

Epistemic Contextualism and Error Theory

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1. Introduction

In this essay, I argue that Schiffer's error-theoretical objection against epistemic contextualism (EC) does not hold, that 'know(s)' is context-sensitive and that there is a potential error theory for epistemic contextualism.

The argument unfolds in two parts: after some introductory remarks (sections 2&3), I first critically assess the recent discussion of Schiffer's error-theoretical objection (section 4) and show that it rests on a confusion that can be avoided by making a previously unstated distinction (section 5). In the second part, I showcase a model for the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)' (section 6) and sketch out a pragmatic approach to the error theory required by EC (section 7).

2. Epistemic Contextualism: everyday cases and skeptical puzzles

EC is the semantic thesis that 'know(s)' is a context-sensitive term.¹ Thus, the content or the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions ('S knows that p', S being some subject, p some proposition) vary across contexts. What is true in a low standard context (e.g. pub), may be false in a high standard context (e.g. philosopher's conference). The epistemic standards are determined by the context. The context is conceived as the context of utterance and refers to features of the attributor's psychology.²

EC is primarily motivated by everyday cases that involve so-called 'shifty data'.³ Let's consider an example:

A: I know that is a zebra.

B: But can you rule out its being a cleverly painted mule?

A: I guess I can't rule that out.

B: So you admit that you don't know that's a zebra, and so you were wrong earlier?

A: Oh, c'mon. I didn't say I know it's a zebra.⁴

The last sentence strikes us as blatantly false because it contradicts sentence one. EC prevents A from saying something contradictory by claiming that 'know(s)' is context-sensitive and that there is a context shift in the course of the conversation. The standards in play at the beginning of the dialogue are not the same as those in the end. Since the standards rise, what is true in the beginning may be false in the end. A is not to blame: she is simply *ignorant* of the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)'. There is no contradiction, since the first and the last sentence have different contents. She needn't retract her initial statement.

Furthermore, EC claims that skeptical arguments resemble the example above.⁵ Hence, the puzzles they generate can be analyzed and resolved analogically.⁶

1 I will use the terms 'context-sensitivity' and 'indexicality' interchangeably. I know that this is controversial, cf. MacFarlane 2007

2 I refer to a generic account of EC that does not distinguish between content and truth context-sensitivity. Moreover, Rysiew 2007 writes that 'context' may additionally refer to the 'conversational-practical situation'. The literature I used for this essay does not do that. So I won't conceive 'context' in that fashion.

3 DeRose 1999: 194

4 Blome-Tillmann 2008: 33

5 EC has focused on arguments for external world skepticism. However, Neta 2003: 398 points out that probably all skeptical templates prey on the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)'.

6 See DeRose 1999 for a detailed account.

3. Schiffer's error-theoretical objection

EC's solution to the skeptical puzzle does not come cheap, though. To establish the positive claim that 'know(s)' is a context-sensitive term, EC has to subscribe to a negative claim. The negative claim consists in an error theory that explains why competent speakers systematically fail to recognize the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)' and get puzzled by the skeptic's argument.

Basically, EC's error theory postulates that speakers get 'bamboozled by [their] own words'.⁷ Put differently, speakers are afflicted by some sort of 'semantic blindness'⁸ to the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)'.

EC's error theory seems hardly satisfactory, though. As Stephen Schiffer (1996) objects, we do not fail to detect the context-sensitivity of ordinary context-sensitive terms, say indexicals like demonstratives (e.g. 'that').⁹ Thus, context-sensitivity may be assumed to be a *transparent* semantic feature. So, EC's claim that there is *hidden* context-sensitivity contradicts this linguistic data.

However, Schiffer's error-theoretical objection is in need of refinement. For it remains unclear against what the objection is directed. Two different kinds of speaker's ignorance might be targeted: either speakers being ignorant of the *content* of their utterances or them being ignorant of what their *communicative intentions* are.¹⁰

4. How to get it wrong: the problems of inaccessible content and mistaken intention

The specification reduces Schiffer's objection to two problems: the problem of inaccessible content (that speakers cannot know what propositions they express) and the problem of mistaken intention (that speakers are mistaken about their own communicative intentions).

