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Do ‘Contextualist Cases’ Support Contextualism?

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Abstract

This paper addresses the argument from ‘contextualist cases’—such as for instance DeRose’s Bank cases—to attributor contextualism. It is argued that these cases do not decide the case against invariantism and that the debate between contextualists and invariantists will have to be settled on broader theoretical grounds.

Classical invariantism (CI) in epistemology is the view that the truth of an attribution of knowledge of a proposition to an agent depends only on the agent’s doxastic and epistemic position towards the proposition and the proposition’s truth value. As opposed to that, attributor contextualism (AC) claims that the truth of a knowledge attribution depends in addition on facts about the conversational context in which the attribution of knowledge is made. Champions of AC, perhaps most notably Keith DeRose (1992, 2009) and Stewart Cohen (1999), have claimed that the following argument supports AC vis-à-vis CI. Consider first this story:

K-LOW. Ernie, Bert and Grover are on their way to L.A. airport to take a flight to New York. Grover is sitting in the back of the car listening to music on his Ipod. Ernie and Bert receive a text message from a friend who asks whether they will stop over in Chicago and suggests to meet for coffee if they do. Not much hangs on whether they meet this friend: they have recently seen him and are due to see him again in a few weeks. Having realised that they simply don’t know, Bert says, “I remember that Grover took a copy of the itinerary with him. We might

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ask him.” Ernie agrees, “Yes, let’s ask him, he’ll know whether the flight has a layover in Chicago.”

Contextualists observe (a) that it is highly plausible that Ernie’s attribution of knowledge here is *conversationally appropriate* and (b) that there is a strong intuition that what he says is *true*.

Now (try for a moment to) forget what I just said and consider this story:

K-HIGH. Ernie, Bert and Grover are on their way to L.A. airport to take a flight to New York. Grover is sitting in the back of the car listening to music on his Ipod. Ernie and Bert receive a text message from their boss telling them that they are to pick up certain documents at the airport in Chicago and that it is of utmost importance that they do so—the future of the company depends on it. Ernie and Bert know that New York flights often have layovers in Chicago. Having realised that they simply don’t know whether their flight has a layover there, Ernie says, “I remember that Grover took a copy of the itinerary with him. We might ask him.” But, as Bert points out, the itinerary may contain a misprint or they may have changed the schedule at last minute. In view of this, Ernie concedes, “I guess you’re right. Let’s not ask Grover. He doesn’t know whether the flight has a layover in Chicago either.”¹

Contextualists notice (a) that it is highly plausible that Ernie’s denial of knowledge here is *conversationally appropriate* and (b) that there is a strong intuition that what he says is *true*.

Such intuitions of conversational propriety and truth, claim contextualists, is excellent evidence that the relevant claims are in fact true. That is to say, however, that K-LOW and K-HIGH constitute evidence that both Ernie’s attribution of knowledge in K-LOW and his denial of knowledge in K-HIGH are both true. But now recall that,

¹ K-LOW and K-HIGH are in essence Stewart Cohen’s (1999) Airport case. DeRose (1992, 2009) has used a different pair of cases, his Bank cases, for the same purpose. Notice that my versions of the cases feature attributions of knowledge *whether P*. This should be harmless, however, for two reasons: first, knowledge *whether P* is very plausibly constituted either by knowledge that *P* (in case *P* is true) or by knowledge that not-*P* (in case not-*P* is true). As a result, if CI fails for attributions of knowledge *whether P*, there is every reason to think that it must also fail for attributions of knowledge that *P*. Second, the cases could, given a generous investment of space, be converted into cases of knowledge-that attributions. For a recipe how to do this see DeRose (2009: 62-3).

according to CI, whether Grover knows that the flight has a layover in Chicago depends only on whether his doxastic and epistemic position towards this proposition is strong enough and on its truth-value. Since all of these factors remain constant across K-LOW and K-HIGH, CI will predict that either Ernie's attribution of knowledge in K-LOW or his denial of knowledge in K-HIGH must be false. Since, as contextualists argue, AC can secure the result that both Ernie's attribution of knowledge in K-LOW and his denial of knowledge in K-HIGH are true, cases like K-LOW and K-HIGH provide reason to favour AC over CI. In fact, DeRose even suggests that such cases provide "the best grounds for accepting contextualism." (2009: 47)

But how good is this argument, really? Consider the following story:

A-LOW. Statler and Waldorf, a couple of committed art aficionados, have just arrived at their friend Kermit's house, who had recently deceased. Kermit's living room features a painting that bears the signature of Gonzo, a very famous artist. For Statler and Waldorf not much hinges on whether it is a Gonzo: they don't intend to buy the work, they don't consider whether it's worth taking the risk to steal it etc. For the first time in years, Statler and Waldorf enter Kermit's living room. Statler immediately notices the painting, sees that it bears the signature of Gonzo and says to Waldorf: "Look, it's a Gonzo. I didn't know Kermit had such good taste."

