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Knowledge and Presuppositions

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Print publication date: 2014

Print ISBN-13: 9780199686087

Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: August 2014

DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199686087.001.0001

Introduction

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DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199686087.003.0001

Abstract and Keywords

This chapter introduces the main objectives and motivations of the book and offers a detailed outline of subsequent chapters. It describes the structure of the book, which begins by developing *Presuppositional Epistemic Contextualism* and then explores its ability to resolve various sceptical paradoxes and puzzles. In subsequent chapters *PEC* is defended against familiar and widely discussed philosophical and linguistic objections to contextualism. In the final chapters of the book *PEC* is employed to illuminate a variety of issues central to contemporary discussions of epistemological issues, such as Gettier cases, Moorean reasoning, the nature of evidence, and other current problems and puzzles.

Keywords: knowledge, epistemic contextualism, scepticism, pragmatic presupposition, presuppositional epistemic contextualism

This monograph is devoted to *Epistemic Contextualism* ('EC'), the view that the truth-conditions of 'knowledge'-ascriptions may change with the ascriber's context of utterance in a specifically epistemic way. More intuitively (and less accurately), contextualism about 'knows' is the view that there are conversational contexts that are governed by what we may call, in a first and intuitive approximation, high standards for 'knowledge'—that is, contexts in which it is difficult to satisfy 'knows p ' for a given proposition p —and contexts with low standards for 'knowledge', in which it is considerably easier to do so.¹ For example, in the context of a chemistry laboratory, it is significantly more difficult to 'know' whether a certain liquid is water than it is in an everyday context, over dinner, say, since in the context of the chemistry laboratory more possible alternatives to the liquid being water (such as its being hydrochloric acid) have to be ruled out than over dinner. The standards for 'knowing' that the transparent liquid in front of us is water thus seem to be higher in the chemistry laboratory than they are in an ordinary dinner conversation.

Even though EC may seem initially plausible and intuitive, the view has, in recent years and for a variety of reasons, been met with overwhelming scepticism by a vast majority of epistemologists and philosophers of language. More specifically, a large number of theorists have voiced doubts as to whether contextualism is viable from the point of view of the philosophy of language and also whether it can deliver on one of its core epistemological promises—namely, to offer a resolution of the sceptical puzzle. To a large extent, I agree with this widely held criticism. The accounts of (p.2) EC that are currently defended in the literature are subject to a variety of objections and suffer from a number of methodological problems and counterexamples.² However, in spite of my pessimistic attitude towards those accounts of contextualism that are currently discussed in the literature, I also believe that the general idea of a philosophically interesting contextualist semantics of 'know' can be coherently developed and safeguarded against the most prominent types of criticism. To my mind, the difficulties of the established versions of EC are peculiar to those established versions,

while the general idea of the context-sensitivity of ‘know’ leaves enough room for interesting philosophical manoeuvring. In this short monograph, I aim to undertake such manoeuvring and to develop a novel contextualist approach to the semantics of ‘knows’.

The book pursues four main objectives. The first objective is to develop a novel account of contextualism—the envisaged account suggesting a close semantic link between the content of the predicate ‘knows *p*’ in a context *C* and what is pragmatically presupposed in *C*. The second objective is to offer replies to the most serious and widely discussed objections to contextualism in the literature. The third objective is to employ the emerging account in innovative solutions to longstanding philosophical problems, such as the problems of scepticism and induction, and in providing analyses of phenomena that have attracted much recent attention—such as the problem of transmission failure and the lottery puzzle. The fourth and final objective is to integrate the view defended here—*Presuppositional Epistemic Contextualism* or simply ‘PEC’—in a broader epistemological framework by combining it with an independently attractive account of evidence and epistemic justification—namely, the knowledge-first account proposed by Williamson (2000).

The literature on the semantics of ‘knowledge’-attributions has been booming for a fair number of years now, and a large variety of views competing with contextualism have entered the scene of late. The major players in this field—besides EC—go under the labels of *Epistemic Relativism*, *Moderate Insensitive Invariantism*, *Subject-Sensitive Invariantism*, and what I have elsewhere called *Pragmatic Invariantism*.³ Each of these views will be largely ignored in this book, and I shall, therefore, not pretend (p.3) to have shown that PEC provides the best overall account of the data on ‘knowledge’-attributions (even though I think that it is a strong contender). In other words, it is not a goal of this book to provide an analysis of the relative strengths and weaknesses of each of the mentioned views in comparison with the contextualist view defended here—such a project is well beyond the bounds of this monograph. The glorious task of delivering a final

judgement on the semantics of 'knowledge'-attributions will therefore have to be left for another day (and, presumably, another author). What I shall argue here is merely that the rather common and widespread unsympathetic attitude towards EC that can be found in the literature is exaggerated at best, and that the view has significantly more potential than is acknowledged by large parts of the philosophical community. The goal of this book is to realize some of that potential by developing a novel, more powerful, and more attractive contextualist approach to the semantics of 'knows'.