A good deal of the contributions to the debate have focused on resolving one or both of these problems in order to refute or invigorate Schiffer's objection. In this section, I critically assess three contributions and show how they fail to resolve the problems. Their failure indicates that they somehow misconceive Schiffer's error-theoretical objection. The misconception will be specified in section five.

Thomas Hofweber (1999) sets out to devise a model for the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)'. Thereby, he adopts a rough propositional approach to sentences or utterances that features unarticulated constituents. Unarticulated constituents are conceived as functional parts of the proposition that do not appear explicitly at the sentential level. In fact, they commonly occur in cases of *implicit relativity*. Adjectives like 'tall' exhibit implicit relativity, since they have an unarticulated constituent which refers to a comparison class. Although implicit, the reference is cognitively accessible to the speaker.¹¹

A second type of unarticulated constituents lacks this property, though. Hofweber calls it *hidden relativity* and considers it to account for the hidden context-sensitivity of 'know(s)' advocated by EC.

Hofweber offers the following example for hidden relativity: we often utter sentences like 'my car moves at 25 mph', treating physical motion as an absolute property. Thanks to recent discoveries in physics, however, we know that motion is a relative property. The motion of an object can be measured only in relation to some framework of reference. Thus, the sentence features an unarticulated constituent we are unaware of.¹²

7 Schiffer 1996: 329

8 Metaphor coined by Hawthorne 2004: 107

9 Schiffer 1996: 326f.

10 Rysiew 2001: 483

11 Hofweber 1999: 4

12 Hofweber 1999: 10f.

Unfortunately for EC, there is dissimilarity between this instance of hidden relativity and the ‘hidden relativity’ allegedly at work in knowledge attributions. In the case of motion, the unarticulated constituent is *invariant*, the framework of reference being some commonsensical understanding of motion as an absolute property. Although speakers cannot strictly speaking access the content of their utterances, it does not matter, since the unarticulated constituent unknown to almost everyone is also the same for everyone.¹³ Were hidden relativity an adequate model for the context-sensitivity of ‘know(s)’, the situation would differ: since the unarticulated constituent is some *variant* feature of the context, the content changes across contexts. When it comes to accessing contents, speakers fail altogether. Consequently, they become unaware of sameness, difference and incompatibility of contents.¹⁴ But obviously, that contradicts linguistic data and renders the hidden relativity approach to the context-sensitivity of ‘know(s)’ inadequate. Hofweber gets stuck with the problem of inaccessible content.

Unlike Hofweber, Patrick Rysiew (2001) does not particularly care about the problem of inaccessible content. He grants EC the inaccessibility of content, but emphasizes the implications: since content and context are closely tied on EC’s account, denying accessibility of content implies that speakers are systematically mistaken about their communicative intentions as well. It simply proves impossible to hold track of the context if one loses the content.¹⁵ Even if EC found a solution to the problem of inaccessible content, it would not prevent EC from falling prey to the problem of mistaken intentions.

Ram Neta (2003) faces the challenge set up by Rysiew. He tries to give a solution to the problem of mistaken intention by biting the bullet and admitting that we can be partially mistaken about our communicative intentions. Moreover, this does not harm our communication capacity, as Rysiew suggests.

To make sense of Neta’s argument, we should return to Hofweber. As we have seen, there is a significant difference between Hofweber’s hidden relativity and the hidden context-sensitivity of ‘know(s)’. One might wonder, however, whether Hofweber’s hidden relativity case really is that unproblematic. After all, it contains inaccessible contents. And according to Schiffer, it is a general truth about language that the content of an utterance has to be backed up by speaker’s communicative intentions.¹⁶ But how can you back up a content you cannot access? It seems to end in mistaken intentions, regardless of the unarticulated constituents being invariant.

Hofweber’s response to this problem is the application of his propositional model of unarticulated constituents to mental states, such as communicative intentions. Since the mental unarticulated constituent is invariant in genuine instances of hidden relativity, no further problems whatsoever arise. Or so he argues.¹⁷

Basically, Neta gives a Hofweberian theory of unarticulated mental constituents for *contextual features*. He argues that there is indeed evidence for some unarticulated constituent on the mental level.¹⁸ But unlike in Hofweber’s application, the unarticulated constituent is a variant, contextual feature, namely some communicative intention, since context for EC is the attributor’s psychology. Put differently, there are communicative intentions we can be mistaken about, but that does not harm EC’s case for the context-sensitivity of ‘know(s)’! Let’s have a closer look at how Neta establishes the first claim – and why we need not bother having a closer look at the second.

