

# EPISTEMIC CONTEXTUALISM, EPISTEMIC RELATIVISM AND DISAGREEMENT

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## Abstract

In the recent philosophy of language literature there is a debate over whether contextualist accounts of the semantics of various terms can accommodate intuitions of disagreement in certain cases involving those terms. Relativists such as John MacFarlane have claimed that this motivates adopting a form of relativist semantics for these terms because the relativist can account for the same data as contextualists but doesn't face this problem of disagreement (MacFarlane 2005, 2007 and 2009). In this paper I focus on the case of epistemic predicates and I argue that on a certain assumption about what is involved in assessing an utterance the epistemic contextualist can solve her problem of disagreement. This undercuts a motivation for epistemic relativism.

## Introduction

One night Bob, an anti-sceptic, has a dream in which he loses his hand. He wakes up, looks at his hand, and exclaims, "I know that I have a hand, that was just a dream." Consider two sorts of cases. First, say that Bob woke his sceptical wife, Saskia, who challenges him, saying, "No, you don't know that. You can't rule out the possibility that you're a handless brain in a vat." Second, say the next day Bob explains his dream to his colleague, Enrico, who discusses Bob's dream with the office sceptic, Marie, who says, "No, Bob doesn't know that he has a hand. He can't rule out the possibility that he's a handless brain in a vat."

What I will call the *basic motivation* for epistemic contextualism is that in such cases we have the intuition that Bob, Saskia and Marie all speak truly.<sup>1</sup> The epistemic contextualist can say that they all speak truly because, on their view, the truth-conditions of knowledge ascriptions are in part determined by the context in which they are uttered. In Bob's context the standards are low so his self-ascription is true. Saskia raises

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<sup>1</sup> See Cohen 1999, DeRose 1995 and Lewis 1996.

the standards so her knowledge denial is true. In Marie's context the standards are high so her knowledge denial is true.

Contextualist semantics have been proposed for a number of expressions such as taste predicates, moral predicates, aesthetic predicates, epistemic modals and epistemic predicates. However, in the recent literature rival relativist semantics for each of these sorts of expressions have been proposed, and a main motivation for adopting relativist semantics is supposed to be that relativists can account for the same data as contextualists but don't face the *problem of disagreement*.<sup>2</sup> If Julian says "I'm tired" and Anya responds, "No, I'm not tired", Anya isn't disagreeing with Julian. What Julian has said is that Julian is tired and what Anya has said is that Anya is not tired. The only way of explaining why Anya has used the *disagreement marker* "No" is by taking Anya to be confused about the meaning of indexicals. Compare this with our cases above. Many would take it that both Saskia and Marie are disagreeing with Bob.<sup>3</sup> But, if the epistemic contextualist is right, what Bob has said is something like Bob knows by low standards that he has hands and what both Saskia and Marie have said is something like Bob doesn't know by high standards that he has hands. These propositions don't contradict each other so, as in the Julian and Anya case, there's no disagreement. Is taking Saskia or Marie to be confused about the meaning of 'knows' the only way of explaining why either of them use the disagreement marker "No" to negatively assess Bob's claim? The main thesis of this paper is that the epistemic contextualist can provide an alternative explanation of these patterns of use. I take it that the challenge posed by the problem of disagreement to the epistemic contextualist is providing such an explanation. If that's right, this undercuts a main motivation for adopting a form of relativist semantics for knowledge ascriptions.

I proceed as follows. In §1 I distinguish *indexical contextualist* and *relativist* accounts of the semantics of 'knows'. In §2 I present Keith DeRose's proposed solution to the problem of disagreement and an objection to that solution. In §3 I argue that the epistemic contextualist can solve the problem of disagreement.

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<sup>2</sup> For predicates of taste see Glanzberg 2007, Huvenes forthcoming, Kölbel 2009 and MacFarlane 2007. For moral predicates see Brogaard 2008 and Björnsson & Finlay 2010. For aesthetic predicates see Baker forthcoming. For epistemic modals see von Fintel & Gillies 2009 and MacFarlane 2009. For epistemic predicates see Cohen 1999, DeRose 1995, Lewis 1996 and MacFarlane 2005.

