Contextualism, Skepticism and Kinds of Possibilities

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1 Introduction

David Lewis has suggested a contextualist account[1] of knowledge to aid us in the solution of the skeptical puzzle (**SKP**); I will attempt to make as sympathetic a case as possible for this account. Lewis has suggested that **SKP** (and its attendant appearance of paradox) is created, in a conversation, by the skeptic exposing us to the *logical possibility* of the brain-in-a-vat (**BIV**) hypothesis, thereby changing the *standards* for knowledge claims made by us. I will argue that the contextualist solution is flawed, but the semantics it provides for knowledge claims is headed in the right direction.

2 The Skeptical Puzzle

The paradigmatic setup for **SKP** is by a review of the following statements:

I. I don't know that I am not a brain in a vat being stimulated electrochemically to have exactly the same physical, mental and sensory experiences that I am having right now. $\neg K(\neg BIV)$
II. If I don't know I am not a brain in a vat being stimulated electrochemically to have exactly the same physical, mental and sensory experiences that I am having right now, then I don't know that I have hands. $\neg K(\neg\ BIV) \supset \neg K(H)$
III. I know that I have hands. $K(H)$

All three statements above are individually plausible. *If* I am being stimulated electrochemically, then I have no way of knowing that I am not being manipulated to have the same experiences right now. *If* I don't know that I'm not being manipulated to have the same experiences that I am having right now, then I don't know that I have hands and yet, I *know* I have hands. So, the three taken together are plainly incompatible or contradictory.

2.1 Possible Solutions

A solution (or dissolution) of the paradox or puzzle can take one of two options:
1. Drop one of the three above as no longer being plausible.

[1] Lewis, David, "Scorekeeping in a Language Game", *Philosophical Papers*, pp 233-249, Oxford University Press, New York, 1983 and "Elusive Knowledge", unpublished manuscript. I have not concentrated on Keith DeRose's alternative contextualist solution ('Solving the Skeptical Puzzle', *Philosophical Review*, 104 (January 1995): 1-52) since the two while superficially similar, are quite different and deserve equal attention.

2. Explain how the three statements aren't really incompatible.
One possible solution is to drop **II**. That is, drop the *principle of epistemic closure* (knowledge is closed under known entailment):

$$(K(P)\&K(P \supset Q)) \supset K(Q)$$

This is a problematic solution; it goes against a very intuitive principle and seems like a high price to pay. It is a solution that has been tried, most notably by Nozick[2] and is one that continues to resist assimilation into the category of viable solutions. And well it should: it requires us to accept what DeRose terms the "abominable conjunction"[3]: that we can not know that we are not a **BIV** and yet know that we have hands. Puzzling though **SKP** might be, there is nothing to suggest that it puzzles us enough to warrant the jettisoning of a well-entrenched epistemic principle while *simultaneously* accepting the counterintuitive **BIV** hypothesis.

We need then, an argument that shows that the meanings of those statements are not what we take them to be; an argument that statements about their plausibility and alleged incompatibility are *false* or *confused*. Alternatively, we need an argument that those statements aren't the kinds of statements that people would make; the paradox falsely represents them as plausible. Lewis' solutions can be seen as a combination of the two approaches.

3 Standards for Knowledge

Why does the skeptical puzzle cause such problems? Lewis suggests that the way we conduct our analysis of knowledge might be the problem, perhaps in the *standards* of knowledge adopted on different occasions, perhaps in the mode of inquiry adopted[4]:

> Maybe epistemology is the culprit. Maybe this extraordinary pastime robs us of our knowledge. *Maybe we do know a lot in daily life; but maybe when we look hard at our knowledge, it goes away* [my emphasis]. But only when we look at it harder than the sane ever do in daily life; only when we let our paranoid fantasies rip.

But epistemology isn't the culprit as much as is wholesale ignorance of the fact that sentences are true according to their context. This is especially true in epistemology (or epistemological contexts)[5]:

> When is a sentence true enough? ..it is something that depends on context. What is true enough on one occasion is not true enough on another.

