

**Keith DeRose, *The Case for Contextualism: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context, Vol. 1*, Oxford University Press, 2009, 288pp + xiii.**

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It is hard to convey the philosophical excitement that was generated by attributer contextualism (henceforth ‘contextualism’) in the mid-to-late 1990s. Although the basic nuts and bolts of the proposal weren’t new—Stewart Cohen had, of course, been championing such a position for some time by this point—things really took off in a major way for this research programme in the mid-1990s. There were two papers that changed the landscape in this dramatic way. One of them was David Lewis’s ‘Elusive Knowledge’, which came out in 1996. The other was Keith DeRose’s ‘Solving the Skeptical Problem’, which came out in 1995. Both are classics of contemporary epistemology.

A key part in the tremendous wave of interest that ensued off the back of these two articles was the prospect that contextualism could *both* pay due attention to our actual practices of ascribing and denying knowledge while at the same time being able to deal with fundamental epistemological problems, such as, in particular, the problem of radical skepticism (a key concern of both articles). Our hunch is that contextualism would not have generated nearly as much interest if either of these features of the view had been absent. This is important, since both aspects of the contextualist research programme have been roundly criticized in recent years.

On the one hand, it has been argued that contextualism does not offer us the resolutions we seek for major epistemological problems. In particular, the contextualist response to the problem of radical skepticism has been attacked, with some claiming that, for example, it merely side-steps the problem rather than resolves it. On the other hand, there has also been a concerted attack on the examples of (putatively) ordinary conversation that contextualism cites in order to motivate the position, such as the now ubiquitous ‘bank’ cases. For example, experimental epistemologists have disputed the ‘data’ in question, while proponents of the rival subject sensitive invariantist view (SSI) have offered very different explanations of what is going on in the relevant cases (and also, of course, often disputed the ‘data’ as well).

Arguably, then, contextualism faces a crisis-point. If it is to dust itself off in the face of this critical onslaught and once more present itself as a credible philosophical proposal, then it needs to be able offer a systematic defence of its main claims, one that is sensitive to the recent lines of critique. Hence DeRose's two-volume defence of contextualism, of which this volume is the first (the second is forthcoming), could not have come at a better time. The focus of this volume is on the ordinary language basis for contextualism, while the focus of the second volume is on the extent to which contextualism can help us with the big epistemological questions, especially with regard to the problem of radical skepticism.

*The Case for Contextualism* (henceforth 'TCC') consists largely of material drawn from a number of previously published papers. However, some new material has been included, most notably the entire final chapter, and an attempt has been made to indicate where the argument of older papers stands in relation to the current literature. For example, in Chapter 3, previously published as 'Assertion, Knowledge and Context', it is made clear that the argument of that paper doesn't aim to establish (as was claimed in the original version) that invariantists can't accommodate intuitions about bank cases used in arguments for contextualism as well as the knowledge norm of assertion (KAA). Instead, all that is claimed is that *classical invariantists* (i.e., non-subject-sensitive invariantists) can't accommodate these intuitions while endorsing KAA. Taken as a whole, TCC presents an argument for its main thesis that deals with a large number of recent much-discussed objections to contextualism, especially those presented in recent work by John Hawthorne and Jason Stanley.<sup>1</sup>

Here's an overview of the argument of TCC. DeRose begins by providing what he takes to be the main motivation for adopting contextualism, that the way in which ordinary speakers use 'knows' in a number of everyday contexts (call these contextualist cases) *prima facie* supports contextualism (Chapter 1), and offers a number of rules for how to best construct and present such cases in order to elicit pro-contextualist intuitions (Chapter 2). A typical classical invariantist response to contextualist cases is to accept that varying standards govern whether speakers can *appropriately* ascribe knowledge to subjects of certain propositions, but to argue that this doesn't reflect any variation in the standards for *truthfully* ascribing knowledge (this is known as a 'warranted assertibility manoeuvre', or 'WAM'). In Chapter 3 DeRose argues that to make this response to

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<sup>1</sup> See especially, J. Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004), and J. Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005).

contextualist cases the classical invariantist has to utilise a certain sort of WAM. In high standards contexts one can't properly assert that one knows that  $p$  whereas in low standards contexts one can, just because in high standards contexts one can't properly assert that  $p$  whereas in low standards contexts one can properly assert that  $p$  (i.e., the classical invariantist must claim that standards for proper assertion vary with context). But if the classical invariantist also adopts KAA then she must think that the truth-conditions of 'I know that  $p$ ' vary with context just because the assertibility conditions of ' $p$ ' vary with context. So the classical invariantist has two options. She can either deny KAA or not utilise this WAM.

