

## V74MK1 Mind and Knowledge 1

### Seminar 2

#### Contextualism

##### Connee and Cohen: Contextualism Contested and Defended

- (1) Semantic contextualism in general: semantic variation due to context
  - a. Attributer's context (aka speaker's context, utterer's context)
  - b. What's a context? Determined by things like: who is speaking, to whom, what's already been said, etc.
  - c. Less controversial cases: indexicals (e.g. 'I', 'here'); gradable adjectives ('tall', 'flat') and *maybe* quantifiers (e.g. 'everyone')
  - d. (Semantic) invariantism: rejection of contextualism
- (2) 'Truth at the expense of contradiction'
  - a. 'Everyone is present.' 'Not everyone is here. The Pope is not here.'
  - b. No real disagreement.
  - c. 'No, what you said is not true, because not everyone is here. The Pope is not here.'
- (3) Epistemic contextualism (EC): contextual semantic variation in epistemic terms ('knows', 'justified' etc.)
- (4) A common form of EC: the truth-conditions for sentences containing 'knows' vary with context of utterance
  - a. Strength of epistemic position required to satisfy 'knows' depends on context in which the word was uttered
    - i. What is 'strength'? How probable the evidence makes the belief? How many possible alternatives to p are ruled out by the evidence? How internally accessible the evidence is? Etc.
  - b. In everyday contexts: 'knows' can be satisfied by ordinary beliefs with ordinary grounds
    - i. So many everyday knowledge-attributions come out true
  - c. In sceptical contexts: 'knows' sets a very high standard
    - i. So many sceptical claims *also* come out true
  - d. Sceptic's claim that you don't know you have hands does not contradict everyday claim that you know you have hands
  - e. Could think of this as 'knows' expressing 'knows<sub>low</sub>' in some contexts and 'knows<sub>high</sub>' in others
  - f. (But NB: EC needn't postulate *exactly two* standards)
- (5) EC is not meant to answer *every* epistemological question, but may help with some epistemological problems
  - a. (It's not an analysis of knowledge or a theory of what knowledge is)
  - b. Cohen's triad of intuitions:
    - i. I know P

- ii. I do not know not-H
  - iii. I know P only if I know not-H
- (6) P is an everyday proposition, H is a sceptical hypothesis
- (7) What kind of 'intuitions' are these?
- (8) EC provides a way of making these claims consistent/taking the intuitions at face value
- a. No real tension here; there just appears to be one owing to confusion about how our language works
- (9) Somewhat concessive to scepticism, but not radically so
- (10)(Some Closure Principle plausibly supporting 3; what happens to CPs under EC?)
- (11)People are typically willing to make 'knowledge' claims in everyday contexts, but less willing when scepticism is on the table or when the stakes are high
- a. Assuming they mostly speak the truth, this supports EC
- (12)Opposing hypothesis: loose talk
- a. There is one invariant standard for 'knows' (fairly high, but not unreachably high)
  - b. Many everyday knowledge ascriptions are false, and people realise this but don't care
  - c. The 'really and truly' test
  - d. Contextualist reply: adding 'really and truly' shifts the context
    - i. But it doesn't *feel* like that's what's going on
  - e. How to choose between contextualism and loose talk hypothesis if both explain the data?
    - i. Cohen (p. 58): contextualism is a *better* explanation
- (13)What if all philosophical discussion is carried on in the 'really and truly' context? Then EC won't help us with any philosophical issues (Connee)
- a. Is that right? What about the philosophical relevance of *everyday* utterances?
  - b. Vacillation of intuitions even *within* philosophical contexts (Cohen)
- (14)It *could* be that sceptics and non-sceptics speak in different contexts
- a. (EC *per se* doesn't deliver that, though specific versions of it might)
  - b. But maybe the sceptics are *wrong* about the requirements imposed by 'knows' in certain contexts ... maybe even those strict requirements *are* (often) met (Conee, p. 54)
- (15)Non-obviousness of EC (cf. 'I', 'here' etc.); 'semantic blindness'
- a. And yet if EC is to explain the plausibility of apparently contradictory 'knows'-involving claims, people must also be quite sensitive to contextual variation in 'knows'
  - b. Why do we *think* there is tension between sceptic's 'knowledge'-claims and everyday 'knowledge'-claims? Seems bad to say we're mistaken about this ('truth at the expense of contradiction'). The illusion (if it is one) is persistent
  - c. Speakers often don't explicitly recognize the context-sensitivity of 'tall' either
  - d. But can be brought to recognize it fairly easily'; not so with 'knows'
- (16)Conee: explaining the triad of intuitions by saying we *think* the standards for 'knows' vary is as good as explaining them by saying the standards *actually do vary*

