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Giovanni Mion

# KNOWLEDGE AND OBJECTIVITY



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## Abstract

My goal is to defend the idea that knowledge is context relative, but, in contrast to current versions of epistemic contextualism, on my view, knowledge is relative to contexts that are objective in the sense that participants to a conversation might be unaware of the content of the context that truly governs their conversation.

The book starts with an analysis of current versions of epistemic contextualism. Epistemic contextualism comes in different forms: contextualists invoke different context shifting mechanisms and have different linguistic models. Nevertheless, all contextualists share the same subjective conception of what contexts are. In other words, contextualists like Stewart Cohen, Keith DeRose and David Lewis implicitly assume that the content of a sentence of the form “S knows that p” is determined by the intentions and beliefs of the individual speaker or by the intentions and beliefs of all the participants to the conversation.

In either case, contextualists implicitly assume a subjective conception of context. In contrast, following Christopher Gauker’s conception of what a context

is, in my book, I defend a different form of epistemic contextualism. On my view also, knowledge is context relative, but it is not relative to the speaker's mental states; rather, it is relative to the speakers' conversational goals and the physical/social/cultural environment in which the conversation takes place.

On this account, even if goals turn out to be psychological entities (for example, desires we are willing to act upon), once the goals of a conversation are established, the best way to achieve them depends upon the way the world really is. In this sense, I contend, contexts are objective entities.

So, I am also a contextualist about knowledge. But, on my view, from the fact that knowledge ascriptions are context relative, it does not follow that they are also intention-based.

On the contrary, my basic claim is that we get a better understanding of the way in which knowledge is attributed if we assume that knowledge attributions are context relative, but that they are not intention-based.

## Introduction

The goal of my book is to defend the idea that *knowledge* is context relative, but, in contrast to current versions of epistemic contextualism, on my view, *knowledge* is relative to contexts that are *objective*, in the sense that participants to a conversation might be unaware of the content of the context that truly governs their conversation.

In the book, I will approach the nature of knowledge by approaching the semantics of *knowledge*. It is not in general the case that when we want to understand the nature of something, e.g., gold, we should answer with semantics. But sometimes it turns out that the philosophical problems concerning the nature of things can be traced back to problems in semantics. In my view, this is precisely the case with knowledge. In other words, on my view, an account of knowledge attributions is at the same time an account of the nature of knowledge. But even if knowledge were a mental state or a relationship between a mental state and a physical state, then, apart from dubious introspective reports, we can account for it only on the basis of our linguistic practices.

In spite of the fact that I will often use the character/content distinction, I should point out that my semantics will be Christopher Gauker's semantics of assertibility in a context rather than truth simpliciter or truth in a model. Gauker defines the notion of assertibility in a context according to the idea that the primary role of linguistic communication is not to share thoughts, but to achieve practical goals.

As I show in the book, the ideas that conversation has goals and that a sentence is assertible (as opposed to true) when it contributes to achieving the goals of the conversation are the key to understanding why *knowledge* is relative to contexts that are objective and why knowledge attributions are sensitive to practical factors.

The book starts with an analysis of current versions of epistemic contextualism. Epistemic contextualism comes in different forms: contextualists invoke different context shifting mechanisms and have different linguistic models. Nevertheless, in the first chapter, I show that all contextualists share the same *subjective* conception of what contexts are. In other words, the most prominent epistemic contextualists (Stewart Cohen, Keith DeRose and David Lewis) implicitly assume that the content of a sentence of the form "S knows that *p*" is determined by the intentions and beliefs of the individual speaker or by the intentions and beliefs of all the participants to the conversation.

In either case, contextualists implicitly assume a *subjective* conception of context. In contrast, following

## Chapter II

## Five Cases

As we saw, according to current versions of contextualism, the meaning of the verb “to know” is context relative. This means that a sentence of the form “S knows that  $p$ ” may express different propositions and thus have different truth values in different contexts of utterance. In addition, as I have argued in the first chapter, according to contextualists, contexts are constituted by the speakers’ mental states. In other words, it is what the participants to the conversation have in mind that determines the value of the parameters needed to interpret their utterances. Accordingly, they assume that the content of a sentence of the form “S knows that  $p$ ” is determined by the intentions and beliefs of the individual speaker or by the intentions and beliefs of all the participants to the conversation. In either case, contextualists implicitly assume a subjective conception of context.

