Relativism and conservatism

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Abstract: Relativism and contextualism have been suggested as candidate semantics for "knowledge" sentences. I argue that relativism faces a problem concerning the preservation of beliefs in memory. Contextualism has been argued to face a similar problem. I argue that contextualists, unlike relativists, can respond to the concern. The overall upshot is that contextualism is superior to relativism in at least one important respect.

1 Relativism

Epistemic relativism, as I will understand it, is the following position:[1]

> Epistemic relativism
>
> *INV*. Sentences of the form "S knows/doesn't know that p" invariably express the same proposition independently of the context of use, namely, that S knows/doesn't know that p.[2]

[1] See e.g. Kompa, 2005; Brogaard, 2008; Richard, 2008; MacFarlane, 2014 for proponents of relativism.

[2] I assume throughout that "S" and "p" don't contain relevantly context-sensitive material. I will further ignore tense as well as relativity to possible worlds. Nothing should depend on these simplifications. See footnote 9 for some further considerations about tense.

REL. These propositions have truth-values relative to an epistemic standard (and there is no one "correct" epistemic standard).

BEL. A belief that p in context C is correct iff p is true relative to the epistemic standard of C.

REL can be spelled out further by specifying the conditions under which a given knowledge proposition is true relative to a given epistemic standard. Different relativists will offer different accounts. The rough idea will be the following: Epistemic standards range from the lowest to the highest. The higher the epistemic standard, the more demanding it is for a knowledge attribution to be true relative to that standard. Assume, for instance, that knowledge is a matter of ruling out relevant alternatives.[3] We can then say that higher epistemic standards require more error-possibilities to be ruled out before one gains knowledge relative to them.

BEL uses a notion of *the* epistemic standard of a given context. What determines this standard is a vexed issue and various accounts can be offered. Most relativists will agree that the epistemic standard in a given context depends on parameters such as what is at stake for the speaker and/or her audience or which error-possibilities they happen to have in mind. Suppose, for instance, that you're thinking about whether your bank will be open on the next Saturday. Your epistemic standard may be more or less demanding depending on how important it is to be right about the opening hours of the bank or on whether you take seriously the possibility, say, that the bank has changed its hours since your last visit.[4]

These rough ideas suffice for present purposes, and the subsequent considerations should apply independently of how exactly relativism is spelled out. To clarify the view a little further, let's briefly look at its motivation.

[3] See e.g. Dretske, 1981.

[4] The bank example is due to DeRose (1992: 913).

One important reason for accepting relativism lies in its ability to resolve certain types of epistemological puzzles. Let "p" stand for some ordinary proposition such as that your bank will be open on the next Saturday. Now consider the following claims:

> *P1*. In contexts with low epistemic standards, you are inclined to believe that you know that p. In contexts with high epistemic standards, you are inclined to believe that you don't know that p.
>
> *P2*. The two mentioned beliefs are contradictory.
>
> *P3*. If two beliefs are contradictory, one of them must be wrong.
>
> *P4*. If one of the mentioned beliefs were wrong, you wouldn't be inclined to hold it.

P1 to P4 are inconsistent, and yet each of these claims seems plausible for many instantiations of p. Take the proposition that your bank will open on the next Saturday. You might be inclined to believe that you know this when little is at stake. When it becomes more important to be right, though, or when you start wondering whether the bank may have changed its hours, you might be inclined to believe that you don't (P1).[5] These beliefs seem to be contradictory (P2). One would correspondingly expect that one of them must be wrong (P3). But if one of the beliefs is wrong, it's puzzling why you are inclined to hold it when you find yourself in the respective context (P4).

Relativism comes to the rescue by undermining P3. Given INV, your beliefs in low and high standards contexts are contradictory. For, the propositions you believe will be propositions to the effect that you know or don't know that p; and there is no epistemic standard relative to which these propositions are true together. Even so, both beliefs may be correct in their respective context given REL and BEL. After all, it may be true relative to low epistemic standards that you know that p and true relative to high epistemic standards that you don't. In this way, relativism carves out a space for what is sometimes called "faultless disagreement" (Kölbel, 2003).

[5] Cases such as DeRose's (1992: 913) already mentioned bank cases and Cohen's (1999: 58) airport case are typically taken to illustrate the respective variation.

Relativism is by now one of the standard options for dealing with epistemological puzzles of the indicated type. I will argue that relativism is likely false though because it is in tension with an immensely plausible principle familiar from the literature on the epistemology of memory (sections 2 and 3). This raises the question of whether the closely related view of epistemic contextualism faces a similar concern. Common opinion holds that it does. I will argue that it doesn't (section 4). The overall upshot will be that contextualism is superior to relativism in at least one important respect.