13 Hofweber’s example is far from uncontroversial. Let’s grant it for the sake of the argument.

14 Hofweber 1999: 16

15 Rysiew 2001: 485

16 Hofweber 1999: 8f.

17 Hofweber 1999: 14. It is irrelevant whether Hofweber’s application really works. I need it only to establish the claim (introduced below) that Neta pursues the same line of argument.

18 Neta 2003: 404f.

Firstly, Neta claims that there are communicative intentions we are unaware of and, hence, can be mistaken about. To illustrate his point, he considers a situation of disagreement that allegedly exhibits the confusion found in skeptical puzzles:

“Two people who think they are in the same room but are in fact in different rooms [and] are talking to each other over an intercom [will] mean something different by 'this room' when one claims 'Frank is not in this room' and the other insists 'Frank is in this room – I can see him!' ”¹⁹

According to Neta, the two people are at the same time mistaken and not mistaken about their respective communicative intentions. On the one hand, they mistakenly believe their communicative intentions to be directed at an incompatible content, although the content cannot be truly incompatible. Incompatibility presupposes sameness of content, which is not given in this case, because the demonstrative ‘this’ gets assigned a different contextual value for each speaker. On the other hand, they are not mistaken about their communicative intentions, since ‘...each knows *something* about her own communicative intentions, but she doesn't know *the whole truth* about her own communicative intentions. Specifically, she doesn't know what inferential relation her own intended content bears to the other's intended content.’²⁰ This specific ignorance results from the ignorance about the non-semantic fact that both speakers are not in the same room.²¹ Conversely, it is the ignorance about the non-semantic fact that results in a *partial* ignorance about one's own communicative intentions. Thus, we can be mistaken about communicative intentions.

Secondly, Neta claims that partial ignorance does not harm EC's case for the context-sensitivity of ‘know(s)’. Thereby, he devises an argument for minimal conversational rationality: we do not need total access to our communicative intentions in order to participate rationally in conversation.

However, we need not evaluate this second claim, since Neta's first claim fails to be consistent. In fact, I think it is essentially flawed when it treats the self-ignorance featured in the Frank-case as related to the semantic blindness afflicting speakers in skeptical cases. Here is why:²²

In the Frank-case it is an ignored non-semantic feature of the context that leaves the two interlocutors puzzled (and explains their confusion to us). It is *not* the partial ignorance of communicative intentions in the first place. Rather, the ignorance of the non-semantic fact induces the partial confusion about the communicative intentions. Analogically, in the skeptical case, Neta could not postulate partially mistaken communicative intentions (induced by the context-sensitivity of ‘know(s)’ and the ignorance of the context alone) and go on to launch an argument for minimal conversational rationality. He could not do it without introducing some non-semantic fact first.

On closer examination, Neta commits a fallacy of equivocation: in the Frank-case, the ‘context’ (we are partially ignorant of) encompasses a non-semantic or non-psychological fact (that the two persons are located in different rooms), whereas the ‘context’ in the skeptical case is supposed to be a much narrower notion, merely including the attributor's psychology.

Since Neta cannot apply the solution worked out for the Frank-case to the skeptical case, his argument breaks down between the claim of partially mistaken intention and the argument for minimal conversational rationality. His failure renders the whole hidden relativity approach implausible at last.

19 Neta 2003: 400. The example was originally devised by DeRose 1992. Rysiew 2001 comments on it to expound the problem of mistaken intention.

20 Neta 2003: 405

21 Neta 2003: 406

22 For brevity's sake, I cannot discuss Neta's explanation of skeptical puzzles. This is not needed anyway: what is at stake is Neta's *application* of his solution to the Frank-case to skeptical puzzles.

5. How to get it right: the distinction between indexicality and intelligibility

The line of argument pursued by Hofweber, Rysiew and Neta fails because it misconceives Schiffer's error-theoretical objection. More precisely, it conflates the distinction between the indexicality of 'know(s)' and the intelligibility of this particular indexicality. Accordingly, two separate philosophical endeavors were run together: the quest for an adequate model of context-sensitivity for 'know(s)', and the pursuit of an explanation as to why the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)' remains unintelligible to us in skeptical cases.

