very difficult to be explained away. Therefore, we conclude that, at least under this respect, the gap view appears to be superior to the intentionalist view. Yet, for this superiority depends upon a minute and not definitely decisive aspect, the problem surely deserves additional attention and further inquiry.

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Thank You for Your Attention

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