2 A memory puzzle for relativism

Here is the memory principle that spells doom for relativism: We sometimes forget things, and we sometimes acquire evidence that speaks against a belief we hold or undercuts the original evidence we had. In such cases, we may lose (or give up) beliefs once formed. Beliefs stay with us, though, in the absence of such conditions. In short:

> **CONS** People retain beliefs once they have formed them—modulo cognitive shortcomings and incoming evidence.

CONS seems exceedingly plausible. This is reflected in the contemporary debate on memory. Owens (2000: 154), for instance, maintains that a subject holding a given belief "will abandon the belief and resume inquiry into the matter just when he receives evidence sufficient to make doubt reasonable." And McGrath (2007: 1) concurs that "[w]e are all conservatives, at least when it comes to belief retention. We are forgetful, of course, but we typically do not abandon our beliefs unless we have special reasons to do so." I assume that the "special reasons" McGrath has in mind here are supposed to constitute incoming evidence of the indicated kind.[6]

CONS is an intuitively plausible psychological claim. It gains further support from the following, widely held epistemological principle: "If *S* has a justified attitude *D* toward proposition *P* at *t*, and

[6] To be sure, CONS must be construed as a principle about dispositional rather than occurrent belief (to the extent that we want to draw such a distinction). Occurrent beliefs come and go much more easily.

if *S* retains attitude *D* toward *P* until the later time *t'*, via memory, then, *ceteris paribus*, *S* is still permitted to have attitude *D* toward *P* at *t'*." (Goldman, 2009: 323) Here, the "*ceteris paribus* phrase is intended to accommodate the possibility that new evidence is acquired between *t* and *t'* " (324). In line with standard terminology, we can refer to this principle as "preservationism."[7] Preservationism doesn't directly entail CONS. It entails that we are generally *permitted* to hold on to our beliefs; according to CONS we *actually do*. Still, preservationism lends prima facie support to CONS. After all, why would people give up perfectly permissible beliefs (unless, of course, they forget)?

It's hard to deny CONS. But the principle immediately leads to a problem for relativism. The problem in a nutshell is this: According to relativism, and BEL in particular, an initially correct belief may turn out incorrect if epistemic standards shift. According to CONS, we will still hold on to the belief. This leads to lots of incorrect beliefs and thus to an implausible error theory.

Here is the argument in more detail. To begin with, note that situations of the following kind will occur if relativism holds:

[7] See Annis, 1980: 330f; Harman, 1986: 29f; Huemer, 1999: 351; Owens, 2000: 155; McGrath, 2007: 14; Bernecker, 2008: 126; Goldman, 2009 for further proponents of preservationism in the above sense. One may even find a commitment to preservationism in Plato when he rhetorically asks "whether a man who has learned, and remembers, can fail to know" (*Theaetetus*, 163d). Frise, 2017 is a rare opponent of preservationism. Note that "preservationism" is sometimes used to label more controversial views (Frise, 2017: 487f). As stated, preservationism says, roughly, that justified beliefs remain justified. A stronger claim would be that beliefs retain whatever justificatory status they initially have. Senor (2014), for instance, takes preservationism to entail not only that justified beliefs remain justified but also that "a belief that had no justification when it was formed […] will be unjustified when recalled." The latter claim conflicts with the popular idea of "generativism," according to which memory can generate, rather than just preserve, justification (see e.g. Lackey, 2005, 2007; Senor, 2007 for discussion).

(i) At time t1, Hannah finds herself in a context, L, governed by a low epistemic standard.

(ii) The proposition that Peter knows that p is true relative to the epistemic standard of L.

(iii) At time t2, Hannah finds herself in a context, H, governed by a high epistemic standard.

(iv) The proposition that Peter knows that p is not true relative to the epistemic standard of H.

Now suppose that, at t1, Hannah forms the belief that Peter knows that p. This shouldn't be unusual according to relativism because, by BEL, (i) and (ii), the belief is correct. Assume further that Hannah neither receives relevant evidence between t1 and t2 nor forgets (i.e. that the "modulo" conditions in CONS aren't satisfied). This shouldn't be unusual either. The problem for relativism now is that, given relativism and CONS, all situations that satisfy the indicated assumptions lead to incorrect beliefs. The reasoning is simple: Given CONS, Hannah will still believe that Peter knows that p at t2. But given BEL, (iii) and (iv), Hannah's belief will be incorrect at t2.

We can devise a similar kind of reasoning for cases where Hannah starts out in a high standards context forming a belief to the effect that Peter doesn't know that p and later moves to a low standards context. Such situations will lead to incorrect beliefs too.

One might be willing to bite the bullet in the light of such outcomes. Maybe ordinary thinkers simply make mistakes of the indicated kind. For the relativist, however, biting the bullet should be unattractive. After all, relativism is at least partially motivated by a desire to avoid the ascription

of mistaken beliefs. For instance, the puzzle mentioned at the outset can be used to motivate relativism only if we are unhappy with an error theoretic approach to P4.[8,9]

Note that, in the argument above, I have focused on third-person rather than first-person knowledge claims. Hannah has beliefs about Peter's knowledge state rather than her own. This strengthens the case against relativism in two respects (a third respect will become apparent later).