Major parts of this book are heavily influenced by Stewart Cohen's and David Lewis's seminal papers on contextualism.⁴ More specifically, the account defended here will be formulated along largely Lewisian (1996) lines—even though the framework that I shall rely on can already be found in Cohen's (1988) much earlier paper. It might be objected that such focus on one particular type of approach is unwarranted. After all, a multitude of different versions of EC have been proposed in recent years. Besides Lewis's and Cohen's early accounts there are, of course, Keith DeRose's and Mark Heller's contextualized safety accounts of 'knowledge', Steven Rieber's account, which analyzes 'knows' in terms of 'explains', Ram Neta's account, on which the satisfaction of 'know' is modelled in terms of 'evidence', which Neta then takes to be context-sensitive, and, last but not least, Jonathan Schaffer's contrastivism, which is, if not a version of EC, at least in many essential respects similar to the view. Each of these accounts is important and they have rightly received much attention in the recent literature. Moreover, it should be noted that most of these accounts are not—or at least do not seem to be—subject to objections that Lewis's and Cohen's early account clearly is. So why propose a novel approach to EC along broadly Lewisian lines?

As I have indicated above, although Lewis's and the early Cohen version of contextualism is presumably the most widely criticized account (p.4) of EC in the literature, I nevertheless believe it to be the most promising one. Thus, the answer to the question why we ought to give those views a second chance is that each of the remaining accounts has its own

downsides and weaknesses; downsides and weaknesses that my novel Lewisian account hopefully does not share. While I shall not engage, in this monograph, in a discussion of each of the aforementioned versions of EC, I take it that a brief glance at the recent (and forthcoming) literature will confirm my contention that, from a contextualist point of view, a fresh approach to EC is desirable.⁵

A second major influence for the views defended in this book derives from Robert Stalnaker's (1999) work on the notions of a *pragmatic presupposition* and the conversational *common ground*. The account of contextualism developed here is, I take it, very much in the spirit of Stalnaker's work, emphasizing the importance of the notions of a pragmatic presupposition and the common ground to communication, pragmatics, and semantic (p.5) theory. More specifically, the account developed here relies on these central notions of Stalnaker's and employs them in modelling the semantic context-sensitivity of 'knows'. Thus, if the approach defended here is correct, then there is—given the normative connections between 'knowledge' and assertion recently argued for by a number of authors—yet another area of crucial importance in which Stalnaker's notions do important explanatory work—namely, in the semantics of 'knowledge'-attributions.

A third major influence for the views developed here derives from Timothy Williamson's (2000) *knowledge-first* epistemology. While Williamson's ideas are still considered to be rather controversial, I take it that, as Keynes put it in an entirely different context, '[t]he difficulty lies not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones, which ramify, for those brought up as most of us have been, into every corner of our minds.'⁶ Given the intuitive plausibility of Williamson's knowledge-first epistemology and the growing support it has been receiving of late, I shall, in Chapter 5 of the book, aim to incorporate the contextualist view developed here into the framework of a contextualized Williamsonian knowledge-first epistemology.

Outline of the Book

Chapter 1: Knowledge and Presuppositions

I begin the book by introducing my account of the semantics of ‘knowledge’-attributions—*Presuppositional Epistemic Contextualism* or simply ‘PEC’. PEC offers a novel way to model the context-sensitivity of ‘knows’—namely, a way that suggests a close connection between the content of ‘knows’ in a context *C* and what is pragmatically presupposed in *C*. Once PEC has been introduced and once we are sufficiently clear on its central notion—the Stalnakerian notion of a *pragmatic presupposition*—the chapter will have made important progress towards a solution of one of the major problems for relevant alternatives versions of contextualism: we will have provided a clear and precise account of what it means for a possibility (or an alternative) to be epistemically relevant at a context while at the same time avoiding the objection that ‘knowledge’ (p.6) becomes—as Lewis puts it—overly ‘elusive’. Chapter 1 accordingly offers an attractive response to the familiar objection to contextualism that ‘[p] ending a precise account of relevance, contextualism will remain unacceptably occult’ and the ‘mechanism of relevance remains as mysterious as magic.’⁷