<sup>3</sup> In common with most of the literature, I'm going to take it for granted that we have the intuition that both Saskia and Marie disagree with Bob.

## 1. Indexical Epistemic Contextualism and Epistemic Relativism

Take a standard semantic framework in which a sentence uttered in a context has a content that is evaluated for truth relative to the circumstance of evaluation of the context in which it was uttered.<sup>4</sup> Sam's utterance of the sentence 'I am sitting' at  $t$  is true if and only if Sam is sitting at  $t$  in the actual world. The time at which Sam uttered the sentence is a *determinant of the truth-value* of Sam's utterance. On this standard framework, the determinants of the truth-value of an utterance either determine the content or the circumstance of evaluation relative to which the content is evaluated. Current orthodoxy is that the time at which one utters a sentence determines the content rather than the circumstance.<sup>5</sup> So, on this view, the content of Sam's utterance is that Sam is sitting at  $t$  and that content is evaluated for truth relative to the actual world. Circumstances of evaluation are worlds, and sentences uttered in contexts express contents that are evaluated for truth or falsity relative to such circumstances.

Say that in context  $c$  Payal utters the sentence 'S knows that  $p$ '. For the epistemic contextualist, one of the determinants of the truth-value of Payal's utterance is the epistemic standard operative in  $c$ . This determinant, as with the time of Sam's utterance of 'I am sitting', can either determine the content of Payal's utterance or the circumstance relative to which it is evaluated. *Indexical Epistemic Contextualism* (IEC) is the view that the standard determines the content.

*Epistemic Relativism* (ER) rejects this semantic framework. ER is the view that knowledge ascriptions have a content that is evaluated for truth or falsity relative to the world in which they are uttered and the epistemic standard operative in the context in which they are *assessed*. Take Payal's knowledge ascription 'S knows that  $p$ '. For ER, this ascription has as its content that S knows that  $p$  and that content is evaluated for truth relative to Payal's epistemic standard (MacFarlane 2005).

It's something of a commonplace in the literature that ER doesn't face the problem of disagreement.<sup>6</sup> On ER, when Bob says that he knows he has a hand that claim is true as assessed by Bob because in his context

<sup>4</sup> This framework is from Kaplan 1989.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, King 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Some have disputed this. See Dreier 2009 and Francén 2010.

the epistemic standards are low. However, that claim is false as assessed by both Saskia and Marie because, in their respective contexts, the epistemic standards are high. That explains why Saskia and Marie negatively assess Bob's claim. Bob, Saskia and Marie are all assessing the same claim and, as assessed from Bob's context, that claim is true but, as assessed from Saskia and Marie's contexts, that claim is false. In this paper I'm going to assume that ER doesn't face the problem of disagreement.

In the next section I will discuss DeRose's proposed solution to the problem of disagreement. I will argue that his solution fails and then present what I take to be a better solution.

## 2. DeRose's Single-Scoreboard Semantics

IEC is the view that the truth-conditions of knowledge ascriptions are in part determined by the epistemic standard operative in the context in which those ascriptions are made. Sentences involving the word 'knows' are semantically incomplete and only express complete propositions when supplemented by a contextually salient epistemic standard. On DeRose's view, in any given context the conversational participants are meant to converge on a single epistemic standard and once that standard has been converged upon it's that standard that allows those sentences to express complete propositions (DeRose 2009, pp. 135-6). But, in conversations where A and B have different standards, an ascription or denial of 'knowledge' to S is true (or false) if and only if S meets (or fails to meet) the standards of both A and B, and truth-valueless if and only if S meets (or fails to meet) one set of standards but not the other (*ibid*, pp. 144-5). The idea is that when the speakers in a context can't agree on a single epistemic standard, sentences involving the word 'knows' can't express complete propositions and so remain truth-valueless.

