PHL232 Handout 5: Contextualism

§1 Background

Epistemic Contextualism is a <u>semantic</u> thesis about attributions of knowledge: it makes a claim about what sentences like 'Tashi knows that Silky snores' *mean*. Contextualists hold that the meaning of 'knows' is context-dependent.

But why think that 'knows' works in this fashion? DeRose appeals to a pair of famous examples:

> **Bank Case A**: My brother and I are walking home on a Friday afternoon. As we pass the bank, we notice that the lines inside are very long. It is not especially important that we deposit our new paycheques right away, so I suggest that we walk straight home and deposit them the next day. My brother says, "Maybe the bank won't be open tomorrow. Lots of banks are closed on Saturdays." I reply, "No, I know it'll be open. I was just there two weeks ago on Saturday. It's open until noon."

> **Bank Case B**: We walk past the bank on a Friday afternoon, as in Case A, and notice the long lines. I again suggest that we deposit our paycheques on Saturday morning, explaining that I was at the bank on Saturday morning only two weeks ago and discovered that it was open until noon. But in this case, I have just written a very large cheque for a new roof. If my paycheque is not deposited before Monday morning, the cheque I wrote will bounce. And the bank is not open on Sunday. My brother reminds me of these facts. He then says, "Banks do change their hours. Do you know the bank will be open tomorrow?" Despite being as confident as before that the bank will be open, I reply, "Well, no. I'd better go in and make sure."

To get a handle on this view we'll require some material from the philosophy of language. Most philosophers identify the meaning of an expression with the contribution of the expression to the truth conditions of sentences in which it appears. So the meaning of a sentence is the condition under which it is true.

Aside on Semantic Context Sensitivity

An indexical such as 'here' picks out different places depending on the context of utterance. Indexicals give rise to a puzzle: (1) an indexical seems to carry a constant meaning across contexts of utterance, yet (2) its contribution to a sentence's truth conditions varies from context to context. To resolve this puzzle, many philosophers follow Kaplan (1989) and distinguish two dimensions of meaning: character and content.

Character is a rule that takes a context of utterance and determines a contribution to truth conditions [formally: a function from contexts to contents], whereas *Content* is an expression's contribution to truth conditions [formally: a function from worlds to extensions]. Kaplan's solution was to identify character as the element of meaning captured by (1), and content as what varies in (2). Philosophers have since extended Kaplan's framework to cover a large variety of context-sensitive expressions. For contextualists, the expressions most analogous to 'knows' are gradable adjectives such as 'tall' or 'flat'. These adjectives are context-sensitive because context determines a *standard* of either comparison (for 'tall') or exactness (for 'flat').

Notice: the context relevant to the determination of content within Kaplan's framework in the context of utterance. So for the case of knowledge-attributions, if 'knows' functions like an indexical then its truth-conditional contribution will be determined by the context of the *attributor*.

Given this apparatus, we can provide a more precise statement of contextualism:

> *Epistemic Contextualism*: the content of 'S knows that p' depends upon the context of utterance (i.e. the attributer's context). In particular, because the content of 'knows'

determines the *standard* that must be met for S to know that p, this standard varies with the context of utterance.

Before we consider contextualism in more detail, let us get some other options on the table.

Relevant Alternatives (RA): 'S knows that p' is true only if S is in a position to rule out a set of relevant not-p alternatives. Which alternatives are relevant is partially determined by utterance context, but may also be determined by the subject's context. [Dretske]

Sceptical Invariantism: 'S knows that p' has a constant content across utterance contexts, but this content imposes a high standard on what counts as knowledge. [Unger]

Non-Sceptical Invariantism: 'S knows that p' has a constant content across utterance contexts, but this content imposes a standard that can be met by ordinary subjects. [Williamson; Nagel]

Interest-Relative Invariantism (IRI): 'S knows that p' has a constant content across utterance contexts, but which standard this content imposes depends upon features of the subject's context. [Stanley]

All four positions must accommodate the Bank Cases (as well as other alleged examples of the context-sensitivity of 'knows').

Given that the subject's evidence/justification doesn't change between Cases A and B, Sceptical and Non-Sceptical Invariantists must hold that at least one of the knowledge ascriptions is false.

But this puts them in an awkward position: they must explain away our intuition that the knowledge attributions in Cases A and B are both true (cf. the recommended Nagel paper).

In contrast, any differences between IRI/RA and Contextualism will only show up once we pull apart subject and attributor contexts (in the Bank Cases these contexts are the identical, since the attributor is the subject).

§2 DeRose's Contextualism

DeRose ranks as the arch-contextualist, so you can treat many features of his view as paradigmatic of contextualism in general.

One dimension of disagreement between DeRose and others (including other contextualists) concerns the contextual factors relevant to the context-sensitivity of knowledge-attributions. DeRose distinguishes *subject-factors* – features of the putative knower's situation – from *attributor-factors* – features of the speaker's situation. Others, such as John MacFarlane, look at the context of agents *assessing* knowledge-attributions.

