

## Lecture 4 Contextualism

### 1. Review and Set-up

#### **Argument from Ignorance**

**SCEPTICAL HYPOTHESIS.** I do not know I am not in a sceptical scenario (e.g. dreaming/B.I.V/evil demon/etc).

**CLOSURE.** If I do not know I am not in a sceptical scenario, then I do not know I have hands.

¬**ORDINARY KNOWLEDGE.** I do not know I have hands.

Last week, we looked at responses to this argument that challenge **Closure**. Dretske and Nozick each argued that there are good reasons to think that Closure is false; but they were also happy to accept the “abominable conjunctions” that followed from the rejection of closure.

**Contextualists** take that cost to be too high. They seek a solution on which both ordinary knowledge claims and the intuitive force of scepticism can be preserved. One thing that this solution and the anti-closure solution share, however, is a commitment to some version of **sensitivity** condition.

We’ll have a quick look at Lewis (1996) – “Elusive Knowledge” – before looking at issues within the contextualism debate. Lewis isn’t on your reading list, but he is an important precursor to this anti-sceptical strategy.

### 2. Lewisian Contextualism

Before presenting his solution, Lewis makes some arguments against other potential responses to scepticism:

#### **Fallibilism**

The view that ‘I know that *P*’ IS consistent with ‘*P* might be false’.

⇒ Lewis says if this is the *only* non-sceptical option, then we can make do. Fallibilism clashes severely with our intuitions, though perhaps marginally less so than scepticism. Given this, it would be even better to find a different option altogether.

### Contextualism about Justification

The view that justification is context-sensitive. Very broadly, on such a view, whether a belief is justified depends in part on the relevant context, such that the same belief with the same justifiers might be justified in one context and unjustified in a different one.

- ⇒ Lewis rejects this brand of contextualism because he “doesn’t agree that the mark of knowledge is justification” (551). He argues that justification is neither necessary nor sufficient for knowledge.

### Positive Account

#### Contextualism<sub>LEWIS</sub>:

$S$  knows proposition  $P$  iff  $S$ ’s evidence eliminates every possibility (in the domain) in which  $\neg P$  (except for those possibilities that are properly ignored).

Some qualifications about this account:

- First, it should be understood as a theory of **knowledge ascriptions**, i.e. of when it is correct to say of  $S$  that they know that  $P$ .
- Second, in order for  $S$ ’s evidence to “**eliminate**” the possibility that  $\neg P$ , that evidence must, in some broad sense, be *inconsistent* with  $\neg P$ . However, this need not be logical inconsistency. And it need not be the case that  $S$  has consciously ruled  $\neg P$  out on the basis of that evidence.
- Third, the universal quantifier ranging over possibilities is **not unrestricted**.

Lewis provides a series of rules which govern when a possibility is **properly ignored**. Here are a few of those rules:

#### **Rule of Actuality**

What is actual (i.e. what this world is like) is never properly ignored. This is effectively a truth condition. What is actual is not necessarily the same as what we *think* is actual.

#### **Rule of Belief**

What  $S$  believes and what  $S$  ought to believe are never properly ignored.

#### **Rule of Attention**

Possibilities you are not ignoring are never properly ignored

Here then is how this view responds to **scepticism**. First, it preserves ordinary knowledge claims by restricting the domain of possibilities such that we do not always have to eliminate the possibility that we're not in a sceptical scenario. Such possibilities are (often) properly ignored, and so we can say that, e.g. 'I know that I have hands'.

However, because of the **Rule of Attention**, the moment you consider the possibility that you are a BIV, you can no longer ignore it! The moment you stop ignoring the possibility, the context shifts, and in the new context, you no longer meet the conditions for saying you know. Note though that, in this new context you not only fail to know you're not a BIV, you also fail to know that you have hands. Thus, the Lewisian contextualist is not committed to any "abominable conjunctions".

### 3. **Subject vs. Attributor Context**

On a view where it is the **attributor's context** (i.e. the one making the knowledge ascription) that is relevant and **not** the **subject's**, it can turn out that two different speakers  $A_1$  and  $A_2$  can *faultlessly* disagree about whether S knows that P, provided they are in two different contexts.