[2]Nozick, Robert. *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford University Press, 1983
[3]DeRose, page 27.
[4]Lewis, David, "Elusive Knowledge", page 3
[5]Lewis, David. "Scorekeeping in a Language Game", page 245

> The standards of precision in force are different from one conversation to another, and *may change in the course of a single conversation* [my emphasis]. Austin's "France is hexagonal" is a good example of a sentence that is true enough for many contexts, but not true enough for many others. Under low standards of precision it is acceptable. Raise the standards of acceptability and it loses its acceptability.

I will take the above quotes to imply the following sets of statements to be held true by the contextualist:

C_1: A knowledge claim isn't a proposition but a sentence; it expresses different propositions in different contexts.
C_2: Knowledge claims are made with reference to some standard of knowledge; their truth conditions depend on the standard of knowledge referred to. Standards will change depending on the context of the conversation; in a courtroom of law, different standards may emerge.
C_3: A knowledge claim K made under some standard for knowledge S_k can be false under another standard of knowledge $S_{k'}$. A statement made under easy standards for knowledge claims could be false under tough standards of knowledge.

In this account, knowledge claims emerge as a three-place relation between a knower, a standard of knowledge and a proposition. Every knowledge claim may be said to come with an attached disclaimer: 'I know that the Bulls won the NBA championships last night' is true if and only if easy standards established for evaluating knowledge of newsworthy sporting events are at play in my conversation[6].

3.1 Possibilities Not-Ignored

How is the ignorance of standards of knowledge at play created in the paradox of the skeptic? Lewis restates the skeptical puzzle as follows[7]:

> If you claim that S knows that P, and yet you grant that S *cannot eliminate a certain possibility in which not-P* [my emphasis], it certainly seems as if you have granted that S does not after all know that P.

The above is the **SKP** precisely because it clashes with the following which represents Lewis' thesis (**L**) on what constitutes a condition for a subject, **S**, to know a proposition **P**[8]:

> Subject S knows propositions P iff P holds in *every possibility left uneliminated* [my emphasis] by S's evidence; equivalently, iff S's evidence eliminates every possibility [my emphasis] in which not-P.

[6] This point will lead to a semantical theory for the contextualist.
[7] Lewis, 'Elusive Knowledge', page 2
[8] Ibid., page 4

Lewis goes on to explain what the rules[9] are for properly eliminating possibilities to avoid **SKP**. For the purposes of this paper, I will concentrate on the suggestive nature of L since it opens the door on the nature of **SKP**. The **SKP** is an example of a situation where *we are asked specifically to ignore the elimination of a possibility in which a knowledge claim might be false.* Consider **L**' (Lewis' **L** rewritten so as to be the condition for a subject to not know a proposition):

> Subject S does not know propositions P iff P holds in every possibility left uneliminated by S's evidence; equivalently, iff S's evidence does not eliminate every possibility in which not-P.

It follows that subject **S** does not know proposition **P** if **P** is false under *some* standard of knowledge $S_k^{'}$ that the subject *may possibly* apply. The ultimate standard of knowledge, then, is one in which **P** is false if it is *logically possible* for it to be false; call this **LP**. It will immediately be observed that the *only* statements that we will *always* know under *all* standards of knowledge are propositions for which it is logically impossible that they be false: "a few simple, axiomatic necessary truths"[10]. Tautologies are all that's left. The following statements would all be false if they appeared in the that-clauses of knowledge claims:

A. Bill Clinton is the President of the United States.
B. Michaelangelo painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.
C. Water is made of 2 molecules of hydrogen and 1 molecule of oxygen.

Just about every kind of knowledge we had disappears.

4 The Use of Logical Possibility

Lewis suggests that **SKP**'s strength and allure arises because the skeptic introduces its listeners to the logical possibility of hypotheses in conversational games. Our particular version asks us to consider the logical possibility of **BIV** obtaining. This hypothesis is suggestive at the least. The *logical space* occupied by things, events, states of affairs that are logically possible is huge. Consider someone asked whether the sun could rise in the west tomorrow. I think she would say "That's impossible". Make your listener think about whether it is impossible that the sun rise in the west tomorrow. Suppose our best theories of planetary motion have been wrong by a microscopic factor in calculations. As a result of this error factor, which has developed in the past few billion years[11], the earth will reverse its direction of motion tomorrow. It's unlikely, perhaps even highly improbable[12], but is it *impossible*? Is

[9] Lewis lists 9 rules for properly ruling out possibilities. The rules themselves are not as interesting as their functions.

