

A Defense of Epistemic Contextualism

Epistemic Contextualism (EC) is a very recent and highly debated position in contemporary philosophy. It evolved primarily as a response to skeptical views on knowledge and as a way to semantically resolve epistemological paradoxes. In essence, it is the idea that the truth conditions of “know” are context sensitive, that is, they change based on the context in which “know” is used. EC holds that a subject S, knows proposition P, in context C, iff: P is true, S believes P, and S meets the epistemic standards of C, where an epistemic standard is “a standard that must be met by a true ‘knowledge’ attribution”. Moreover, EC revolves around two central theses, namely, (a) ascriptions of knowledge are context-sensitive, and (b) the context-sensitivity of knowledge ascriptions provides the basis for resolving the skeptical paradox. Epistemic contextualists such as Stewart Cohen, stand strictly by this idea, while invariantists like Earl Conee, who take a more traditional and widely accepted epistemological stance, argue the opposite, claiming that the truth conditions of epistemic propositions do not vary contextually. Conee specifically presents two main objections to EC in his piece *Contextualism Contested*, which hold that the first thesis (a) of EC is misleading and that his proposed “loose talk” alternative is far more reasonable, and that the second thesis (b) of EC is entirely false in that even if (a) holds, it does not follow that the skeptical paradox is solved. Despite these arguments made by Conee, Cohen still shows in his piece *Contextualism Defended*, that EC provides merely a plausible solution to the skeptical paradox as well as a means to appeal to both compelling skeptical arguments, and our intuitive everyday knowledge attributions. In this paper, I shall explain the way EC aims to solve the skeptical paradox, outline the arguments made by Conee, and present Cohen’s responses to these arguments in defense of EC.

As mentioned, EC is the idea that knowledge ascriptions such as “know” are context sensitive, much like the word “flat”, that is, that the meaning of the word changes in different contexts. For example, let us imagine a situation in which a subject claims that the table at which they are sitting is flat. Upon hearing this, a scientist nearby responds by claiming that, under close microscopic examination, the table is not in fact flat as it contains ridges invisible to the human eye. Both the subject and the scientist have valid reasons for ascribing truth to their claims as the context in which they refer to the “flatness” of the table is different. Specifically, the subject refers to a notion of the word “flat” that is commonly used and widely recognized, while the context in which the scientist uses “flat” demands microscopic examination and is not as intuitive. As the word “flat” is context sensitive and both the subject and the scientist are using a different meaning of the word, it is then possible for the table to be both “flat” and “not flat” without contradiction.

EC takes knowledge ascriptions to behave in this way and can therefore be used to respond to epistemic skeptical arguments. As mentioned previously, the main goal of EC is to present a solution to the skeptical paradox and to end the epistemic debate between the skeptic and the anti-skeptic. Furthermore, EC attempts to respond to the skeptical claim that it is beyond the reach of humanity to truly know anything about the external world. The skeptical paradox is comprised of three valid, yet jointly inconsistent propositions that take the following form:

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

Where (1) takes the form of the closure principle, that is, the idea that knowledge is closed under known entailment, namely, if a subject S knows a proposition P, and P entails Q, then S knows that Q. Here, (1), a conditional whose antecedent takes on any empirical claim about the external world such as "I know I have two hands", states that if this is taken to be the case, then it follows that "I know I'm not a BIV", where being a brain-in-a-vat (BIV), that is, a bodiless brain in a vat being controlled by an external force who generates perceptual experiences indistinguishable from those in the actual world, is an example of a skeptical hypothesis, that is, a scenario in which one is radically deceived about the way the world is but their experiences remain the same. In simpler terms, (1) states that if one can know some common sense empirical proposition, then it follows that they know they are not being radically deceived about their experiences. Further, (2), is some skeptical hypothesis, where the skeptic argues that one cannot be certain that they are not a BIV, or are not being radically deceived, thus challenging the certainty with which we take any empirical claims to be true, that is, our biological intuition that we can truly know anything at all. Lastly, (3), is a common sense empirical proposition such as "I know I have two hands", which is argued by the anti-skeptic.