Chapter 4 is an explanation of what DeRose calls the *gap view*. In any conversation the participants will have their own epistemic standards, so there is a temptation to think that the contextualist holds that any ascriber's knowledge ascriptions get their content from that ascriber's standards (what DeRose calls their *personally indicated content*). On the gap view, this is false. In general, in a conversation between two conversational participants A and B where the personally indicated content of A and B differ, an ascription or denial of knowledge to  $S$  is true/false *iff*  $S$  meets/fails to meet the standards set by the personally indicated content of both A and B, and *without a truth-value iff*  $S$  meets/fails to meet one set of standards but not the other.

Chapter 5 contains DeRose's response to a number of objections to contextualism based on linguistic data. Chapter 6 argues that, first, SSI is committed to the truth of strange sentences such as ' $S$  knows that  $p$  today, but on Tuesday, when the stakes will be higher,  $S$  won't know that  $p$ '. Second, it argues that, while contextualism is committed to the view that similar strange sentences (' $S$  doesn't know that  $p$  but what I said earlier, " $S$  knows that  $p$ ", was true') can be truthfully asserted, the same goes for views on which 'tall' is context-sensitive (' $S$  isn't tall but what I said earlier, " $S$  is tall", was true'), so there's no problem unique to contextualism.

The key battleground between SSI and contextualism is third-person knowledge ascriptions. In Chapter 7 DeRose argues, first, that the SSI projectivist account of what goes on in High Ascriber-Normal Subject cases is insufficiently motivated and, second, that the contextualist can easily handle cases where it looks as if it should be the *subject's* epistemic standards that 'call the shots'. DeRose also argues that the contextualist has no problem accommodating the sort of data cited in defence of KAA and the analogue knowledge norm for practical reasoning.

We'll briefly comment upon some limitations of the argument of TCC before considering objections. While DeRose acknowledges the question of why our intuitions about knowledge ascriptions and denials in contextualist cases carry such evidential weight (pp. 49-51) he doesn't offer much by way of response and, further, the growing body of literature in experimental philosophy suggesting that what he takes to be our intuitions about contextualist cases aren't shared by 'the folk' isn't addressed.<sup>2</sup> The argument of Chapter 3 is easily dealt with by denying KAA, and there's a growing body of literature suggesting that it should be rejected.<sup>3</sup> There is little discussion of skepticism and contextualist resolutions of skeptical arguments but, as DeRose makes clear, TCC is intended as the first of two volumes, the second of which will deal primarily with skepticism (p. 44).

We will now discuss some objections to the arguments summarised above. First, DeRose's discussion of the gap view is unclear about a crucial detail. What he says is that, in conversational contexts in which A and B differ in personally indicated content, if A ascribes/denies knowledge that  $p$  to  $S$  then that ascription/denial lacks a truth-value *iff*  $S$  meets/fails to meet the standards of one of but not both A and B. Does that mean that A's ascription/denial has an indeterminate semantic content? It would seem that this has to be so, but DeRose's discussion doesn't make that clear.

Second, DeRose wants to apply his gap view to the following sort of case. Say that in a low standards context Ted asserts that Dougal knows that the bank is open on Saturdays. Later, Jack, who is in a high standards context and was told about Ted's earlier assertion, says 'Rubbish, Dougal knows no such thing!'. DeRose says that Jack's assertion has no truth-value *iff* Dougal meets Ted's standards but doesn't meet Jack's standards, and so Jack's assertion has no truth-value (even though Ted's assertion was true, and what he asserted is still true in Jack's high standards context). Consider this consequence. Later, Ted, still in a low standards context, asserts that Dougal knows that the bank is open on Saturdays. Presumably on DeRose's view this assertion is without a truth-value *iff* Dougal meets Ted's standards but not Jack's, and this is the case. The upshot of the gap view seems to be that, for a subject who has been truthfully ascribed knowledge of a given proposition, if that subject is denied knowledge in a later high standards context

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, J. May, W. Sinnott-Armstrong, J. Hull & A. Zimmerman, 'Practical Interests, Relevant Alternatives, and Knowledge Attributions: An Empirical Study', *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 1 (2010), 265-73. To be fair to DeRose, he does now have a paper forthcoming which addresses these issues, 'Contextualism, Contrastivism, and X-Phi Surveys', *Philosophical Studies* (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> For a useful survey of some of the main critical lines with regard to KAA, see M. Weiner, 'Norms of Assertion', *Philosophy Compass* 2/2 (2007), 187-195.

and then re-ascribed knowledge in a low standards context, both that denial and re-ascription are without a truth-value. This is certainly not an innocuous consequence of the gap view.