First, it arguably makes little sense for Hannah to store beliefs to the effect that she herself knows that p. Instead, she would presumably just store that p.[10] Similarly, instead of storing that she doesn't know that p, she would presumably just store nothing at all. Correspondingly, the indicated memory problem may appear marginal as far as first-person knowledge beliefs are concerned because we have so few of them. In contrast, third-person knowledge beliefs populate our minds, and the range of relevant beliefs extends if we take into account not just knowledge-that, but also

[8] We already saw that Plato plausibly subscribes to preservationism. Interestingly enough, he also uses this principle to construct an argument against (a form of) relativism (*Theaetetus*, 163c-164b; see 166a-168c for a candidate response). There are parallels to my argument, I think, but I won't enter this exegetical minefield. Thanks to Evan Strevell for making me aware of Plato's discussion.

[9] Problems similar to the one described may also arise for theories where the objects of belief are temporally neutral propositions. See Bernecker, 2008: 159; Matthen, 2010: 6ff for pertinent discussion. To avoid these problems, we can replace CONS by a principle to the effect that we retain *temporally updated versions of* our beliefs (e.g. the belief that it is raining gets updated after a while to the belief that it was raining a while ago, etc.). I'll leave open whether this modification is unproblematic. Just note that my objection against epistemic relativism could easily be restated in terms of the suggested modified version of CONS. What about relativism about predicates of personal taste (MacFarlane, 2014)? The indicated memory problem might arise here as well, but it is certainly less severe. Taste standards plausibly change much less frequently over time than epistemic standards (see below for discussion). More importantly, taste beliefs that are incorrect due to a change in taste standards will be rectified as soon as we retry the relevant type of food. No similar mechanism is available in the case of knowledge.

[10] See Adler, 2012: 254 for a similar observation.

the various forms of knowledge-wh. Beliefs like "Peter knows when the last metro goes," for instance, play a key role in our everyday endeavors.[11] If we retain these beliefs in line with CONS and if relativism is right, we end up with large swathes of incorrect beliefs as epistemic standards shift.

Second, the intuition that, in line with CONS, Hannah will retain her belief as she moves from L to H is stronger the stronger her initial evidence for this belief is. Suppose she heard that Peter knows that p from various very reliable sources and maybe even remembers these sources when she finds herself in H. Under these assumptions it is pretty clear, I think, that Hannah will hold on to her belief. A similar strengthening of our intuitions is problematic for first-person cases because if we strengthen Hannah's evidence too much, the respective self-ascription of knowledge will eventually be true relative to every epistemic standard, even the epistemic standard of H. Thus, the first-person correlate of (iv) will fail to hold, and we can no longer generate the problematic type of situation.[12]

[11] Adler (2012: 254) states that third-person knowledge-that beliefs are "a very rare kind of belief." I'm not sure I agree, but the appeal to know-wh should mitigate the worry.

[12] In this way, we can also rebut some more theoretically motivated candidate responses to the memory problem above. First, I stipulated that Hannah's evidential situation doesn't relevantly shift as she moves between L and H. Proponents of so-called "total pragmatic encroachment" will find this stipulation problematic. They hold that factors that determine one's epistemic standard also partly determine what evidence one has (see e.g. Weatherson, 2017: 246ff for an overview). For instance, they might hold that high standards can be defeaters for otherwise justified beliefs. In third-person cases, we can respond by just stipulating that Hannah's evidence for believing that Peter knows that p is so strong that high epistemic standards don't defeat it. Peter's evidence for believing that p may still be somewhat mediocre so that he counts as a knower only by low standards. Second, proponents of so-called "situation-sensitive" accounts of (outright) belief won't like CONS. They hold that belief is a matter of having a credence above a certain threshold, where this threshold depends on parameters such as one's epistemic standard (see e.g. Clarke, 2017: 402 for a brief overview). On this view, we will retain beliefs throughout subsequent situations only as

In sum, relativism entails an implausible error theory if we accept CONS. According to CONS, we typically hold on to our beliefs. If relativism is right, this is a mistake as far as knowledge beliefs are concerned.

3 Replies and rejoinders

How can a relativist respond to this objection? Presumably the first thing that comes to mind is to restrict CONS. Here is one way to go:

> **CONS'** People retain beliefs once they have formed them—modulo cognitive shortcomings and incoming evidence—but *knowledge beliefs* are suspended whenever the present epistemic standard relevantly differs from the epistemic standard in the storage context.

On this principle, we don't end up with incorrect beliefs as we move from context to context, for knowledge beliefs that would become incorrect will be suspended before they lead to trouble. The relevant beliefs presumably won't be suspended forever. They arguably get reactivated, as it were, as soon as the epistemic standard goes back to its original state.