In my work, I defend a different form of epistemic contextualism. In the view that I am about to advocate, the meaning of the verb “to know” (its content, to be

precise) is also context relative, but the semantic value of a sentence of the form “S knows that *p*” is not determined by the speakers’ states of mind, but among the other things, also by the physical/social/cultural environment in which the conversation takes place. So in contrast with the standard contextualist view, in the view that I am about to advocate, contexts are *objective entities* because they may include environmental facts which might be unknown to all participants to the conversation.

Before I articulate my view, let me present some of the most discussed examples by contextualists. In this way, I will be able to better illustrate some of the strengths and weaknesses of current versions of epistemic contextualism, and offer a *prima facie* argument in favor of *objective contextualism*. The five cases are taken from Stanley 2005 (pages 3-5), but they are presented in a different order:

*Low Stakes* [**Case I**]. Hannah and her wife Sarah are driving home on a Friday afternoon. They plan to stop at the bank on their way home to deposit their paychecks. It is not important that they do so as they have no impending bills. But as they drive past the bank, they notice that the lines inside are very long, as they often are on Friday afternoon. Realizing that it isn’t very important that their paychecks are deposited right away, Hannah says, “I know the bank will be open tomorrow, since I was there just a week ago on Saturday morning. So we can deposit our paychecks tomorrow morning.”

*High Stakes [Case II]*. Hannah and her wife Sarah are driving home on a Friday afternoon. They plan to stop at the bank on their way home to deposit their paychecks. Since they have an impending bill coming due, and very little in their account, it is very important that they deposit their paychecks by Saturday. Hannah knows that she was at the bank two weeks before on a Saturday morning, and it was open. But, as Sarah points out, banks do change their hours. Hannah says, “I guess you’re right. I don’t know that the bank will be open tomorrow.”

*High Attributor-Low Subject Stakes [Case III]*. Hannah and her wife Sarah are driving home on a Friday afternoon. They plan to stop at the bank on their way home to deposit their paychecks. Since they have an impending bill coming due, and very little in their account, it is very important that they deposit their paychecks by Saturday. Hannah calls up Bill on her cell phone, and asks Bill whether the bank will be open on Saturday. Bill replies by telling Hannah, “Well, I was there two weeks ago on Saturday, and it was open.” After reporting the discussion to Sarah, Hannah concludes that, since banks do occasionally change their hours, “Bill does not really know that the bank will be open on Saturday.”

*Low Attributor-High Subject Stakes [Case IV]*. Hannah and her wife Sarah are driving home on a Friday afternoon. They plan to stop at the bank on their way

home to deposit their paychecks. Since they have an impending bill coming due, and very little in their account, it is very important that they deposit their paychecks by Saturday. Two weeks earlier, on a Saturday, Hannah went to the bank, where Jill saw her. Sarah points out to Hannah that banks change their hours. Hannah utters, “That’s a good point. I guess I don’t really know that the bank will be open on Saturday.” Coincidentally, Jill is thinking of going to the bank on Saturday, just for fun, to see if she meets Hannah there. Nothing is at stake for Jill, and she knows nothing of Hannah’s situation. Wondering whether Hannah will be there, Jill utters to a friend, “Well, Hannah was at the bank two weeks ago on a Saturday. So she knows that the bank will be open on Saturday.”

*Ignorant High Stakes* [**Case V**]. Hannah and her wife Sarah are driving home on a Friday afternoon. They plan to stop at the bank on their way home to deposit their paychecks. Since they have an impending bill coming due, and very little in their account, it is very important that they deposit their paychecks by Saturday. But neither Hannah nor Sarah is aware of the impending bill, nor of the paucity of available funds. Looking at the lines Hannah says to Sarah, “I know that the bank will be open tomorrow, since I was there just two weeks ago on Saturday morning. So we can deposit our paychecks tomorrow morning.”