Contextualism and the knowledge norm of assertion

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Keith DeRose has argued that 'the knowledge account of assertion – according to which what one is in a position to assert is what one knows – ... provides a … powerful positive argument in favor of contextualism' (2009: 80). The truth is that it yields a powerful argument against contextualism, at least against its most popular, anti-sceptical versions. The following argument shows that, if we conjoin (such versions of) epistemic contextualism with an appropriate meta-linguistic formulation of the knowledge account of assertion, contextualism cannot coherently be stated.

1.

Contextualists typically maintain that one of the chief merits of their theory is its response to the sceptic. According to contextualism, knowledge ascriptions concerning ordinary empirical propositions are false in high-standards conversational contexts, but true in quotidian contexts in which sceptical hypotheses are not salient. 'The fact', DeRose writes, 'that the skeptic can ... install very high standards which we don't live up to has no tendency to show that we don't satisfy the more relaxed standards that are in place in more ordinary conversations and debates' (2009: 42). We do not speak falsely, according to DeRose, 'when we claim to know [...] in contexts in which no skeptics are calling our attention to those [skeptical] hypotheses' (1999: 18). Stewart Cohen, another great champion of contextualism, argues similarly that one of contextualism's major virtues is that it preserves 'our confidence in the truth of our everyday knowledge ascriptions' (2000: 102). Note that what these authors claim here is not merely that, *if* there are such low-standards contexts and people who (self-)ascribe ordinary empirical knowledge in them, then these everyday knowledge ascriptions are mostly true. The sceptic could happily accept such a conditional statement. (It would be consistent with his charge that empirical knowledge does not in fact exist). Instead, contextualists hold that there actually are such mundane contexts with true knowledge ascriptions.[1]

Let S be a (DeRosean) contextualist and h denote the empirical proposition that S has hands. $K_X\_$ stands for *X knows* _. The following, then, is true according to contextualism:

(1) There are ordinary, low-standards contexts in which '$K_S h$' is true.

Consider a conversational context in which the contextualist states his theory. Such contexts are paradigmatic epistemology or 'philosophy classroom' contexts in which sceptical hypotheses are salient and taken seriously.[2] Where would scepticism be conversationally salient and taken seriously if not in contexts such as these? (I will return to this topic in Section 3.) Let C_{High} be such a context. According to contextualism, in C_{High}, knowledge ascriptions to the effect that a given subject knows some ordinary empirical proposition, as uttered by a participant in that context, are false. Hence:

(2) '$K_S h$' is false in C_{High}.

Next consider a meta-linguistic version of the knowledge account of assertion. DeRose holds that:

(Assertion$_K$) 'A speaker ... is well-enough positioned with respect to p to be able to properly assert that p if and only if ... [she] knows that p according to the standards for knowledge that are in place as ... [she] makes her assertion' (DeRose 2009, 99).[3]

The corresponding rule for assertion is that 'one must assert only what one knows according to the standards for knowledge that are in place as one makes one's assertion' (ibid.). Suppose that:

(3) S's stating his theory in C_{High} is a proper speech act.

Given that (1) follows directly from an integral claim of (classical anti-sceptical versions of) epistemic contextualism, (3) and (Assertion$_K$) yield that:

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[1] DeRose frequently stresses that 'speakers do in fact use "knows" in the way described' (2009: 50) and declares this as a 'datum' that any theory of knowledge (ascriptions) ought to acknowledge.

[2] As for example Williamson puts it, 'in the epistemology seminar, contextualists are apt to console themselves with the thought that although most denials of "knowledge" *in that context of scepticism* are correct, in everyday contexts many assertions of "knowledge" are also correct' (2005: 689, emphasis added). When contextualists are engaged in expounding their theory, Williamson argues, they are located 'in an epistemological context, so they should assent to the claim "We do not know those propositions" [that are known in everyday contexts]' (2001: 26).

(4) '$K_S(1)$' is true in C_{High}.

Moreover, we may assume that contextualists take knowledge to be factive and that they accept that disquotation and the factivity of knowledge give us:

(Factivity) (There are contexts in which '$K_X p$' is true) $\rightarrow$ p.[4]

Qua professional epistemologists, contextualists will understand how this meta-linguistic principle applies to particular knowledge ascriptions and to statements such as (1). Hence we have:

(5) '$K_S((1) \rightarrow h)$' is true in C_{High}.

The final step of the argument draws on a meta-linguistic epistemic closure principle (which contextualists characteristically accept as well):

(Closure)   For all contexts C, speakers X, and propositions p, q:
[('$K_X p$' is true in C) and ('$K_X(p \rightarrow q)$' is true in C)] $\rightarrow$ '$K_X q$' is true in C.

This formulation glosses over some complexities. Sometimes people fail to 'put two and two together'. Hence, it may be argued, only if one (i) knows that *p*, (ii) knows that *p* entails *q,* and (iii) believes that *q* on the basis of (i) and (ii), or 'competently deduces' *q* from *p*, does one also know that *q* (or is at least in a position to know that *q*). But such complications need not deter us here. We could easily make the appropriate adjustments in our meta-linguistic closure principle. Since they would not affect the core of the argument, however, we may safely work with the simpler formulation above. Given (Closure), it follows from (4) and (5) that:

(6) '$K_S h$' is true in C_{High}.

