

DeRose on Epistemic Contextualism

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I. The Puzzle

The Argument from Ignorance:

- 1) I don't know that I'm not a BIV.
- 2) If I I don't know I'm not a BIV, then I don't know I have hands.
- 3) Therefore I don't know I have hands.

Something plausible has to go! Whatever we say, we want to *explain* why it's so easy to fall into this trap.

On it's face, valid argument; only three options:

- i) Skeptic: accept (3).
- ii) Moore: deny (1).
- iii) Nozick: deny (2).

But DeRose has a fourth proposal:

- iv) Equivocation! 'know' has different meanings in (1) and (3).

Or:

Replace *I have hands* with *that's a zebra* and *I'm a BIV* with *that's a painted mule*.

Why do (1) and (2) seem plausible and (3) seem *implausible*?

How could people be so wrong?

Why so easy to get people to accept it?
(We'll come back to this.)

Statements (1) and (3) are false in most contexts; true in certain skeptical ones.

II. The Basic Strategy: Contextualism

Consider the argument:

- 1') This pan isn't flat.
- 2') If this pan isn't flat, then Mass. Ave isn't flat.
- 3') Therefore Mass. Ave isn't flat.

Some terms are clearly context-sensitive ('I'; 'you'; 'here'; 'now'). Others are not as obvious ('flat', 'tall', 'empty').

Diagnosis: 'flat' is context-sensitive. In (1') we use very high standards for flatness; in (not-3') we (usually) use more lax standards.

Analogy with the Argument from Ignorance: in (1) we use very high standards for knowledge; in (not-3) we use more lax standards.

Main task: find a mechanism which explains (predicts) how the standards for 'know' shift across contexts.

Prove that no roads are flat?

Example: "Jimmy's gotten tall!" vs. "Tall people should stand in the back."

The trap: (3) is almost always false; but (1) and (3) are true *in the context generated by the argument*.

III. The Simple Contextualist: Accommodation

Rule of Accommodation: If, when using a context-sensitive term, someone says something false (by the current standards), we adjust the standards to make the statement true (by the later standards).

Problem: What about the Simple Skeptic?

Problem: What about the Boastful Zoologist?

(Q: Is this convincing?)

Objection: Accommodation fails to predict which arguments are (un)convincing.

Reply: **Rule of Relevance.** *Mention* possibilities we can't rule out.

Counter: "rule out *p*" = "know not-*p*"

Examples: "Roger's glass is empty"; "It's 2 o'Clock"; "The pan isn't flat."

"You don't know you have hands."

"Due to my vast knowledge of zebra and mule anatomy, I know that those animals are not mules cleverly painted to look like zebras."

This is too tight a circle.

IV. The Subjunctive Conditionals Account

E.g. "If I were to walk out of the room, Roger would be confused."

Your belief that p is **insensitive** iff if p were false, you'd still believe it.

Contrast: $p = I'm$ standing vs. $q =$ There's no cat outside the classroom.

Nozick's Insight: We tend not to judge 'S knows p ' if S's belief that p is insensitive. Examples:

Lotteries: why don't you know your ticket will lose?

I have hands vs. *I'm not a BIV*.

That's a zebra vs. *That's not a painted mule*.

This is why Nozick denies (2): you can know you have hands even if you *don't* know you're not a BIV. (Former belief is sensitive; latter isn't.)

Problem: Abominable conjunctions. "For all I know I'm a handless BIV; but I know I have hands."

Conclusion: We want to hold onto (2); you're in at least as strong an epistemic position wrt *I'm not a BIV* as *I have hands*.

In the most similar situation (nearest possible world) that I walk out of the room, Roger is confused.

Also: Boastful zoologist vs. me.

Or: "It's consistent with my knowledge that I'm a handless BIV; but it's *not* consistent with my knowledge that I'm handless."

V. The Subtle Contextualist: Sensitivity

DeRose: Combine a contextualist treatment of 'know' with a sensitivity-based mechanism for context-shift.

Contextualism: standards for knowledge (required strength of epistemic position) can go up and down with context.

Nozick: whether your belief is *sensitive* wrt p is a metric of your epistemic position wrt p . (But, crucially, it varies by propositions.)

Rule of Sensitivity: When someone says (denies), "S knows p ," raise standards for knowledge so that S must be in a strong enough epistemic position that her beliefs are sensitive to p .

Example: take a good skeptical hypothesis, like *I'm a BIV*.

a) Stronger epistemic position wrt *not-BIV* than *I have hands*.

b) Sensitive wrt *I have hands*; but *insensitive* wrt *not-BIV*.

How? BIV-worlds are much farther away; much harder to be sensitive.

Saying "You don't know you're not a BIV", expands sphere of relevant worlds.

Explains patterns of good/bad skeptical hypotheses. Avoids abominable conjunctions. Explains why skepticism hard to resist, but wrong.

Context determines a *sphere of epistemically relevant worlds* where belief must match facts.

(a) ensures (2) is true; (b) ensures that, upon being asserted, (1) becomes true.

VI. Questions

Q1: Why is (1)-(3) so much more convincing than (1')-(3')?

Q2: Does contextualism make epistemology *subjective* or *parochial*?

Q3: What about analogues with "reason to believe"? *That* doesn't require sensitivity.