If we adopt CONS' instead of CONS, the problem for relativism no longer arises. We face other concerns though. First, the substitution of CONS' for CONS can easily seem like a cost in and of itself. CONS has intuitive appeal and the suggested restriction may appear ad hoc. The more substantial challenge is that if CONS' were true, people would have to keep track of the epistemic standard of the contexts in which they initially form knowledge beliefs. Otherwise they couldn't detect relevant changes in epistemic standards and suspend beliefs accordingly. It's a common and

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long as our initial credence is high enough for belief in these situations. But even if we weaken CONS in this way, third-person cases make trouble for relativism. Again, we can simply stipulate that Hannah's initial credence is as high as it gets. If anything, third-person cases impose restrictions on Peter's credences. It should also be noted that total pragmatic encroachment and subject-sensitivism about belief are highly contested views and that relativism is typically developed as an alternative to such positions (see e.g. MacFarlane, 2014: 182ff).

plausible assumption though that people don't keep track of epistemic standards in this way. In a related discussion of epistemic contextualism, Williamson (2005: 100), for instance, observes that "[m]ost people cannot remember where they got much of the information on which they rely."[13]

To be sure, this is not to deny that people's knowledge claims are sensitive to the epistemic standard governing their present context. For instance, it might well be that people are less inclined to ascribe knowledge in high than in low standards contexts. I only deny that they generally remember the epistemic standard of contexts in the past.

One might inveigh that people don't have to keep track of epistemic standards for CONS' to hold. It would suffice to keep track of what evidence the relevant subject has for the putatively known proposition. For instance, Hannah could remember Peter's evidence instead of her previous epistemic standard. If she keeps track of this, she can properly decide whether to suspend the relevant knowledge belief in her new context as long as she's aware of her present epistemic standard. The belief has to be suspended if Peter's evidence isn't good enough for the epistemic standard at hand.[14]

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[13] See also Adler, 2012: 254; Rysiew, 2012: 287; Brown, 2014: 196; Moeller, 2015: 4060; Hannon, 2015: 121.

[14] MacFarlane (2014) proposes this idea without being properly aware of it. He discusses how a computer could store and maintain knowledge attributions in a relativist framework. He suggests that "[t]he computer would simply delete records where the [putatively knowing subject] did not meet [the current epistemic standard]." (313) This model doesn't require the computer to keep track of earlier epistemic standards. But the computer must keep track of the subject's earlier evidential situation. Otherwise it won't be able to tell whether the subject "did not meet" the current epistemic standard. Incidentally, this explication of MacFarlane's computer undermines the case MacFarlane wants to make for relativism over contextualism based on the suggested computer model. He argues that a contextualist computer is inferior to a relativist one because, unlike the relativist computer above, a contextualist computer needs to store previous epistemic standards (312). This advantage is spurious because, as indicated, the relativist computer avoids storing epistemic standards only at the cost of storing evidential situations.

The idea that people keep track of evidence in this way, though, is no more plausible than the previous idea that they keep track of epistemic standards. As Frise (2017: 494), for instance, points out, "studies strongly suggest that we have fairly little memory for the sources of our beliefs, and what memory we do have is highly fallible."[15] In addition, there are many third-person cases where we never knew what the original evidence was. For instance, Hannah might learn that Peter knows that p just because Peter tells her that he knows that p even if Peter doesn't tell her what his evidence for p is. In such cases, Hannah may remember *her* evidence for believing that Peter knows that p (i.e. his testimony). What she would need, though, is *Peter's* evidence. After all, whether it is true relative to a given epistemic standard that Peter knows that p depends on his evidence, not hers.

Arguably, the previous considerations are compatible with the assumption that Hannah remembers *how good* Peter's evidence was without necessarily knowing *what* it was. She might infer, for instance, and subsequently store, how good Peter's evidence must have been based on the fact that he self-ascribed knowledge in a context governed by a given epistemic standard.

Even this assumption, though, seems empirically questionable. Talking about high school romances, for instance, Hannah might firmly remember that Peter knew that Paul was in love with him without having any additional belief about how good his evidence was. Of course, she might infer that Peter's evidence must have been good enough for knowledge relative to the epistemic standard from back then. But unless she remembers what this standard was—which she typically doesn't, as argued before—this isn't going to help at all.

In light of these worries, one might opt for a different modification of CONS along the following lines:

> **CONS''** People retain beliefs once they have formed them—modulo cognitive shortcomings and incoming evidence—but *knowledge ascribing beliefs* are suspended

[15] See also Harman, 1986: 41; Huemer, 1999: 346; McGrath, 2007: 4; Bernecker, 2008: 128; McCain, 2015: 473.

whenever the epistemic standard is not the lowest and *knowledge denying beliefs* are suspended whenever the epistemic standard is not the highest; except when we happen to remember that there was no relevant shift in epistemic standards.