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[3] For the most influential (non-contextualist) defence of the knowledge account, see Williamson 2000: 238–69.
[4] '$\rightarrow$' stands for entailment (or, strictly speaking, for the meta-linguistic entailment relation).

(6), however, contradicts (2). It thus turns out that DeRose's contextualism-cum-knowledge-account-of-assertion is self-referentially incoherent.

My argument has taken its cue from DeRose. With minor qualifications, however, it also applies to other versions of epistemic contextualism, most notably to Cohen's account. Indeed, the general upshot is that the conjunction of two of the currently most influential theories at the intersection of epistemology and philosophy of language – (anti-sceptical versions of) epistemic contextualism and the knowledge account of assertion – cannot coherently be stated. Cohen declares that he is 'not unsympathetic' to the knowledge account (2004: 485). He suggests the rule that 'S may assert p in [context] C only if "S knows p" is true at C' (2004: 486). Moreover, as already noted, Cohen also thinks that one of contextualism's chief virtues is that it preserves the intuition that our everyday knowledge ascriptions are normally true. So, his contextualism would also seem to be committed to (1) and (2). And it would seem to be committed to accepting the remaining steps of the above argument as well, except perhaps that in light of Cohen's official statement, (4) might be replaced by the slightly more guarded claim that, *if* indeed the knowledge account is correct, then '$K_S(1)$' is true in C_{High}.

In any case, the present argument shows that Cohen had better *not* be 'not unsympathetic' to the knowledge account of assertion. And DeRose, who enthusiastically endorses it, faces the following trilemma. Either he must acknowledge that asserting his overall theory is not a proper speech act; or he must drop his response to the sceptic; or he must abandon the knowledge account of assertion. On the first horn it is not clear why we should believe what the DeRosean contextualist utters when he states his theory. If the contextualist accepts the second horn, however, he loses one of the major selling points of his account. On the third (perhaps least damaging) horn he would lose what DeRose regards as an otherwise 'powerful argument' for contextualism.[5]

2.

In recent years two arguments against contextualism have been presented that bear certain structural similarities to the one above. Timothy Williamson (2001, 2005) has argued that the factivity of knowledge shoehorns contextualists into Moorean paradoxes. Elke Brendel (2005, 2009), Crispin Wright (2005), Peter Baumann (2008, 2010), and Wolfgang Freitag (2011) discuss a 'factivity problem' which 'suggests that contextualism is inconsistent' (Baumann

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[5] It is not the aim of this article to discuss DeRose's arguments for this view. The core idea is that the conditions for warranted assertability vary with the context, and that this context-variability is just what contextualism predicts for the knowledge norm (cf. DeRose 2009: 92, 99).

2010: 82). In response to this latter charge Anthony Brueckner and Christopher Buford (2009, 2010) have recently urged that it constructs a mere pseudo-problem which saddles contextualism with claims to which it is not committed.[6] How does the above trilemma relate to these arguments?

Discussing Lewis's contextualism (cf. Lewis 1996), Williamson maintains, without drawing on the knowledge norm, that the account is 'committed to Moore-paradoxical assertions' (2001: 26). It, too, holds that 'in everyday contexts many assertions of "knowledge" are ... correct' (Williamson 2005: 689). The problem is that, since 'know' is a factive verb, the truth of, for example, '"He knows that there is a whiteboard in the room", as uttered outside the seminar, requires the truth of "There is a whiteboard in the room" as uttered outside the seminar and therefore as uttered inside the seminar too' (ibid.). Consequently, Williamson argues, in the seminar contextualists are committed to this:

(MK)   There is a whiteboard in the room and I do not know that there is a whiteboard in the room.

(MK) is Moore-paradoxical. Hence 'in the seminar, they [the contextualists] should not say that "He knows that there is a whiteboard in the room" expresses a truth outside the seminar' (ibid.).

My argument does not dispute this reasoning, yet it suggests that the problem is even harder. It is not entirely clear what Williamson means by 'committed to'. Note first, however, that if knowledge is a constitutive norm of assertion – as indeed Williamson himself forcefully argues in Williamson 2000 and elsewhere – an utterance of (MK) would present the speaker as *knowing* something of the form 'p, and I do not know that p'. If, as is widely accepted, knowledge distributes over conjunction, the speaker would thus present himself both as knowing that p and as knowing that he does not know that p. By the factivity of knowledge this latter claim entails that he does indeed not know that p, so by uttering (MK) the speaker would present himself both as knowing and not knowing that p.

Secondly, given the knowledge account, (MK) is equivalent with:

(MK*) There is a whiteboard in the room, but I am not in a position properly to assert that there is a whiteboard in the room.

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[6] Baumann and Freitag also argue that the charge can ultimately be defused. In what follows I shall,

This sounds even worse than (MK). By uttering (MK*), the speaker would assert something while simultaneously denying that he is entitled to make that assertion. He would explicitly deny the propriety of the very speech act in which he is currently engaging, thereby performing a speech act which is, in normal circumstances, incomprehensible.