I think that the conflation roots in Hofweber's notion of hidden relativity. For it unsuccessfully tries to explain the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)' by emphasizing its cognitive inaccessibility. Even Neta's much more sophisticated argument is pervaded by this idea that unintelligibility should somehow account for context-sensitivity.

Fortunately, the issues are not that closely tied. EC's positive and negative claim can be treated separately. Adjusting one does not mean to lose the other. A separate treatment might even be required in order to comprehensively explain knowledge attributions.

Therefore, on my reading, Schiffer's error-theoretical objection raises two questions which can be answered independently.

- (i.) Which semantic model does best explain the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)'?
- (ii.) Which pragmatic model governs the intelligibility of this particular context-sensitivity?

In the second part, I attempt to answer these questions by presenting Michael Blome-Tillmann's analysis of the indexicality of 'know(s)' and by putting forward some reflections on the pragmatics of knowledge attributions.

6. A model for the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)'

Michael Blome-Tillmann (2008) puts forward a model for the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)' that might be taken as a convincing answer to the first question. He claims that 'know(s)' is a linguistically exceptional term, for it features a special combination of semantic, syntactic and pragmatic properties. More precisely, 'know(s)' proves to be indexical and factive, non-gradable and functioning as the epistemic norm of assertion.²³ The unique nature of 'know(s)' would also partly explain the difficulties we face in detecting its context-sensitivity.

For reasons of brevity, I will just present his argument for the indexicality of 'know(s)' which coincides (not coincidentally) with the refutation of the error-theoretical objection. Two further objections that establish the properties of non-gradability as well as factivity and normativity of assertion, respectively, cannot be addressed here. Moreover, the argument for the indexicality of 'know(s)' will not be assessed critically.

The aim of this section is to showcase one specific feature of a recent indexicalist approach which can accommodate most of the criticism directed at EC so far.

Blome-Tillmann's argument for the indexicality of 'know(s)' runs as follows: on closer examination, the indexicality of 'know(s)' is no more obscure than the indexicality of gradable adjectives like 'flat'. Both of them may violate the 'transparency requirement' Schiffer holds for ordinary indexicals. Imagine the following dialogue:²⁴

23 Blome-Tillmann 2008: 52

24 Blome-Tillmann 2008: 36

A: That meadow is flat.
B: But have you considered there are some molehills in it?
A: I guess I haven't.
B: So you admit that meadow isn't flat, and so you were wrong earlier?
A: Oh, c'mon! I didn't say that the meadow is flat.

Intuitively, the last sentence seems false, because we fail to spot the indexicality of 'flat' right away. But our initial confusion can be straightened out by applying so-called 'degree modifiers' like 'completely'. Compare: ²⁵

A: That meadow is flat.
B: But have you considered there are some molehills in it?
A: I guess I haven't.
B: So you admit that meadow isn't flat, and so you were wrong earlier?
A: Oh, c'mon! I didn't say that the meadow is *completely* flat.

Now we realize that A's first and last sentences are not really contradictory. And, as it turns out, the same can be done for 'know(s)'. Recall the zebra-case above:

A: I know that is a zebra.
B: But can you rule out its being a cleverly painted mule?
A: I guess I can't rule that out.
B: So you admit that you don't know that's a zebra, and so you were wrong earlier?
A: Oh, c'mon. I didn't say I know it *with absolute certainty*.²⁶

Presumably, we do not usually talk like this, but that may have reasons other than the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)'.²⁷ What matters is that the modifier phrase applied reminds us of the two epistemic standards at stake. And that the content of 'know(s)' varies accordingly.

After having considered such and similar cases, Blome-Tillmann derives the following manual for EC's handling of error-theoretical objections: First, one needs to construe parallel problem cases for gradable adjectives. Second, one smoothens those examples containing apparent contradictions by inserting modifier expressions.²⁸

Sure, this semantic model for the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)' is just one side of the coin. The finding that 'know(s)' is a unique expression with certain linguistic properties does not yet fully explain our systematic failure to recognize its context-sensitivity. But it gives us a hint: since the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)' is semantic, we are not afflicted by *semantic* blindness. Rather, the lack of intelligibility must enter on the *pragmatic* level of knowledge attributions. Therefore, let's have a closer look at the pragmatics of knowledge attributions.²⁹

25 Blome-Tillmann 2008: 39

26 Blome-Tillmann 2008: 39f.

27 Presumably, the reasons are 'know(s)'s being factive and the epistemic norm of assertion. Cf. Blome-Tillmann: 48 f.

28 Blome-Tillmann 2008: 41. Obviously, Blome-Tillmann holds that gradable adjectives are context-sensitive. That's not universally agreed.