Dretske calls this **radical contextualism** and argues that it is false.

*I can't rob S of his knowledge by worrying (as he does not) about disembodied brains in vats or by appealing to higher standards. Nor can I create knowledge for S by not worrying about, by invoking weaker standards, and therefore not finding relevant, possibilities he does. What the person attributing knowledge to S (this can be S himself) takes to be relevant is, I submit, irrelevant to whether S knows what he is said to know. It is sometimes relevant to what S is being said to know, but this, surely, is different from a relevance to whether he knows what he is said to. (2004: 178)*

According to Dretske, the radical contextualist is led astray by contextual variation in what we say, and attributes this sensitivity to knowledge itself. Though, it should be noted that many contextualists are *explicitly* giving accounts of **knowledge claims** and not of knowledge itself. Dretske acknowledges that some contextualists may simply accept his observation but deny that it is problematic.

In response, he argues that this, in combination with the radical sceptic's interest in preserving closure, leads to unacceptable results. As soon as the context changes to the sceptic's (i.e. one in which we are entertaining a sceptical hypothesis) then we have to agree with the sceptic that we never knew anything. This is because, it is our current context of utterance that is relevant, and not the context in which we held the relevant

beliefs. But this, Dretske argues, gives up too much to the sceptic. It is an answer “only available to those who don’t think about scepticism [sic]” (182). And it follows from this that it is an answer that we can *never give to the sceptic*.

On the other hand, if the contextualist wants to be able to evaluate past claims according to the attributor’s context at *that* time a new problem arises. Consider the following imagined dialogue based on one from Yourgrau (1983) (taken from DeRose 2009: 201)

**A:** Does Mary know that that's a zebra?

**B:** Yes, she knows.

**A:** But can she rule out its being merely a cleverly painted mule?

**B:** No, she can't.

**A:** Ah, so you admit now that she didn't know it was a zebra?

**B:** No, she did know before your question that it was a zebra. But after your question, she no longer knows.

Something seems amiss here. It seems like the last sentence is absurd. And yet, on attributor-sensitive contextualism, it seems to be the correct thing to say. This is sometimes referred to as a **‘now you know it, now you don’t’** case.

The proponent of subject-sensitivity argues that in both of these cases, if we take the contextual standards to depend on the subject of the knowledge claim instead, we can avoid both problems. In the second (mule) case, if one were subject-sensitive, then **B** could still say of Mary that she knew that the animal was a zebra, since the possibility of the animal’s being a painted mule was only raised in the *attributor’s* context and wasn’t salient in Mary’s. Similarly, in answer to the sceptic, subject sensitivity allows us to say to the sceptic that ordinarily, we make true knowledge claims since, in those contexts, the possibility that we are BIVs is not relevant.

The trouble is, subject-sensitivity seems to raise problems of its own. Consider an example from Cohen (1999): Smith believes a particular flight has a layover in Chicago, and forms this belief on the basis of an itinerary. John and Mary hear Smith assert his belief, and witness him consulting the itinerary. For John and Mary, though, it is vital that they know whether the flight, in fact, stops there, so they decide to double-check because they’re concerned the itinerary may have recently changed. On a subject-sensitive view, John and Mary should accept that Smith knows the layover is in Chicago. Cohen objects though:

*if Smith knows on the basis of the itinerary that the flight stops in Chicago, what should they have said? 'Okay, Smith knows that the flight stops in Chicago, but still, we need to check further.' To my ear, it is hard to make sense of that claim. Moreover, if what is printed in the itinerary is a good enough reason for Smith to know, then it is a good enough reason for John and Mary to know. Thus John and Mary should have said, 'Okay, we know the plane stops in Chicago, but still, we need to check further.' Again, it is hard to make sense of such a claim. (1999: 58–9)*

In response, Hawthorne (a proponent of the subject-sensitive view) argues that the subject-sensitive view can make sense of this by appeal to the **knowledge norm of assertion**. He explains that, in the example, in order for John and Mary to *assert* that Smith knows the flight stops in Chicago, they would have to *know* that Smith knows this. But, in order to know that Smith knows this, they would themselves have to know that the flight stops in Chicago. But they do not know this! So they cannot appropriately assert that Smith knows it.