In their response to the factivity problem, Brueckner and Buford discuss the following example (which they adapt from Baumann 2008). Frank is located in a low-standards context in which knowledge ascriptions according to which he knows that Mary has hands are true. Mary, by contrast, finds herself in a demanding context in which her statement that she knows that she has hands is false. Suppose that Mary is a contextualist and learns about Frank's epistemic state. We then have:

(1*) 'Frank knows that Mary has hands' (as uttered by Frank about himself) is true in C_{Low}.

(2*) 'Mary knows that she has hands' (as uttered by Mary about herself) is not true in C_{High}.

(3*) 'Mary knows that (1*)' is true in C_{High}.

We may assume that Mary knows that knowledge is factive and that she can apply an appropriate meta-linguistic factivity principle to the case at hand. With (Closure) it then follows from (3*) that 'Mary knows that she has hands' is true in C_{High}, which contradicts (2*). However, Brueckner and Buford (2010: 487) ask, why should the contextualist accept (3*)? Could not Mary reply that in her high-standards context she does not know that she has hands and hence that, even though she knows that 'Frank knows that Mary has hands' is a *candidate* for being true as uttered by Frank in his low-standards context, she would have to know that she has hands in order to know (1*) in her high-standards context? Mary could, and should, reply in this way, Brueckner and Buford argue. If this response is acceptable, the contextualist might react in a similar fashion to Williamson's charge and deny that he is committed to Moore-paradoxical assertions.

Whether or not this is a legitimate move on behalf of 'pure contextualism' and the factivity problem, it does not work for the above argument against contextualism-cum-the-knowledge-account-of-assertion. A response along Brueckner and Buford's line against this argument would have to argue that the contextualist can legitimately deny (4), i.e., deny that he knows when he asserts his theory, in C_{High}, that there are low-standards contexts in which (it is true to say that) he knows that he has hands. The claim that there are such quotidian contexts, however, is a cornerstone of classical, anti-sceptical forms of contextualism. And we

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for reasons of space, only discuss Brueckner and Buford's argument.

have seen that, given that (1) is constitutive of such forms of contextualism, (4) *follows* from the knowledge account of assertion and the assumption that *S* (a contextualist) performs a proper speech act when asserting his theory.

3.

How else could the contextualist respond, provided he wants to maintain (i) that contextualism offers a response to the sceptic, (ii) that asserting his theory is a proper speech act, and (iii) that knowledge is the norm of assertion? A promising way to go, it may be suggested, is to reject my claim that the contextualist is committed to regarding the epistemological context in which he presents his theory as a high-standards context.[7] I do not think that this line of reasoning would be successful. DeRose, Cohen, and other contextualists hold that one of contextualism's major virtues is that it deals with sceptical paradoxes. DeRose explicitly says that 'contextualist theories of knowledge attribution have almost invariably been developed with an eye toward providing some kind of answer to philosophical skepticism' (2009: 41).[8] So the advocate of such forms of contextualism cannot reasonably claim that, when he expounds his theory, sceptical hypotheses fail to be salient. The only available move at this point seems to be to maintain that, even though it must be conceded that sceptical hypotheses are salient in such contexts, they are not inevitably taken seriously enough to raise the epistemic standards to a sceptical level. In other words, might not the contextualist respond that it is only once he has stopped taking sceptical scenarios to be serious possibilities, and has presupposed their falsity, that he turns to linguistic questions about the truth conditions of knowledge attributions?[9]

No. Simply presupposing that scepticism is false would amount to abandoning tenet (i) above, that contextualism offers a *response* to the sceptic. A reply along such lines is thus not available to classical anti-sceptical contextualism, the kind of approach this paper has been concerned with. The conclusion stands, therefore, that classical contextualists such as DeRose

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[7] For an account that may be exploited in this way see for example Blome-Tillmann (2009), who argues, *pace* Lewis, that merely directing one's mind towards some sceptical possibility does not make it impossible properly to ignore it 'in the epistemologically relevant sense' (247). According to Blome-Tillmann, the speaker's pragmatic presuppositions determine which possibilities are taken seriously in a given conversational context.

[8] Almost invariably. For an exception see Ludlow (2005), who develops his version of contextualism primarily as an explanation of linguistic data about contextual variations of knowledge attributions. However, precisely because Ludlow's contextualism is not engaged with scepticism, his approach is from an epistemological point of view less interesting.

[9] This was suggested by an anonymous referee.

and Cohen must either abandon their anti-sceptical ambitions, or concede that their theory cannot coherently be stated, or give up the knowledge account of assertion.[10]

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[10] Earlier versions of this article, or parts of it, were presented at the conference *Contexts, Perspectives, and Relative Truth*, organized by Elke Brendel, June 2011 in Bonn, and at the *34th International Wittgenstein Symposium*, August 2011 in Kirchberg am Wechsel, organized by Winfried Löffler and myself. For helpful comments I am indebted to the audiences and to an anonymous referee of *Analysis*.

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