[10] Ibid., page 10

[11] Add as many layers of possible things that could have wrong in the calculations, undetected nuclear particles that behave erratically due to a malfunctioning and so on and so forth.

[12] As the New York Lottery says: "Hey, you never know". But then, the Lottery has also been described as a tax on people that are bad in math.

there a *contradiction* involved in this? No, it's not impossible. The sort of thing that is logically impossible is that the sun rise in the east *and* not-rise in the east tomorrow. It's impossible that it both be raining and not-raining but it's not impossible that it start raining tomorrow and continue for exactly 328 years, 43 days, 17 hours and 39 seconds.

It is the suggestive power of the logical possibility of the **BIV** hypothesis that the skeptic exploits and that Lewis tries to counteract. For what else does Lewis' injunction that we 'properly' ignore certain possibilities amount to but a plea that the logical space of possibilities be reduced? The skeptic hypothesizes that our experiences are *logically compatible* with the absence of those very same experiences. It is a hypothesis that draws picturesque strength from matters being "possible in principle". But possibilities in principle can be awfully misleading[13]. Is the **BIV** hypothesis really physically possible in any sense of the word? Is the kind of technological or scientific sophistication required to realize the **BIV** hypothesis physically possible[14]?

At the heart, then, of the skeptic's colorful puzzle is a simple threat to empirical epistemology: "Empirical experiences are logically compatible with the absence of the causes of those same experiences". Consider the following restatement of **SKP**:

I. It is logically compatible with my current experiences that I am a brain in a vat being stimulated electrochemically in order to have exactly the same experiences that I am having right now. $(\neg K(\neg BIV))$
II. If it is logically compatible with my current experiences that I am a brain in a vat being stimulated electrochemically in order to have exactly the same experiences that

[13]Daniel Denett, *Consciousness Explained*, page 6, Penguin Books, New York, 1993) makes the following point:

> One should be leery of these possibilities in principle. It is also possible in principle to build a steel ladder to the moon..to write out, in alphabetical order, all intelligible English conversations consisting of less than a thousand words..neither of these are remotely possible in fact and sometimes an impossibility in fact is theoretically more interesting than a possibility in principle,..

[14]Dennett again (Ibid., page 7):

> They [the evil scientists] begin with a conveniently comatose brain...they arrange..suitably encoded nerve impulses into your auditory nerves...they also arrange for the signals that would normally come from your vestibular system or inner ear..they might then go on to stimulate the tracts that used to innervate your epidermis. Suppose the scientists, having accomplished all this, tackle the more difficult problem of convincing you that you are..an agent capable of engaging in some form of activity in the world..they permit the sensory experience..by giving you kinesthetic feedback associated with the relevant volitional or motor signals in the efferent part of your nervous system..the problem of calculating the proper feedback, generating it , composing it, and then presenting it to you in real time is going to be computationally intractable on even the fastest computer...Descartes was wise to endow his deceiving demon with infinite powers of trickery.

I am having right now, then it is logically possible that I don't have hands. Therefore I don't know that I have hands. $(\neg K(\neg BIV)) \supset \neg K(H)$
III. I know that I have hands. $K(H)$

If nothing else, the above rephrasing of **SKP** should convince us that the **BIV** hypothesis is surely granted too much respectability[15]. The **SKP** is compelling because we are asked to consider possibilities not taken into consideration when determining the truth of empirical statements. But, then, how could a *semantics* for empirical statements ever be *coherent* under such conditions? To bring matters that are logically possible into considering the truth conditions for empirical statements destroys all empirical knowledge; precisely the effect intended by the skeptic. But what is the introduction of the possibility of the **BIV** hypothesis doing to the standards for knowledge claims assumed in the conversation?