CONS'' avoids incorrect beliefs. People are no longer required to store epistemic standards either. There are other problems though. As before, CONS'' can seem like an ad hoc modification of CONS. More importantly, beliefs in knowledge denials would now be suspended almost all the time because we are hardly ever governed by the highest, thoroughly skeptical epistemic standard (DeRose, 2009: 41ff). Beliefs in knowledge ascriptions may be left intact more frequently depending on one's conception of epistemic standards. But if, as suggested by DeRose (2009: 13ff), epistemic standards can go as low as to allow hardly more than true belief to count as knowledge, then typical everyday contexts will presumably be governed by a standard that is substantially above the minimum. This would mean that knowledge ascriptions are suspended most of the time as well. We constantly tell each other who knows what. Given CONS'', this practice would be massively insincere because we would hardly ever actively hold the pertaining beliefs.

Of course, even if most knowledge beliefs are suspended, closely related beliefs may remain unscathed. For instance, when Hannah finds the proposition that Peter knows/doesn't know that p in her memory, she might still be allowed to believe that *there is some epistemic standard* relative to which Peter knows/doesn't know that p. But this won't be enough to justify a knowledge ascription or denial in a context governed by a specific epistemic standard.

One might respond that I'm overstating the variability of epistemic standards. Maybe epistemic standards change rarely, and most of the time we are governed by what we may call the "everyday"

epistemic standard.[16] CONS' or CONS'' might look plausible after all because the principles would at most require us to keep track of rare and exceptional cases.[17]

This is presumably the best shot the relativist has at resolving the indicated memory concern. But problems remain. First, CONS' and CONS'' may still seem like ad hoc modifications of the intuitively compelling CONS. Second, there is a question of whether we even keep track of special epistemic standards. Finally, the assumption that epistemic standards vary rarely is problematic in at least two respects.

On the one hand, some candidate motivations for relativism plausibly enforce a flexible conception of epistemic standards. For instance, relativists might want to use their view to accommodate intuitions about cases such as the familiar bank or airport cases.[18] Making sense of the entire range of such intuitions may require a flexible conception of epistemic standards.[19] Similarly, relativists might want to capture the spirit at least of knowledge-action principles such as that "one ought to act upon only what one knows" (Stanley, 2005: 98). Given that what one ought to act upon is highly sensitive to stakes, what one knows (or "knows") should vary to the same extent. In this vein, DeRose (2009), for instance, assumes that epistemic standards make widely different

[16] Such proposals have been made on behalf of contextualism (e.g. McKenna, 2014; Hannon, 2015) and what standardly goes by "subject-sensitive invariantism" (e.g. Grimm, 2015). MacFarlane (2014) may be seen as suggesting stable epistemic standards on behalf of relativism (see below). See also McKenna, 2017.

[17] A closely related candidate approach would be to grant that epistemic standards vary a lot and to argue instead that most of our "knowledge" lives up to the highest possible standard. Ichikawa's (2017) "Moorean contextualism" goes in this direction. But Ichikawa only aims to safeguard a relatively limited class of basic knowledge, such as direct perceptual knowledge, against raised epistemic standards. This won't be enough to dispel the memory problem. A more radical approach that safeguards most of our knowledge is conceivable. But such an approach hasn't been defended, and it would presumably face the same types of worries I will raise for stable standards relativism.

[18] See footnote 5.

[19] See de Brasi, 2014: 68 for a similar observation regarding contextualism.

demands on what counts as "knowledge," starting from something close to mere true belief (13ff) and ending with absolute certainty (41ff).[20] Relativists can abandon the presented motivations of course, and they might seem spurious anyways. But then we need some other motivation for the view. It's not obvious what this motivation should be.[21]

On the other hand, and in addition to the putative lack of motivation, "stable relativism" faces the following direct objection: Uncontroversial context-sensitive expressions vary with context parameters that change a lot even in everyday contexts. Consider e.g. "flat" as in "flat shoes," "flat stomach/belly," "flat nose," "flat roof" or "flat land/landscape/terrain."[22] "Knows" would be an awkward exception, and it is unclear why its meaning shouldn't have fossilized on the epistemic standard most commonly in place. After all, it would be pretty uneconomical to have an expression—like "knows" on the suggested account—that has us assess the context each time it is employed, but then gives us the same correctness conditions almost all the time anyways. A more efficient way to go would be to make "knows" context-insensitive and use slightly more complex expressions (e.g. "knows for sure") for the occasional exceptional circumstance.

One might inveigh that plausible stories can be told about how "knows" evolved to become context-sensitive and still have the suggested default reading. In this spirit, MacFarlane (2014: 319) presents the following speculative history of the term:

> Once upon a time, "knows" had an invariantist semantics. The truth of knowledge claims did not depend on a contextually determined standard. Rather, there was a single set standard that agents had to meet in order to count as "knowing." This worked well enough, because life was simple. Inquiries mostly concerned basic necessities of life, and the matrix of risks and rewards stayed relatively constant.