In the Bob and Saskia case Bob has low epistemic standards whereas Saskia has high standards. So, on DeRose's view, when Saskia says that Bob doesn't know he has a hand that's truth-valueless. DeRose thinks that this deals with the problem of disagreement because, to use his phrase, Saskia is disagreeing with Bob over the truth-value of the same 'gappy' thing (*ibid*, p. 145). What about the Bob and Marie case? In such cases DeRose also holds that an ascription or denial of 'knowledge' to S is true/false if and only if S meets/fails to meet the

standards of both A and B, and truth-valueless if and only if *S* meets/fails to meet one set of standards but not the other (*ibid*, pp. 148-50). On DeRose's view, when Marie says that Bob doesn't know he has a hand that's truth-valueless. Again, this is supposed to deal with the problem of disagreement. Marie is disagreeing with Bob over the truth-value of the same 'gappy' thing.

I'm going to grant DeRose that this solves the problem disagreement in both cases. I will argue that DeRose's solution to the problem of disagreement is incompatible with the basic motivation for epistemic contextualism. Recall how the Bob and Marie disagreement went. Bob has just woken from a dream in which he lost a hand. Upon awakening he affirmed, "I know that I have a hand, that was just a dream." Later, Marie is informed of Bob's remark and says, "No, Bob doesn't know that he has a hand." Consider what would happen later if Bob, still in a low standards context, recalls his dream and says, "I know that I have a hand, thank God." Presumably, on DeRose's view this assertion is truth-valueless because it meets Bob's standards but not Marie's. DeRose's view has the consequence that, for any knowledge ascription, if that knowledge ascription is disputed then there is no context in which that knowledge can be truly re-ascribed. But the basic motivation for epistemic contextualism is that in low standards contexts, like Bob's when he self-ascribes the knowledge that he has hands, a good number of knowledge ascriptions are true, whereas in high standards contexts, like Marie's when she challenges Bob's knowledge self-ascription, a good number or maybe all knowledge denials are true. Because on DeRose's view disagreement renders knowledge ascriptions or denials truth-valueless irrespective of the context in which those ascriptions or denials are made, it is incompatible with the basic motivation for epistemic contextualism.

### 3. An EIC Solution to the Problem of Disagreement

In this section I'm going to argue that, on an assumption about what one is assessing when one assesses an utterance, EIC can solve the problem of disagreement.

In their paper 'Contextualism, Assessor Relativism, and Insensitive Assessments', Gunnar Björnsson and Alexander Almér identify the following implicit assumption about utterance assessment:

When we assess utterances using various assessment phrases, we normally (barring confusion, misunderstanding, etc.) assess the satisfaction of their truth-conditions. (Björnsson and Almér 2009, p. 366)

So, on this assumption, when Saskia or Marie assesses Bob's utterance, they are assessing the satisfaction of the truth-conditions of Bob's utterance. Björnsson and Almér propose a revision of this assumption:

When we assess utterances using various assessment phrases, we normally (barring confusion, misunderstanding, etc.) assess the satisfaction of the conditions that are made most salient by the utterances in the context of assessment. (*Ibid*, p. 367)

Note that, of course, it may well be that the conditions made most salient by an utterance are just the truth-conditions of the utterance, as in the example below:

Kyle: Giraffes have small necks.

Tony: No, that's false, giraffes actually have really long necks.

Here Tony is assessing the truth-conditions of Kyle's utterance. Presumably, on Björnsson and Almér's view, this is because that's what is made most salient by the utterance in Tony's context of assessment.

I'll quickly run through their argument for revising the assumption and their argument for their proposed revision.<sup>7</sup> They identify certain cases where it looks like the assessment of an utterance is not assessing the satisfaction of the truth-conditions of the utterance. For example:

Gunnar: I believe Anne did it.