29 Semantic blindness is not the only term we should ban from our vocabulary. A 'particular model of context-sensitivity for 'know(s)'' seems a candidate as well. After all, 'know(s)' is simply indexical. Its special linguistic behavior is due to its combination with other semantic, syntactic and pragmatic features.

7. Intelligibility and context

A generic approach to the pragmatics of knowledge attributions could look like this: basically, two types of context are operative in knowledge attributions. There is not only the attributor's context, but also the shared 'conversational score' between the attributor and (an)other interlocutor(s). The 'conversational score' could be modeled roughly in Lewisian terms: it manages all the information relevant to a conversation and makes it available to the participants.³⁰ Misunderstandings occur if we no longer share the same score.

Accordingly, 'know(s)' gets its contextual values assigned in two different stages. The epistemic standards may be determined by the attributor's psychology alone. Additionally, however, there is a parameter on the 'conversational scoreboard' that determines whether the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)' is intelligible to the speakers or not. Let's call it the intelligibility parameter.

Presumably, the intelligibility parameter does not only exist for the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)'. After all, 'know(s)' features the same context-sensitivity as any other, ordinary context-sensitive term. If this is true, their difference in intelligibility can be explained as follows:

In the case of an ordinary indexical like a personal pronoun, the mechanism is comparably simple because of two reasons: the context-sensitive expression at stake does not feature exceptional linguistic properties, and, if intelligibility is a parameter on the scoreboard, there will be an according rule of accommodation. A rule of accommodation serves the purpose of keeping a conversation alive by adjusting apparently incorrect linguistic behavior.³¹ So does the rule of accommodation for intelligibility: if the conversationalist ignores the context-sensitivity of a term, the rule assigns the contextual value that is most suitable for the current course of the conversation.

In the case of 'know(s)', things get slightly more complicated. First of all, we are dealing with a linguistically exceptional expression: 'know(s)' does not only feature the semantic property of being indexical, as indicated above. Rather, there are other features bound to interfere with the 'conversational scoreboard'. Normally, I suppose, the 'conversational scoreboard' can handle the variety of parameters pretty well. And the rules of accommodation take care of the rest.

In the skeptical case, however, there seems to be too heavy 'pragmatic traffic' on the scoreboard. As a consequence, we lose track of the intelligibility parameter. As a result, we become ignorant of the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)' and end up being puzzled by the skeptical case.³²

Obviously, I try to make sense of Neta's inconsistency. Not our communicative intentions, but the 'conversational score' provides us with the non-semantic and non-psychological contextual feature ignored in the skeptical case. When we fail to detect the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)', we are simply ignorant of the intelligibility parameter.

Sure, the model put forward is but a sketch. Nonetheless, I believe it to have the potential for explaining our 'pragmatic blindness' in respect to knowledge attributions. And even if solutions were not to be found in elaborating on my account, it highlights two areas on which proponents of EC should focus their philosophical efforts: First, EC needs to revise its notion of 'context', since it has proven to be too narrow. Second, EC needs to flesh out the pragmatics of knowledge attribution. Sure, EC is an essentially semantic thesis. But, as we have seen, it cannot refute criticism without making sense of some fundamentally pragmatic concepts.

30 Lewis 1979: 344ff.

31 Lewis 1979: 346f.

32 In detail, this process could be modeled after Lewis' explanation of 'relative modality'. Cf. Lewis 1979: 354f. Unfortunately, for reasons of brevity, I cannot discuss that here.

8. Conclusion

In my essay, I have argued that Schiffer's error-theoretical objection rests on a confusion that can be successfully disentangled by introducing the distinction between indexicality and intelligibility. Consequently, I suggested that one treats the problems the distinction frames separately by devising a semantic model for the context-sensitivity of 'know(s)' and a pragmatic model for the intelligibility of its context-sensitivity. I showcased Blome-Tillmann's semantic model and advocated a pragmatic model that operates on two different notions of context, a psychological and a conversational one.

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