Third, consider DeRose's objection to the SSI account of what goes on in High Ascriber-Normal Subject cases (Chapter 7). Stanley has argued that what goes on in such cases is that ascribers incorrectly *project* their epistemic standards onto the subjects of their knowledge ascriptions. When we are inquiring into whether a subject knows that  $p$  we are treating that subject as a *source of information*. This leads us to ask what that subject would know if she had our interests. There's an obvious problem, highlighted by DeRose. What about cases where an ascriber knows that  $p$  and is aware that this is so? The ascriber isn't going to treat the subject as a source of information because she already has that information. DeRose's response is that maybe the defender of SSI could provide some additional mechanism which explains why ascribers would still project their standards in such cases. But what the defender of SSI really needs is some sort of reason for thinking that this projection of epistemic standards is *mistaken*. It isn't enough to give a characterisation of our epistemic practice that explains why we project our epistemic standards. The contextualist also thinks that we project our epistemic standards. The difference is that the contextualist thinks this is entirely correct. The characterisation has to explain why we are mistaken in doing so.

If DeRose leaves his argument against projectivist SSI strategies here, he leaves himself open to the following sort of argument. The defender of SSI just has to give some reason for thinking that projecting our epistemic standards is mistaken. The response to this might just be: if there are good objections to contextualism, and the defender of SSI obviously thinks that there are, those objections should be reason enough.

One might think that the above is a real problem for DeRose. But it would be a mistake to think that DeRose is in such a dialectically weak situation. Unfortunately, that his argument is somewhat different to the one given above only really becomes clear in the last section of Chapter 7. Consider the sorts of cases where ascribers, with seeming propriety, apply to their subjects the epistemic standards appropriate to those subject's situations. Such cases are thought to be problematic for contextualism. DeRose argues that this is not so. Say that we've got an ascriber A who is talking about whether a subject  $S$  knows. In some conversational situations A's conversational purposes will lead her to apply the standards appropriate to her situation, for example, when she is treating that

subject as a source of information. But in other situations *A*'s conversational purposes will lead her to apply the standards appropriate in *S*'s situation, for example when she is discussing whether *S* should take a certain course of action ('*S* should do *A* because she knows that *p*'). Contextualism, or at least DeRose's version, is just the view that what standards an ascriber selects are determined by her conversational purposes. So contextualism can easily accommodate both sorts of cases. As DeRose emphasises, reflection upon our epistemic practice tells us that what epistemic standards we select depends upon our conversational purposes. This is entirely consistent with contextualism, but the defender of SSI needs to insist that when our conversational purposes demand that we select epistemic standards appropriate to our practical situation this is a mistake. Our epistemic practice shows that there is a need for what DeRose calls the flexibility that contextualism provides.

We think that the above argument for the superiority of contextualism over SSI as an account of our everyday epistemic practice is a good one. However, this argument is certainly insufficient to establish what we earlier identified as the main thesis of TCC. To establish that contextualism provides the best *overall* account of our everyday epistemic practice would require more engagement with the various classical invariantist accounts available and an in-depth analysis of the relative strengths and weaknesses of SSI. DeRose succeeds in presenting a case for contextualism but it is certainly not a conclusive case.

These critical remarks aside, this is a major and long-awaited work, one that will not disappoint. Even if one has read the papers that are reprinted here, there is still much to be gained by reading them again within the context provided by this book, safe in the knowledge that they are in a form which represents DeRose's current views. Moreover, the 'introductory' chapter one is in fact a significant piece of work in its own right, offering a fairly comprehensive history of contextualism along with a fantastic overview of the relevant philosophical terrain and the position of contextualism within that terrain. Anyone serious about epistemology should read this introduction. Given that anyone serious about epistemology should also have already read many of the papers that make up this volume, what you have in this book is thus essential reading for epistemologists *simpliciter*. If there is a problem with this work, it is that once you get to the end your appetite to start on volume two is pretty strong. So let us hope that DeRose doesn't take too long to present us with the second instalment.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> We are grateful to Keith DeRose for helpful feedback on an earlier version of this review.