In my books (a) it is highly plausible that Statler's attribution of authorship is *conversationally appropriate* and (b) there is a strong intuition that what Statler says is *true*.

Now (try for a moment to) forget what I just said and consider this story:

A-HIGH. Statler and Waldorf, a couple of committed art aficionados, have just arrived at their friend Kermit's house, who had recently deceased. Kermit's living room features a painting that bears the signature of Gonzo, a very famous artist. For Statler and Waldorf it's of crucial importance whether it is a Gonzo. Kermit's belongings are up for sale and Statler and Waldorf are considering buying the piece for a considerable amount of money. As they are deliberating whether to go ahead with the deal, Statler points out that Gonzo is one of the most widely

forged artists and that not long ago there was a big scandal concerning forged Gonzos in the area. Waldorf adds that Kermit never knew a lot about art and that due to his trusting nature he was exactly the kind of person who would have fallen for such a scam. Statler then draws attention to the fact that the execution of the painting is unusually sloppy for Gonzo and Statler points out that the painting is stylistically and thematically very different from other works by Gonzo from the period during which, according to the date on the painting, it was created. In view of the evidence, Statler concludes: "This is not a Gonzo."

Again, in my books, (a) it is highly plausible that Statler's denial of authorship is *conversationally appropriate* and (b) there is a strong intuition that what Statler says is *true*.

Given that such intuitions of conversational propriety and truth constitute excellent evidence that the relevant claims are in fact true, we should now have excellent evidence that Statler's attribution of authorship in A-LOW and his denial of authorship in A-HIGH are both true. Notice that if they are both true, any invariantist account of attributions of authorship according to which the truth of an attribution of authorship depends only on who created the piece must be false. However, I take it, hardly anyone will be tempted to reject invariantism about attributions of authorship on this basis. The intuitions of conversational propriety and truth in A-LOW and A-HIGH do not move us away from invariantism in the direction of contextualism. In consequence, the anti-invariantist import of the argument from K-LOW and K-HIGH will be weakened. It will be even further weakened if, as I will argue momentarily, invariantists can give parallel accounts of the intuitions in both pairs of cases.

Let's suppose that the piece is by Gonzo so that Statler's attribution of authorship in A-LOW is true, and his denial in A-HIGH false. One crucial question then concerns how we can explain Statler's mistake. I think that there are two crucial ingredients in the correct explanation: first, compared to A-LOW, *the higher stakes at issue in A-HIGH make it reasonable for him to consider and base his judgement on a wider range of evidence bearing on the question whether the painting is a Gonzo*. While in A-LOW it is entirely reasonable for Statler to consider and base his judgement solely on the fact that the piece bears Gonzo's signature, given the higher stakes at issue in A-HIGH, it is also reasonable there for Statler to consider and base his judgement

on further evidence bearing on the question such as how the claim that the painting is by Gonzo fits with other relevant facts he knows. However, second, *the additional evidence considered is misleading*, it points Statler away from truth, in the direction of falsehood. The explanation of his mistake also serves to explain our intuition of conversational propriety and truth. Just like Statler we, the evaluators of the case, take the evidence at face value—naturally as the description of the case provides no reason not to do so. Our intuitions go awry because they are guided by misleading evidence.

Now, consider moderate invariantism, according to which the doxastic and epistemic standards for knowledge are attainably low. Suppose, furthermore, Grover satisfies these standards and his belief is also true so that it qualifies as knowledge in both K-LOW and K-HIGH. I think that moderate invariantists can avail themselves of an explanation of the mistake in K-HIGH parallel to the one just provided for A-HIGH: first, compared to K-LOW, *the higher stakes operative in K-HIGH make it reasonable for Ernie to consider and base his judgement on a wider range of evidence bearing on the question whether Grover knows*. While in K-LOW it is entirely reasonable for Ernie to consider and base his judgement as to whether Grover knows solely on the basis of fact that he has an itinerary, in K-HIGH it becomes reasonable for him to consider and base his judgement as to whether Grover knows on further evidence bearing on the question such as whether he has eliminated all error possibilities that, given the importance of the matter, appear relevant. The fact that he hasn't eliminated some apparently relevant error possibilities constitutes evidence that his belief does not qualify as knowledge. However, second, *the additional evidence considered is misleading*, it points Ernie away from truth, in the direction of falsehood. Again, the explanation of his mistake also serves to explain our intuition of conversational propriety and truth. Just like Ernie we, the evaluators of the case, take the evidence at face value—naturally as the description of the case provides no reason not to do so. Our intuitions go awry because they are guided by misleading evidence.