Alexander: No, she couldn't have. (*Ibid.*)

In this case Alexander is rejecting the claim that Anne did it, not the claim that Gunnar believes that Anne did it. Alexander is not assessing the satisfaction of the truth-conditions of Gunnar's utterance. Rather, he's assessing the satisfaction of the truth-conditions of the claim that Anne did it. They also identify cases where it looks like the assessment of an utterance is assessing the satisfaction of the conditions made most salient in the context in which the utterance is being assessed. For example:

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<sup>7</sup> A rather different argument for a similar conclusion about what is involved in the assessment of claims involving 'ought' can be found in Björnsson and Finlay 2010.

Bill: The keys might be in the car.

Emily: No, they are in my pocket. (*Ibid*, p. 368)

If we accept the plausible claim that one's claims about what 'might' be the case are relative to one's present body of information, or possibly the body of information of some relevant group, Bill's utterance is true if and only if, relative to the information he possesses, it's possible that the keys are in the car.<sup>8</sup> So Emily isn't assessing the truth-conditions of Bill's utterance. Rather, as Björnsson and Almér have it, she's assessing

whether the keys' being in the car is compatible with *her* information ... because that is the condition that is made salient when Emily is assessing Bill's utterance. (*Ibid*, pp. 368-9)

If we accept the above picture a solution to the problem of disagreement can be found. Consider our dispute between Bob and Saskia:

Bob: I know that I have a hand.

Saskia: No, you don't know that. You can't rule out the possibility that you're a handless brain in a vat.

Recall that Saskia is in a high standards context. For contextualists like DeRose, Stewart Cohen and David Lewis that means that a large number of error possibilities, such as the possibility that Bob is a handless brain in a vat, are *salient* in Saskia's context. So what's going to be salient in Saskia's context of assessment is whether Bob can rule out possibilities such as the possibility that he's a handless brain in a vat. Or, in other words, what's salient in Saskia's context is whether Bob knows by *her standards*. Bob doesn't know by her standards so that explains why Saskia gives a negative assessment of Bob's utterance. Of course, the same explanation can be given of Marie's assessment of Bob's utterance.

The solution to the problem of disagreement I am proposing goes like this. Bob claims 'I know that *p*' and Saskia or Marie respond 'No, Bob doesn't know that *p*'. On EIC, these claims are all true because Bob knows by his standards but not by Saskia or Marie's standards. But EIC can explain why Saskia and Marie negatively assess Bob's utterance without holding that they are mistaken in doing so. They negatively

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<sup>8</sup> See von Fintel and Gillies 2009 for further discussion.

assess Bob's utterance because they are assessing the satisfaction of the conditions that are most salient in their respective contexts of assessment, which is whether Bob knows by the (high) standards of their contexts. He doesn't, and that explains their negative assessments.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that EIC can solve the problem of disagreement. My proposed solution, unlike the solution offered by DeRose, is compatible with the basic motivation for epistemic contextualism. On my solution, Saskia and Marie aren't assessing the truth-conditions of Bob's utterance. Rather, they are assessing the satisfaction of the conditions made most salient in the context in which they are assessing that utterance. EIC can solve the problem of disagreement without positing truth-value gaps. This undercuts a main motivation for ER.

I want to close by commenting on the limitations of the EIC solution to the problem of disagreement that I have sketched above. First, it depends upon a view of utterance assessment that some might find controversial. Accordingly, what I take myself to have done is shown that on the assumption that this is the correct view of utterance assessment there is an EIC solution to the problem of disagreement. Second, earlier I set myself the task of showing how EIC could explain why Saskia and Marie give a negative assessment of Bob's knowledge self-ascription without holding that they are mistaken about the meaning of 'knows'. My solution to the problem of disagreement is an explanation of some patterns of linguistic data. One might object that a 'proper' solution to the problem of disagreement has to do more than explain some linguistic data. Nothing I've said in this paper addresses this worry. Of course, the objector is going to have to give an account of what 'proper' disagreement amounts to.<sup>9</sup>

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