All three propositions are independently very plausible, but clearly contradictory as a whole and cannot coexist in this way. Yet, the ongoing debate between the skeptic and anti-skeptic persists because there is sufficient evidence that supports both the truth conditions of empirical claims and the idea that we cannot be certain that we aren't BIV, and hence have any real knowledge. The inconsistency between these propositions would then force us to give one of them up, and either give way to skepticism or stand by our intuitive knowledge attributions. However, by adopting the contextualist idea that knowledge is context sensitive, the puzzle presented by the paradox can be solved. The skeptical paradox, much like the example regarding the word "flat", presents the conflict that arises from attributing the same meaning to a word that is being used in completely different contexts in the same argument. The reason for the paradox is that we are mistaken in looking at the word "know" in the same context, that is, we are wrongly assuming that the standards are the same for attributing knowledge to both the skeptic and the anti-skeptic. While the anti-skeptical claim takes the word "know" as it is used regularly by

fluent speakers, the skeptical claim is referring to a notion of “knows” that requires much more certainty. Specifically, contextualists claim that these varying contexts set either very high epistemic standards, that is, standards that are at play in skeptical hypotheses and might require one to rule out the possibility that they are being radically deceived about their perceptual experiences, or very low epistemic standards, ones that are at play in most ordinary contexts, namely, those that attribute one knowledge of basic empirical propositions without the need to rule out skeptical possibilities. In this way, it is then possible for one to accept (3) and reject (2) in low-standard contexts, preserving ordinary knowledge of empirical claims, while accepting (2) and rejecting (3) in high-standard contexts, giving way to compelling skeptical arguments. Further, EC maintains that (1) holds in every context, and that our meta-judgment that (1), (2) and (3) are inconsistent is false. In accepting this theory of contextualism, we no longer face the conflict of having very valid, yet jointly inconsistent claims in the skeptical paradox and it becomes safe for one to make claims such as, “I know I have two hands, yet I don’t know that I’m not a BIV”, without contradiction.

Despite the compelling nature of contextualism as an explanation for our shift in intuitive epistemic judgement and a solution to the skeptical paradox, EC has faced and continues to face many criticisms in contemporary epistemology. Earl Conee in particular, who adopts the more traditional view of invariantism, raises interesting questions and presents two very valid arguments against EC in his piece *Contextualism Contested*. His first argument attacks the first thesis of EC (a) in holding that “we cannot validly infer that contextual differences yield differing truth conditions simply because differing standards are often applied”. In other words, to accept that the context in which we use the word “know” changes, does not imply that its core meaning changes as well. Moreover, Conee claims that it does not, and offers an alternative position. Under his invariantist light, Conee holds that it is more reasonable to accept the idea that people simply use knowledge ascriptions loosely (“loose talk” in Conee’s terms), to attribute knowledge to themselves in everyday contexts, and that upon reflection, fluent speakers come to this realization. Moreover, Conee claims that fluent speakers are able to acknowledge that they loosely use the word “know”, because when asked if they “really and truly” know (“really and truly” test in Conee’s terms), they begin to doubt or deny that they do. According to Conee, this reflective acknowledgement indicates that the meaning of “know” remains the same, and it is the way in which it is used in everyday contexts that shifts the standards of knowledge attribution. Conee anticipates that the contextualist may respond to this argument by claiming that asking a fluent speaker if they “really and truly” know, imposes more stringent truth conditions for knowledge, explaining why they may say to no longer know what they previously did under more lenient standards. He however, proceeds to note that the contextualist fails in taking too seriously the view that the “really and truly” test changes the truth conditions of not only knowledge ascriptions but other casually used predicates. He states that although possible for this to be the case, it is not in fact what occurs when one is presented with such question. Rather, they are setting aside “loose talk” and revealing the truth behind the casually discussed topic.