Some may be tempted to object that the two pairs of cases aren't analogous. After all, isn't it the case when we consider K-LOW and K-HIGH *together*, the intuitions of propriety and truth remain, while if we consider A-LOW and A-HIGH *together*, the intuitions of propriety and truth disappear? I am not convinced. When I consider K-LOW and K-HIGH together and manage to convince myself that the

intuitions in K-LOW are on the right track, I am tempted to regard the error possibility at issue in K-HIGH as simply irrelevant. And if I manage to convince myself that the error possibility in K-HIGH is relevant, I am tempted to think that the attribution of knowledge in K-LOW is simply false. I agree that my intuitions may not be worth much here (as I have fairly strong invariantist inclinations). It is noteworthy, however, that even contextualists concede as much. Here is DeRose:

If I were presented with the high- and low-standards cases together, then the pressure to give the same verdict about whether the subject in question knows in the two cases would be great—and greater than is the pressure to rule that one or the other of the claims made within the cases (that the subject ‘knows’ in [K-LOW], and doesn’t ‘know’ in [K-HIGH]) must be false. (DeRose 2009: 49, n.2)

In view of these considerations, DeRose (2009: 49) himself urges that the cases should be considered separately.² Given that he is right on this score, we need not fear that the cases are disanalogous in the way envisaged by the objection.

What shall we make of all this? Well, we have two accounts of cases like K-LOW and K-HIGH before us: one attributor contextualist, the other (moderate) invariantist. The contextualist account, let us suppose, gives a fully charitable account of our intuitions about these cases. It predicts that both speakers speak truly. As opposed to that, the invariantist account tells us that the speaker in K-LOW speaks the truth while the speaker in K-HIGH speaks falsely. Contextualists find it desirable that the intuitions are accounted for in a fully charitable way and claim an advantage for their view. However, as we have seen, invariantists might respond that they don’t see that a charitable account is required. After all the cases are, as far as they are concerned at any rate, relevantly analogous to other cases for which we expressly *don’t* want a fully charitable such account. So, how do we decide which account to adopt? Perhaps we might say that when we have two accounts of a set of intuitions and all else is equal we should opt for the more charitable one. (In other words, even if we can’t use the cases to talk an invariantist out of his position, there is reason to favour contextualism in the sense that it is the view

² Note that this is the reason why, before advancing to the second of each pair of cases, I asked you to (try to) forget my description of the first one.

a neutral person has reason to adopt.) But then the invariantist might call into doubt whether all else is really equal here. For starters, it has been claimed and even conceded by some contextualists that CI has default plausibility. Thus, Patrick Rysiew writes:

[W]e seem, if anything, to be ‘intuitive invariantists’. As one leading contextualist [i.e. Cohen 1999: 78] says, many “resist [the contextualist] thesis — some fiercely. Moreover, those who do accept the thesis, generally do so only as a result of being convinced by philosophical reflection.” (Rysiew 2009, §3)

If this is correct, it is not clear that we start from a neutral position. If we don’t, if we start from invariantism, and need to be talked out of it, it is not clear that the argument from cases like K-LOW and K-HIGH will do the job. Perhaps even more significantly, CI, or at any rate, the version of moderate CI outlined above, is (all else equal) *simpler* than its contextualist rival. After all, the explanatory principle it invokes in order to explain our intuitions in these cases—the speaker makes a mistake due to misleading evidence—is one that any theory of knowledge will have to invoke at some point. To see this consider the following case: *A* tells me that *S* knows that *P* and, trusting *A*, I judge (and perhaps later assert) that *S* knows that *P*. However, *S* doesn’t even believe *P*. Here *A*’s testimony constitutes misleading evidence that *S* knows that *P*, which explains my mistaken judgement (and assertion). As opposed to that, contextualists propose to invoke a new explanatory resource (a contextualist semantics) in order to account for these cases. The present version of invariantism makes recourse to fewer explanatory resources and is thus simpler than its contextualist rival. Does this mean that CI is preferable to AC after all? I don’t think it shows quite as much. For suppose that AC outperformed CI when it comes to other epistemological problems or perhaps CI can solve certain problems only by complicating its story where AC needn’t. In this way, it might still turn out that AC is preferable to CI. What I think does transpire is that the debate between contextualists and invariantists won’t be decided on the basis of cases like K-LOW and K-HIGH, that the argument that such cases favour AC over CI doesn’t go through. We need to compare the relative merits of the two views on a broader scale. I am optimistic for invariantism. But, of course, I could not hope to argue as much

here.³

1 References

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