Chapter 2: The Sceptical Puzzle

After having developed a detailed account of the semantics of ‘knows’ and of what contextualists have often—more or less vaguely—referred to as a context’s ‘epistemic standards’, I will, in Chapter 2, provide an in-depth discussion of sceptical puzzles. More specifically, I argue in Chapter 2 that my approach to the semantics of ‘know’ is explanatorily superior to more standard approaches defended in the literature—not only because it accounts more adequately for actual speakers’ intuitions about sceptical arguments (which have often been misconstrued by contextualists), but also, crucially, because the account defended is not subject to the most prominent and familiar epistemological objections to EC. The chapter addresses three such pertinent objections: firstly, the worry that as a linguistic or semantic view—namely, as the view that the predicate ‘know’ is context-sensitive—contextualism is irrelevant to epistemological concerns; secondly, the worry that contextualists qua epistemologists are unable to felicitously assert, and thus defend, the view that we ever

satisfy the predicate 'know', and, finally, the worry that contextualism is self-undermining and collapses into pyrrhonism, the ghastly view that 'philosophical attempts to defend knowledge inevitably wind up undercutting it.'⁸ Each of these problems for standard contextualism is shown to have a straightforward solution within the framework of PEC.

Chapter 3: Objections and Replies

Chapter 3 is then devoted to the discussion of objections to *Presuppositional Epistemic Contextualism*. I first discuss the objection that PEC is troubled by the fact that 'knowledge'-attributions have semantic values in what I call 'solitary contexts'—that is, contexts comprising only one individual. Next, (p.7) I address a more serious objection according to which PEC makes it too easy to satisfy 'knows' at a context: if whether we 'know *p*' at a context *C* becomes a (partial) function of what we pragmatically presuppose in *C*, can we implausibly come to 'know' propositions by merely changing our presuppositions? The third objection to PEC discussed in Chapter 3 is then based on the foundationalist idea that our pragmatic presuppositions themselves need to be epistemically justified or legitimate in order to provide proper foundations for our 'knowledge'. A fourth objection discussed in this chapter is based on an apparent counterexample to PEC built around the datum that we can assume a proposition *p* at a context *C* without taking it seriously. The objection addressed next is then concerned with what I call the *Problem of Known Presuppositions*: some propositions are taken seriously and thus clearly present relevant alternatives at a context *C*, despite the fact that their negations are mutually 'known' and thus pragmatically presupposed in *C*. The final objection discussed in Chapter 3 is based on the idea that Lewis-style versions of EC—such as PEC— have implausible consequences when combined with fairly standard assumptions about the semantics of counterfactual conditionals. It is argued that none of the mentioned objections results in a serious challenge to PEC.

Chapter 4: Linguistic Issues

After having considered objections addressing specific features of PEC in the previous chapter, Chapter 4 deals with

objections to ‘generic’ or ‘bare’ EC—that is, the general linguistic view that the predicate ‘knows’ is context-sensitive. In recent years, generic contextualism has fallen into considerable disrepute. Many theorists have raised doubts as to whether ‘know’ is context-sensitive, typically basing their arguments on data suggesting that ‘know’ behaves semantically and syntactically in a way quite different from recognized indexicals such as ‘I’ and ‘here’ or from gradable adjectives such as ‘flat’ and ‘empty’. This chapter takes a closer look at four pertinent objections of this kind. According to the first of these objections—the *Semantic Blindness Objection*—contextualism is committed to an implausible error-theory—namely, the view that competent speakers are sometimes systematically mistaken about the truth-conditions of ‘knowledge’-ascriptions: they are blind towards the semantics of ‘knows’. The second objection addressed in Chapter 4—the *Objection from Epistemic Norms*—is based on the observation that contextualism has to face some implausible consequences when combined with the (p.8) intuitively plausible and recently popular view that knowledge is the norm of assertion, belief, or practical reasoning. Next, I address the *Gradability Objection*, according to which the analogy between ‘knows’ and gradable adjectives, defended by a number of recent contextualists, breaks down on the syntactic side: since ‘knows’ is not gradable, its context-sensitivity cannot be modelled on the semantics of gradable adjectives. The fourth and final objection discussed in Chapter 4—the *Clarification-Technique Objection*—is then based on the observation that ‘know’ differs from many other context-sensitive expressions in not accepting modifier phrases clarifying or making explicit the intended truth-conditions. Again, it is argued that PEC has plausible responses to each of these objections and that they do not provide convincing reasons to reject the idea of a presupposition-sensitive contextualist semantics for ‘knows’.

Chapter 5: Further Puzzles

After having dealt with objections to contextualism in general and PEC in particular, I turn again to the explanatory virtues of PEC. More specifically, I argue, in 5.1, that the view defended in this monograph can handle Gettier examples

elegantly. Next, I develop, in 5.2, a solution to the lottery puzzle by proposing a non-reductionist account of the notion of resemblance at work in our Lewisian Rule of Resemblance. The account proposed is shown to clear the way for a resolution of the lottery puzzle that exploits the flexibility of the presuppositional framework provided by PEC. Section 5.4 then offers a PEC-based account of inductive ‘knowledge’ and develops a resolution of knowledge-theoretic versions of Hume’s Problem of Induction. Finally, Section 5.5 discusses Williamson’s claim that $E = K$ (that a proposition is part of one’s evidence if one knows it) and integrates the main ideas underlying Williamson’s knowledge-first epistemology into PEC’s contextualist framework.