DeRose provides several examples of both subject-factors and attributor-factors, both 'objective' factors such as the importance of being right and 'subjective' factors such as the alternatives to which the subject or attributor attends (cf. p. 916).

Potential Objection: if we make contextual factors too fine-grained, and thus make knowledge-attributions sensitive to subtle shifts in the context, we risk making knowledge *fragile*. For instance, on Lewis's view the mere mention of a sceptical hypothesis is enough to render self-attributions of knowledge false. But we might think that knowledge shouldn't rest on such factors.

Subject-factors and attributor-factors play very different roles within DeRose's account (cf. pp. 921-922).

Intuitively: attributor-factors help determine *what it is* for an attribution to be true, whereas subject-factors help determine *whether* such attributions are true.

More Precisely: Only attributor-factors help determine the meaning of knowledge-attributions, since only the context of utterance is relevant to the determination of content. Yet whether the truth-conditions of a particular knowledge attribution are *satisfied* will depend upon subject-factors.

DeRose uses this difference of role to distinguish the Relative Alternatives approach from contextualism. Because the set of relevant alternatives is partially fixed by subject-factors, the meaning of a knowledge-attribution cannot depend upon which alternatives are relevant (cf. p. 923).

Question: should we accept this sharp division of role? Does DeRose have an argument for the division that does not rely upon an antecedent commitment to Kaplan's character/content distinction?

§3 Lewis's Contextualism: How Context Determines Content
Lewis's contextualism goes beyond DeRose's rather bare semantic proposal. Contextualists owe us an account of what it is about knowledge that makes the truth conditions of 'S knows that p' shift with the context of utterance (cf. p. 551). *Lewis's claim*: to know that p requires that a subject be *infallible* about p, and what counts as infallibility shifts with context.

In more detail:
   A. 'S knows that p' is true only if S has an infallible belief that p.
   B. S has an infallible belief that p iff p is true in every relevant possible world left uneliminated by her evidence.
   C. Which possible worlds are relevant is determined by the following seven principles:
      1. S's actual world is always relevant (cf. pp. 554-555)
      2. A possibility that S believes to obtain, or ought (relative to available evidence) believe to obtain is always relevant.
      3. If possibility A saliently resembles possibility B, and A is relevant, B is relevant [*Note*: this handles the Gettier cases and the Lottery Paradox]
      4. Possibilities that involve the failure of otherwise reliable belief-forming mechanisms are irrelevant.
      5. In all relevant worlds samples are representative and the best explanation is a true explanation.
      6. Possibilities that most speakers in our community ignore all the time are irrelevant.

7. An attended possibility is always relevant.

Note: 1 secures the factivity of knowledge; 2 and 3 deal with many cases of epistemic luck; and (as we'll see) 7 almost singlehandedly deals with scepticism.

§4 Contextualism and Scepticism
DeRose and Lewis argue that contextualism both answers the sceptic and explains why sceptical arguments have such persuasive power. The relationship between contextualism and scepticism provides one of the most powerful arguments for contextualism.

Recall the sceptic's argument.

> Let q be the denial of a sceptical hypothesis (e.g. the hypothesis that we are brains in vats), and let p be some ordinary proposition about the world (e.g. that I have hands).
>
> 1. S knows that if p then q (e.g. if we have hands, we are not brains in vats)
> 2. S does not know that q [Sceptical Premise]
> 3. If S knows that if p then q, then if S knows that p then S knows that q [Closure Principle]
> 4. So S does not know that p [from 1-3]
>
> Given that we can substitute just about any proposition about the world for p, this argument seems to undermine our claim to know truths about the external world.

Contextualists argue that the sceptic does not show that we never know ordinary propositions about the world. Instead, sceptical arguments shift the attributor's context, and so raise the standard for what counts as knowledge. On Lewis's account the source of this shift is 7 (make sure you understand why). But since this shift affects what our knowledge-claims mean it does not undermine knowledge-attributions made within low-standard (i.e. ordinary) epistemic contexts.

So while there is a sense in which the sceptic is right when she says that we know nothing – if we are in the right context, our claims to know will come out false – ordinary knowledge remains safe in regular contexts.

§5 Objections
1. *Fragility*: Contextualism makes knowledge sensitive to factors that make knowledge either too easy to gain or too easy to lose (cf. §2)
2. *Disagreement*: If we adopt contextualism, we must accept that there cannot be meaningful *disagreement* between knowledge-attributors who occupy distinct contexts of utterance (since each means something different by 'knows' when the one says 'S knows that p' and the other denies it).
3. *Extensional Adequacy*: once the details have been filled-in, contextualism generates the wrong results for particular cases (or the right results for the wrong reasons). IRI theorists make this argument for cases in which the subject's stakes are high, and the attributor's stakes are low.
4. *Ordinary Speaker Understanding*: Usually when expressions of a certain kind are context-sensitive, speakers of the language can detect this fact. But our use of 'knows' does not seem to reflect any sensitivity on the part of speakers to its putative context-sensitivity. And philosophers should not make claims about what expressions mean that run counter to ordinary speaker understanding.