[20] See also Turri, 2010: 93n.

[21] See e.g. McKenna, 2014; Hannon, 2015; Grimm, 2015 for recent candidate ideas and Gerken, 2017: 197ff for criticism of at least some of the points they make. Note that more traditional appeals to the ability to resolve skeptical arguments have rarely been taken to sufficiently motivate views like relativism on their own. See e.g. DeRose, 2009: 41ff. Maybe relativism can help to resolve the "threshold problem" (BonJour, 2010).

[22] All of these examples are among the most frequent collocations of the form "flat + NOUN" to be found in Davies, 2008-.

> As time passed, society became more complex. Instead of small houses, people began building large apartments housing many people. They built ambitious bridges over chasms. Failures of these large structures would be catastrophic, and many fewer people were regarded as authoritative about questions like "how thick a support do you need per unit weight?" when it came to these big projects.
>
> People had been in the habit of settling questions about who is authoritative about a subject by asking who knows about it. Indeed, this was regarded as one of the main points of talking about knowledge. In order to preserve this link between attributions of knowledge and the project of identifying people who are authoritative on a subject, people began to demand that those who are said to "know" meet a higher standard in a context where much is at stake than in an ordinary context.

This narrative naturally leads to the idea that epistemic standards don't change a lot. We rarely build "ambitious bridges over chasms," so for the most part, our epistemic standard should be tied to the ordinary, everyday demands our ancestors already had.[23]

Compelling as it may seem at first, I think the previous considerations point to a flaw in MacFarlane's story. People supposedly sought to preserve the "link between attributions of knowledge and the project of identifying people who are authoritative on a subject." By preserving this link, they made "knows" context-sensitive and, as a consequence, burdened each and every use of the term with the rare possibility of extremely high stakes. This just looks like an unwise decision. The much more efficient decision would be to tie "knows" invariably to who is authoritative *as far as usual purposes are concerned* and coin some new expression (or combine some old ones) for the rare new cases (e.g. "knows for sure").[24]

To be clear, I'm not saying that ordinary language always evolves towards the most efficient semantics (presumably it doesn't). But in Austin's (1956: 11) memorable phrase, "it embodies […]

[23] Note that it's not entirely clear whether MacFarlane really wants to subscribe to a stable conception of epistemic standards. In other places, he suggests that it will be "fairly rare for two contexts to be governed by precisely the same standard." (314)

[24] Interestingly enough, MacFarlane (2014: 312f) himself suggests that context-sensitivity for "knows" leads to added cognitive costs either in terms of storing epistemic standards (contextualism) or at least in terms of tracking the current epistemic standard (relativism). See footnote 14 for further potential cognitive costs for relativists.

the inherited experience and acumen of many generations of men." As such, a general presumption of efficiency seems like a natural place to start at least when it comes to expressions as ubiquitous and central as "knows." Stable relativism doesn't align with this presumption.

In sum, none of the suggested replies on behalf of relativism is fully convincing. We should abandon this view in the absence of more promising proposals.

4 A memory puzzle for contextualism?

Many authors have argued that contextualists face problems concerning memory.[25] If this is so, relativism and contextualism might be in the same boat, and the relativist could be at least a little less concerned. I will argue that relativists shouldn't get their hopes up. Contextualism may face a memory problem. If there is a problem though, it is far less straightforward than the memory problem for relativism just outlined.

Epistemic contextualism, as I will understand it, is the following position:[26]

> Epistemic contextualism
>
> *CON*. Sentences of the form "S knows/doesn't know that p" express different propositions depending on the context of use, namely, propositions to the effect that S knows/doesn't know *relative to the epistemic standard of the context* that p.
>
> *ABS*. These propositions have absolute truth-values.
>
> *BEL**. A belief that p in context C is correct iff p is true.

It may be instructive to see how contextualism addresses the puzzle outlined in the introduction. Our relativist rejected P3 (the contradiction-to-wrongness entailment). The contextualist will reject P2 (the contradiction assumption). The basic idea will be that, when you say in a low standards context "I know that p," you express the proposition that you know that p *relative to low epistemic*

[25] See e.g. Hawthorne, 2004: 110; Williamson, 2005: 100; Brueckner, 2010; Adler, 2012: 253f; Rysiew, 2012: 286ff; de Brasi, 2014; Moeller, 2015; MacFarlane, 2014: 311ff; Hannon, 2015 for discussion.

[26] See e.g. DeRose, 2009; Blome-Tillmann, 2014; Ichikawa, 2017.

standards. When you say in a high standards context "I don't know that p," you express the proposition that you don't know that p *relative to high epistemic standards*. These are also the propositions you believe. Hence, your beliefs aren't contradictory after all. (There is, of course, the pressing question of why the beliefs initially appeared contradictory, but I'll set this worry aside.)

