Why Contextualists Cannot Know They Are Right: Self-Refuting Implications of Contextualism

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Conversational contextualism in epistemology is characterized by four main theses: 1. the indexicality of knowledge claims thesis; 2. the attributor contextualism thesis; 3. the conversational contextualism thesis, and 4. the main thesis of contextualism according to which a knowledge claim can be true in one context and false in another context in which more stringent standards for knowledge are operant. It is argued that these theses taken together generate problems for contextualism. In particular, it is shown that there is no context in which the contextualist can truthfully claim to know her theory is true. Since these results were obtained only with principles the contextualist cannot give up—like the principle of epistemic closure and the principle that knowledge implies truth—it seems that contextualism is in need of a thoroughgoing revision if it is to become a successful epistemic theory.

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1. Introduction

Contextualism has become one of the leading paradigms in epistemology in recent years. There are a plethora of different contextualist approaches to knowledge. What unites these different contextualist accounts is the shared view that the truth values of knowledge ascriptions—like “S knows that p (at time t)”—are context-dependent. But in spelling out this general thesis contextualist approaches begin to diverge. In particular, there is an ongoing debate about what constitutes a context and what determines changes in contexts. The most popular version of contextualism in contemporary epistemology is that championed by David Lewis, Keith DeRose and Stewart Cohen.¹ This version is often described as conversational contextualism or semantic contextualism.² In the following, I will focus on this version of contextualism. I will spell out the main theses of contextualism and argue that they generate problems for contextualism. In particular, it will be shown that the contextualist cannot know some of the central claims of contextualism.
2. Four Central Theses of Contextualism

According to contextualists, knowledge claims are *indexical*. To explain the kind of indexicality involved in knowledge ascriptions, ascriptions of *flatness* are often used as an example. According to "normal" standards given in a context of a billiard game, the claim made by a player: "This billiard table is flat" is true if the table does not have any "bumps" that can be detected even by a closer look at the table. But in higher standards contexts in which microscopic irregularities count, the claim "This billiard table is flat" is false, i.e., the claim "This billiard table is not flat" is true. Competent speakers wouldn't judge these two claims to be contradictory to each other. It is perfectly clear that the conditions of correctly applying the term "flat" to the table have changed in the second claim. This hidden context-sensitivity can be made explicit by using different indices representing different contexts in which different standards are operant. Furthermore, it should be noticed that sentences like "X is flat" are always context-sensitive. There is no context-independent objective application of the term "flat".

The indexicality of ascriptions of flatness is a model for the indexicality of knowledge claims. The truth values of knowledge claims can also vary with different contexts. Let's consider a variation of a famous example by Dretske³: During a zoo visit, a person S is looking at some animals in a paddock that she identifies as zebras. This visual experience occurs under normal perceptual conditions and S has prior knowledge of what zebras look like. Furthermore, there is a sign at the fence that says "zebras". Let's assume that the animals S is looking at are in fact zebras and that S's knowledge about zebras allows her to reliably distinguish zebras from other similar looking animals such as donkeys and ponies.

According to contextualists, in such a situation during a normal zoo visit, S *knows* that the animals she is looking at are zebras, even though she cannot rule out the possibility that these animals are cleverly disguised mules. But let's now assume that it is rumored that in order to save money the zoo director adds to the few zebras he owns some cleverly disguised mules that look exactly like real zebras. In this situation the possibility that the animals S is looking at are cleverly disguised mules becomes *salient*. Since S cannot (by merely looking at the animals) rule out this possibility, S *does not know* that the animals she is looking at are zebras—even if she is in fact looking at real zebras. Contextualists also contend that like "flat" there is no context-independent objective knowledge ascription.

The *Indexicality of Knowledge Claims Thesis* (IKCT) is one of the central theses of contextualism. It can be roughly summarized as follows:

(IKCT) All knowledge claims of the form "S knows that p" are indexical.

The contextualist answer to the question of whose standards determine the truth values of a given knowledge ascription brings us to the second central thesis of contextualism. The truth value of "S knows that p" depends, according to contextualism,