

## Attributing Knowledge of the Virtues of Contextualism

William A. Bauer

Published in *The Reasoner* 2(8): 6-7, August 2008

Contextualism in epistemology claims two virtues: first, that it can explain the power of sceptical scenarios – such as the possibility that one is a brain-in-a-vat (BIV) with identical experiences to those in real life – to challenge knowledge claims; second, that despite the power of such sceptical scenarios, it can show why we do, in fact, know many things – such as that one has hands. The basic contextualist strategy is to show that there are (at least) two standards for knowledge: low (i.e., ordinary or non-sceptical) and high (i.e., sceptical) standards. A shift in the standards for knowledge occurs when sceptical possibilities are raised by an interlocutor, thus creating a high-standards epistemic context in which participants don't possess knowledge. Anthony Brueckner (2004: The Elusive Virtues of Contextualism, *Philosophical Studies* 118, 401-405) aims to show that he cannot truthfully claim to know the virtues of contextualism, because the epistemic context in which he tries to state the virtues will have high standards established by the raising of sceptical possibilities necessary to explain contextualism. Thus, Brueckner constantly finds himself in a sceptical context which precludes him from knowing anything, including the virtues of contextualism. This implies that no one can know the virtues of contextualism.

Perhaps the virtues of contextualism are elusive to a solo epistemologist, as in Brueckner's situation. However, I will argue that there are possible conditions under which a friend – a possible attributer, to Brueckner, of knowledge – can truthfully attribute knowledge of the virtues of contextualism to Brueckner. According to contextualism, psychological features of the attributer determine the epistemic context for the truth-conditions of knowledge sentences. So, if the attributer is kept in a low-standards context, then the attributer can truthfully attribute knowledge of the virtues of contextualism to Brueckner. But how can the friend remain in a low-standards context if Brueckner must cite sceptical scenarios in explaining the virtues of contextualism?

I propose that the friend may be kept in a low-standards context provided two conditions are satisfied: (a) Brueckner does not raise *specific* sceptical possibilities, since this would cause his friend to consider those possibilities, thus shifting the epistemic context from low to high standards; and, (b) the friend does not presuppose *specific* sceptical possibilities, which would activate high standards for knowledge, thus falsifying her judgment about Brueckner's epistemic state. How does this work? The framework for both conditions, I claim, is found in the contextualism of David Lewis (1996: Elusive Knowledge, *The Australian Journal of Philosophy* 74, 549-567).

Concerning condition (a), I first invoke the Rule of Attention (Lewis 1996: 559): for any given possibility, "if in *this* context we are not properly ignoring it but attending to it, then for us now it is a relevant alternative," i.e., a possibility requiring ruling out in order to attain knowledge. No matter how far-fetched the possibility seems, if in this context we attend to it by raising the possibility, then it is relevant to the standards for knowledge within that context. But, what counts as a possibility? Lewis (1996: 552) says a possibility, *P*, needs to be specific enough such that anything we could say about *P* will apply to all sub-cases of *P*. Thus, if *P* has sub-cases such that what we say about *P* does *not* apply to the sub-cases of *P*, then *P* is not specific enough to count as an actual possibility. This implies that if Brueckner carefully suggests a *general* sceptical point-of-view or attitude, without invoking specific sceptical possibilities such as the BIV, evil demon, or dreaming scenarios, then he will not cause his friend to attend to those possibilities. In order to do this while expositing the virtues of contextualism, Brueckner might say, for example, 'according to the sceptic we might be mistaken about all we know', instead of raising specific possibilities. Thereby, the specter of scepticism is presented and subsumes several sub-cases without raising, and thus causing the friend to attend to, those sceptical sub-cases or possibilities. Thus, the friend would properly ignore those possibilities.

However, supposing momentarily that Brueckner needs to raise specific sceptical possibilities to exposit contextualism, I suggest that he could issue anti-sceptical prefatory comments in order to diminish the impact of scepticism on the epistemic context,<sup>1</sup> to the effect that his friend needn't really attend to specific

sceptical possibilities. By ‘not really attend to’ I mean that although the friend becomes aware of a possibility, she does not take it seriously so that it does not affect her reasoning about Brueckner’s epistemic status. So, for example, Brueckner might say to his friend, ‘I’m about to discuss the BIV scenario, but we should not take it seriously – it’s just for the sake of explaining contextualism’. Then, the friend avoids attending to the sceptical possibility with serious intent, yet enough is said to explain the power of sceptical scenarios, and thus exposit the virtues of contextualism.

Concerning condition (b), according to the Rule of Conservatism (Lewis 1996: 559) if those around us “normally do ignore certain possibilities, and it is common knowledge that they do,” we too can (defeasibly) ignore those possibilities. For example, in some contexts of inquiry physicists ignore the possibility of friction in carrying out experiments. We can imagine that Brueckner’s friend hails from a context of inquiry in which sceptical possibilities are consistently ignored. Thus, we can say that the friend starts off in a context of inquiry in which she does not presuppose sceptical possibilities.

Thus, if Brueckner’s friend doesn’t presuppose any specific sceptical scenarios – condition (b) – *and* she doesn’t attend to any in virtue of what Brueckner says – condition (a) – then the friend will remain in a low-standards context. She can thereby truthfully judge that Brueckner knows the virtues of contextualism. In other words, although by himself Brueckner cannot know the virtues of contextualism, if he speaks generally enough and has the right kind of friend, that friend can truthfully attribute knowledge of the virtues of contextualism to Brueckner.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Tim Loughlin for suggesting this idea to me.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Albert Casullo for his comments.