How does contextualism fare with respect to CONS? In itself, the principle creates no trouble. Similar to the relativist, a contextualist will presumably have to grant that situations of the following kind occur (the assumptions (ii*) and (iv*) are metalinguistic counterparts of the previous assumptions (ii) and (iv)):

(i) At time t1, Hannah finds herself in a context, L, governed by a low epistemic standard.

(ii*) The proposition expressed by "Peter knows that p" in that context, namely, the proposition that Peter knows *relative to the epistemic standard of L* that p, is true.

(iii) At time t2, Hannah finds herself in a context, H, governed by a high epistemic standard.

(iv*) The proposition expressed by "Peter knows that p" in that context, namely, the proposition that Peter knows *relative to the epistemic standard of H* that p, isn't true.

Unlike the relativist, though, the contextualist won't have to say that Hannah will happily form the belief that Peter knows that p at t1. According to contextualism, she will rather form the belief that Peter knows *relative to the epistemic standard of L* that p. Such beliefs remain correct by BEL* even if they are transferred to the context H. After all, by BEL*, the correctness of a belief is independent of the context in which it is held (as witnessed by the fact that C doesn't occur on the right hand side of the corresponding biconditional).[27]

[27] The belief that Peter knows that p by the standards of L might still not be correct overall as held in H if we assume a contextualistic knowledge norm for belief. For Hannah's evidence for the claim that Peter knows that p by the standards of L may be too weak for proper belief in the new context. Similar problems presumably arise for any view imposing varying epistemic requirements for belief in different contexts. On

This is not to say that memory is entirely unproblematic for contextualism, but we certainly need more than CONS to get the problem going. One strategy is to "imagine we have a belief box that contains sentences of English." (Hawthorne, 2004: 109f) On such a view, forming a belief amounts to storing an English sentence in one's belief box. Retaining a belief amounts to the sentence remaining in the belief box. Contextualism now runs into trouble because there is a question of which English sentence we could plausibly store when we form "knowledge" beliefs.

Suppose, for instance, that we just store "S knows that p." In that case, CONS will wreak havoc. If we keep this sentence in the belief box as we move to a different context, it may end up expressing a falsity in the new context because it expresses a different proposition there. One might propose instead that we store sentences like "S knows by low/high standards that p." Williamson (2005: 101) rightly worries though that "[p]hrases such as 'high standards' and 'low standards' are themselves context-sensitive, and in any case far too vague and unspecific for identifying a location on a continuum of standards." Finally, one might suggest that we store sentences along with bits of episodic memory (or a "mental snapshot" (Hawthorne, 2004: 110)) of the situation in which the sentence was stored.[28] This could help us retrieve the relevant proposition even in the new context. But we now run into the above problem that such episodic memory is rarely at hand. As indicated, we frequently don't remember the situation in which we initially formed a given belief.

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such views, a belief that meets the epistemic requirements of one context need not meet the requirements of another. CONS will thus lead to trouble. I won't discuss here how this more general issue could be resolved, but I suspect that situation-sensitivists about belief and total pragmatic encroachers (footnote 12) can get around the problem.

[28] Episodic memory is the primary focus of the contemporary memory debate. See Sutton, 2016 for an overview. The kind of memory I'm primarily concerned with in this paper—what standardly goes by "semantic memory"—plays a relatively minor role. Klein (2015) even argues that semantic memory isn't properly called "memory." I'm not attached to the word.

There is a prima facie worry for the contextualist. Unlike in the case of relativism, though, compelling responses can be offered.

First, and most importantly, the suggested memory problem for contextualism rests on a highly controversial if not obviously simplistic model of belief; namely, a model where beliefs are English sentences stored in a belief box. I won't be able to refute this model. This would require a discussion of the metaphysics of belief that goes beyond the scope of this paper. But we can briefly look at alternative models. We'll see that the problem for contextualism arises on none of these alternative models. This should make us suspicious that there is a genuine concern. I'll present the models in italics and indicate in each case why the memory problem no longer arises.

We don't store English sentences but sentences in a "language of thought" (Fodor, 1979). On this model, the problem for contextualism no longer arises because the question "Which sentence is stored?" is unreasonable. It can't be answered for any belief we hold simply because we have no established means to write down sentences in the language of thought. Maybe one could want a logical form for the supposedly stored sentences. But that's easy to come by. Take whatever logical form you independently favor for "knowledge" sentences and just add an argument place for an epistemic standard.

We store interpreted sentences, that is, sentence-proposition pairs, instead of purely syntactic objects (Douven, 2010: 36). On this model, the question "Which sentence is stored?" becomes unproblematic because it is easily answerable—granting that the sentences are in English. We can simply store "S knows that p" along with the proposition it expressed in the storage context. The resulting pair will unproblematically inhabit the belief box even as we move between contexts with different epistemic standards.