## Lewis: Elusive Knowledge

- 1) Lewis starts from a view about the NS conditions for knowledge
  - a) Subject S knows proposition p iff S's evidence eliminates every possibility in which not-p
- 2) Lewis is a contextualist about 'every'
  - a) 'Every beer was consumed at the party': *Every beer in the fridge was consumed at the party*
  - b) 'Every beer is a beer': *Every beer in the world is a beer*
- 3) 'Every possibility in which not-p'
  - a) Every reasonably plausible possibility in which not-p
  - b) Absolutely every possibility in which not-p
- 4) Compare 'p is impossible'
  - a) *There are no reasonably plausible possibilities in which p* (E.g. a third candidate wins the election)
  - b) *p is logically impossible* (E.g.  $2+2=5$ )
- 5)  $p = I$  have hands
  - a) My evidence does not eliminate the possibility that I'm a BIV, so it does not eliminate absolutely every possibility in which not-p
  - b) But it does eliminate every reasonably plausible possibility in which not-p (surgery, accident, no hands at birth, etc.)
- 6) 'S knows that p' has the same truth-conditions as 'S's evidence eliminates every possibility in which not-p'
  - a) So the truth-condition for 'S knows that p' depends on the context of utterance
  - b) In a high-standards context, the truth-condition is: S's evidence eliminates absolutely every not-p possibility
  - c) In a low-standards context, the truth-condition is: S's evidence eliminates every reasonably plausible not-p possibility
- 7) In fact, there are *all sorts of different standards* depending on context
  - a) I.e. there are all sorts of sets of possibilities that might be the ones S's evidence needs to eliminate
- 8) Which aspects of context determine exactly which not-p possibilities S's evidence has to rule out?
  - a) Who spoke, when, where, to whom
  - b) Background information assumed
  - c) Speaker's intentions and purposes
  - d) Speaker's expectations
  - e) The subject matter (just by talking about jockeys we can set the standards for 'tall' as low standards)
- 9) Just by mentioning – or ever *considering* – a BIV possibility we put ourselves in a context according to which that possibility is one of the ones that needs to be eliminated if S is to count as 'knowing' she has hands
- 10) So in all contexts where scepticism is on the table, we count as 'knowing' very little
  - a) Lewis says knowledge is elusive, because it 'vanishes' when you examine it too much
  - b) By considering scepticism you raise the *standards* for knowledge
  - c) So when you think too hard about how much you know, you actually *lose* knowledge

11) He really shouldn't say this

- a) EC is a view about *language*
- b) He *says*: by considering scepticism you raise the standards for knowledge
- c) But actually the view is: by considering scepticism you raise the standards for 'knowledge'
- d) Whether or not the *subject* is considering scepticism is irrelevant: it is the utterer's context, not the subject's context, that we're interested in
- e) Cf: 'Peter's not here' means he's not where the *speaker* is
- f) Lewis's claim is a bit like saying:
  - i) By moving around, you change whether Peter is here is not
  - ii) You don't, you just change whether utterances of the *sentence* 'Peter is here' come out true when you say them