Conee proceeds to present his second argument against EC, specifically, an attack on the second thesis (b) of EC which holds that even if we accept EC and take it to be the case that knowledge ascriptions are in fact context-sensitive (a), it does not strictly follow that EC solves the skeptical paradox in two specific ways. First, in that EC lacks explanation, that is, reasons for one's intuitions regarding (1), (2) and (3). Conee states that "satisfied truth conditions do not explain plausibility", and EC must explain why speakers have mastered the context sensitivity of knowledge ascriptions well enough to let it guide their judgement yet have remained unaware of it until recently. In stating this, Conee is arguing that EC is too vague and unclear about what exactly these high and low epistemic standards are, as it could very well be the case that although the standards in skeptical contexts are high, they need not be unreachably high, in which case one would claim they know they're not being radically deceived about their perceptual experiences (BIV), no longer having a solution to the skeptical paradox. The second way in which Conee claims EC doesn't solve the skeptical paradox, is that it lacks satisfactory responses to "epistemically consequential details", as "it may be that all philosophical discussions are carried out in one strict, 'really and truly' context". That is, the idea that EC is irrelevant to philosophical issues as philosophers are strictly concerned with the "really and truly" contexts in their discussions and most who consider it still sincerely deny it.

In his piece, *Contextualism Defended*, Stewart Cohen defends the views of EC and responds to the arguments made by Conee above. First and foremost, he challenges Conee's alternative invariantist position about "loose talk", which holds that a fluent speaker's reflective response to the "really and truly" test reveals the acknowledged truth value of their statements, by stating that under the pressures of skepticism, fluent speakers "tend to deny that (they) know even the most conspicuous facts of perception, the clearest memories, etc", despite Conee's claim that only such cases would pass the "really and truly" test. This supports the contextualist idea that the high standards set in such contexts would make one's skeptical denials true. For this reason, Cohen states that Conee's alternative account "incorrectly predicts that we should hang on to such knowledge ascriptions, even in the face of skeptical 'really and truly' challenges".

Cohen responds to the first part of Conee's second attack on thesis (b) of EC, which states that contextualism, if true, does not solve the skeptical paradox in that its vagueness about epistemic standards allows for the possibility of having reachably high standards in skeptical contexts, by stating that although he is right in that EC does not explain what exactly the epistemic standards are in particular contexts, this problem can be solved by accepting the fluent speaker's shifty intuitive judgments as well as the possibility that "standards in everyday contexts are low and attainable, and standards in skeptical contexts are high and unattainable". Moreover, Cohen claims that despite the contextualist lacking proof about the correctness of our intuitive judgements, contextualism still offers a non-skeptical solution to the skeptical paradox as well as a means to both preserve the truth values of our everyday knowledge ascriptions, and appeal to compelling skeptical arguments.

In response to Conee's second attack on thesis (b) of EC which holds that "there is a single standard that is always in effect in philosophical discussions of knowledge", namely the high standard set by the "really and truly" context, Cohen states that the idea that ascriptions of knowledge are context-sensitive in itself, will not settle the main philosophical questions about knowledge. As mentioned previously, the intent of EC to "provide an explanation for the intuitive data in a way that can explain the appeal of skepticism while still preserving the truth of our everyday knowledge ascriptions", which is why its theses provides no philosophical significance of this nature. Furthermore, Cohen claims it is important to note that even in discussing philosophy there is in fact often a shift between the idea that we "know" and the idea that we don't. Specifically, when alternating between discussions about the Gettier problem and discussions about skepticism, we are too alternating between the way we use the word "know" and the meaning we give it. That is, when discussing Gettier cases we attribute knowledge to ourselves and use these epistemic intuitions as a basis for constructing our theory of knowledge, yet when discussing skepticism, we make claims about our inability to know anything about the external world, that is, the very things we claimed to know when discussing Gettier cases. If we appeal to Conee's claim that "all philosophical discussions are carried out in one strict, 'really and truly' context", then attempting to derive a theory of knowledge on the basis of the low standards set by everyday contexts, would be irrelevant to philosophy. This is a liability.

Despite the fact that EC is unable to define the specific standards set by different contexts and prove the correctness of our intuitive judgements about knowledge, it is able to explain the appeal of skeptical arguments and validate the truth of our everyday knowledge ascriptions. Moreover, it provides a plausible solution to the skeptical paradox that spares us from having choose between a strictly skeptical or anti-skeptical position. Although EC may not particularly settle the main philosophical questions about knowledge, that it can do this much, makes it as plausible as any invariantist position.

References:

1. Cohen, Stewart. *Contextualism Defended*, 2005.
2. Conee, Earl. *Contextualism Contested*, 2005.