Chapter 6: Closure and Moorean Reasoning

In Chapter 6 I argue that PEC offers an attractive account of our intuitions concerning the phenomenon of (apparent) *transmission failure*. More specifically, I offer not only a precise account of when and in which sense transmission fails, but I also model Crispin Wright’s notion of *epistemic entitlement* with the conceptual resources provided by PEC. Subsequently, some of the most pressing difficulties of Wright’s account are resolved by (p.9) distinguishing between two different notions of justification: what I call *relevant alternatives justification* (‘RA-justification’) and *evidentialist justification* (‘E-justification’). On the account developed in Chapter 6, transmission fails in the sense that RA-justification does not transmit. But transmission, in a different sense, also does not fail: E-justification transmits—at least in everyday or non-sceptical contexts. Thus, I argue that when some theorists in the debate claim that justification does not transmit while others claim that it does, these theorists are most plausibly interpreted as speaking about different kinds of epistemic justification. In summary, I show in Chapter 6 that PEC has the explanatory resources to integrate both the Moorean position and accounts advocating transmission failure within a single contextualist framework: Mooreanism, contextualism, and views advocating transmission failure no longer have to be understood as rival accounts of the same data.

Notes:

(1) We shall see later, in Chapters 1 and 4, that talk about ‘standards’ for ‘knowledge’ or the satisfaction of ‘knows’ is, strictly speaking, inadequate. However, I shall make use of the notion in this introductory discussion to illustrate the view without engaging in a detailed discussion of how to model the semantics of ‘knows’.

(2) See fn. 5 for a brief outline of particular versions of contextualism and their weaknesses. One promising exception to this general claim is (Schaffer and Szabó forthcoming).

(3) (Blome-Tillmann forthcoming).

(4) See (Cohen 1988; Lewis 1996).

(5) Here is a brief outline of the mentioned accounts and their weaknesses. Keith DeRose’s (1995, 2004b, 2006) contextualized safety approach to EC is, as I argue elsewhere (Blome-Tillmann 2009a), subject to numerous counterexamples. DeRose’s notion of what is epistemically relevant in *C* cannot be explicated in terms of similarity spheres that are centred on actuality. Mark Heller (1989, 1999) defends a similar approach to EC that is subject to the same objections. Stewart Cohen’s (1999) internalist version of EC has also been criticized extensively in the literature (see, for instance, (Pritchard 2002) and (Stanley 2005)). Steven Rieber (1998), who offers a version of EC that analyzes ‘know’ in terms of ‘explains’, has been decisively criticized by Neta (2002, pp. 667–8). Moreover, Rieber’s account employs the notion of a ‘salient possibility’ or a ‘salient [...] contrast’ (Rieber 1998, p. 169), which is defined by means of a rule that is very similar to Lewis’s problematic Rule of Attention (see Williams 2000, and Section 2 of this chapter). Jonathan Schaffer (2004a, 2005, 2007) proposes a contrastivist account of knowledge that is not only troubled by scepticism and closure failure (see Kvanvig 2007) but also relies on a linguistically questionable analogy between ‘know’ and ‘prefer’ (see Stalnaker 2004). For further criticism of Schaffer’s approach see (Neta 2008). Finally, Ram Neta (2002, 2003a, 2003b) proposes a version of EC that takes ‘evidence’

to be context-sensitive and 'know' to be analyzable in terms of 'evidence'. Neta's approach thus treats the notion of evidence as explanatorily more basic than the notion of knowledge, a view that many theorists may find unattractive nowadays (see, for instance, Hawthorne 2004a; Stanley 2005; and Williamson 2000). A more serious shortcoming of Neta's account, however, is its incompleteness. Neta defines the possession of evidence for p in C in terms of one's evidence in C favouring p over all alternatives to p that are *relevant* in C (Neta 2002, p. 673, 2003a, p. 21), but we are not told what it means for an alternative to be relevant in C . This is problematic, however, for, as Schaffer and Sosa remark with regard to relevant alternatives accounts of EC, '[p] ending a precise account of relevance, contextualism will remain unacceptably occult' (Schaffer 2004a, p. 88), quoting (Sosa 1986, p. 585), and the 'mechanism of relevance remains as mysterious as magic' (Schaffer 2004a, p. 88). One of the goals of the subsequent chapters is to develop a comprehensive account of the notion of a relevant alternative.

(6) (Keynes 1936, Preface).

(7) (Schaffer 2004a, p. 88), quoting (Sosa 1986, p. 585). See also (Vogel 1999, p. 168) for this criticism.

(8) (Fogelin 2000, p. 44).