We store propositions instead of sentences. This is the most straightforward model given that propositions are the most natural candidate objects of belief. The question "Which sentence is stored?" now rests on the false presupposition that we store sentences. And the adequate

replacement question "Which proposition is stored?" is easily answerable. It's the proposition expressed by the respective "knowledge" sentence in the storage context.

Having and retaining beliefs is not a matter of storing anything but a matter of having and retaining certain dispositions (Stalnaker, 1999: ch. 12 and 13). Again, the question "Which sentence is stored?" will rest on the false presupposition that we store sentences, or anything at all. Maybe we should still be able to characterize the dispositions constituting knowledge beliefs. But such dispositions are difficult to describe in general and there doesn't seem to be a special problem for contextualism. As a rough approximation, suppose that Hannah comes to believe that Peter knows that p by a low epistemic standard. The relevant disposition would presumably include that Hannah is inclined to say "Peter knows that p" when she finds herself in a corresponding low standards context.

In sum, the supposed problem for contextualism arises *only* on the English-sentence-storage model. Contextualists can shift the burden of proof to their opponents by asking why we should adopt this controversial model rather than any of the numerous, unproblematic alternatives.

Even if a case for the English-sentence-storage model can be made, contextualists need not despair. There are storable English sentences that don't face any of the above concerns. Take sentences like "S knows that p by a standard/with certainty appropriate for when one's life/a friendship/one's job/one's savings/movie tickets are at stake." These sentences relatively stably express the same proposition in every context and mark a relatively precise location in the continuum of epistemic standards.

One might worry that the suggested sentences aren't proper English. But Ludlow (2005: 19f), for instance, lists a range of real life examples where people use modifiers of the indicated kind. The examples include, but aren't limited to, "knows for sure/certain/by ordinary/scientific standards/beyond all reasonable doubt." The above sentences are just more elaborate versions of these attested constructions.

Another concern could be that the suggested sentences are too hidden from ordinary cognition to be plausibly stored in our belief box. People wouldn't report stored knowledge beliefs in these terms.[29]

At this point, though, we are asking too much. The alleged requirements for stored sentences now are that they are context-insensitive, precise *and* cognitively transparent. These requirements cannot even be met for uncontroversial context-sensitive expressions. Take "clean." We say things like "clean *for a toilet*" or "clean *for a shirt*." But this leaves lots of context-sensitivity in place. A clean *festival* toilet is very different from a clean toilet *in a hotel*. And even the standard for what counts as a clean festival toilet may differ widely e.g. from one speaker to another or one period of time to another.[30] It's presumably possible to precisely resolve all context-sensitivity here. But there is little hope that the resulting sentence will be used by anybody to report their memory beliefs.

Rysiew (2012: 289) apparently disagrees. He suggests that uncontroversially context-sensitive terms are "typically replaceable, and often simply replaced, by some fairly obvious, clearly understood, relatively *precise*, and *easily articulable* rendering of the relevant information in *invariant* terms" (my emphasis). But he seems to be misled by his own examples, "tall" and "rich." Following Rysiew, we can arguably replace these expressions by the relevant subject's "height in feet and inches" (289) or "average pre-tax earnings over the past ten years, say" (289). But these replacements are available only because "tall" and "rich" happen to have a readily accessible underlying numerical scale in terms of e.g. feet and dollars. "Clean," and similarly "sharp," "dull," "soft" and many other context-sensitive expression, don't.[31] Note also that even when such a scale is available, it's

[29] This worry is related to the worry from the lack of "clarification devices" for contextualism (Hawthorne, 2004: 104–107). The latter worry though has nothing specifically to do with memory but concerns single conversations where attempts are made to shift the epistemic standard. See e.g. Blome-Tillmann, 2008: 47–52, 2014: 125ff; DeRose, 2009: 180ff for replies on behalf of contextualism.

[30] See DeRose, 2008: 145–147 for related observations.

[31] Solt (forthcoming) similarly distinguishes gradable adjectives "with" or "without numerical measures."

not clear that we can always locate the relevant object on the relevant scale. Suppose I'm a zoo keeper taking care of Barbados threadsnake Barbie. You might know that Barbie is long for a Barbados threadsnake because I keep bragging about this. You may still have no clue how long Barbados threadsnakes typically are and hence how long Barbie is.[32]

5 Conclusion

Relativism is worth taking seriously, but in light of the indicated memory problem, it is unlikely to be correct. Epistemic contextualism is much better off in this regard. A problem arises for this view only if we grant highly controversial metaphysical assumptions about the nature of memory, and even if we grant these assumptions, the case against contextualism remains far from irresistible.

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[32] See DeRose, 2008: 151f for a similar observation.

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