5 The Skeptic's Strategy

The contextualist's assertion that "*..the standards of precision in force are different from one conversation to another, and may change in the course of a single conversation..*" points out the skeptic's strategy. We are led to believe that a thinking agent makes the three statements mentioned and then is made to realize that he has arrived at a contradiction. But is any of this plausible? Is it plausible that a person that responds with a 'Yes' to:

Q_1. Do you know you have hands?
will respond in the negative to:
Q_2. Do you know that you're not a brain in a vat?

If I have just answered in the affirmative to Q_1, it is implausible that I will assert negatively to Q_2. There is one way though. I would answer negatively if I felt that the knowledge required in order to disprove the **BIV** hypothesis wasn't available. And the the only way I would reply with a 'No' then, would be if my questioner were to introduce the possibility of the **BIV** hypothesis (a hypothesis which I clearly considered false in while answering Q_1). But in doing so, my questioner changes the standard for knowledge in the course of the conversation. For after all, how could I

[15]One good example of this sort of strategy failing (even though it carries us a bit afar) is Nagel's ("What Does It Feel Like To Be a Bat", *The Nature of Mind*, Rosenthal, D. ed, 1988) dismissal of the possibility of a scientific (or physicalistic) explanation of consciousness on the grounds that any scientific (or physicalistic) theory of consciousness is logically compatible with the absence of consciousness. This, to say the least, is mistaken. Any scientific theory is logically compatible with the absence of the phenomena that it aims to explain. Does this render all of science mistaken or deeply flawed? The theory of gravitation is logically compatible with an absence of gravitation. So what? Does that scientific theory explain nothing? Does that make it logically possible that gravitation doesn't exist? Sure. But in what sense, if any, does the logical compatibility of the theory of gravitation with an absence of gravitation diminish the explanation offered by the theory?

know that I am not a brain in a vat if my only standards for judging this were the ones used to determine that I had hands? I am not even using the standards used to evaluate the existence of electrons, evidence for which is far more abundant than the evidence required for the falsity of the **BIV** hypothesis. I make the second statement with a different assessment of what constitutes knowledge[16]:

> The commonsensical epistemologist says: I know the cat is in the carton-there he is before my eyes-I just can't be wrong about that!". The sceptic replies: "You might be the victim of a deceiving demon." Thereby *he brings into consideration possibilities hitherto ignored, else what he says would be false* [my emphasis]. The boundary shifts outward so that what he says is true. Once the boundary is shifted, the commonsensical epistemologist must concede defeat. And yet he was not in any way wrong when he laid claim to infallible knowledge.

The agent now knows something that he didn't know when he made the first statement.

I suggest that it is implausible that I could, without contradiction, find the three constituent statements of **SKP** compelling[17] unless my judgements are made relatively independent of one another. If these judgements are relatively independent of one another, then how can *three distinct knowledge claims, made in three distinct epistemic states* be used to set up a paradox? For if we are to believe Lewis, knowledge claims previously considered true by us are now rendered false by the introduction of the possibility of the **BIV** hypothesis. At the very least, the introduction of the **BIV** hypothesis changes standards for knowledge claims from easy to tough.

It is possible for me to string together three sentences, made in ignorance of each other, that taken together generate a paradox. Consider the following:

M_1. I know the moon exists
M_2. There is no moon
M_3. The moon is a satellite of the earth

If these statements are to be taken to generate a paradox then all three need to be evaluated at the same epistemic state. Consider a subject that makes statement M_2, without knowing about M_3. He then takes a class in astronomy and makes statements M_3 and M_1. Can it be said that these three statements made by the same person at different times[18] constitute a paradox?

The change in the standards of knowledge during the conversation places a knower in a different epistemic state, one in which propositions known before are possibly

[16] Lewis, David., "Scorekeeping in a Language Game", page 247, *Philosophical Papers*, Volume I, Oxford Publishers, Oxford, 1983

[17] I don't really think it is true to say that all three are equally compelling. If really asked to make a choice, anyone would pick III as the most compelling (taking the Morean line). I think it implausible that I would be picked as the most compelling.

[18] A pointer to the hidden indexical semantics that the contextualist needs

not known anymore. The skeptic, using the rule of accommodation, has raised the standards in the course of the conversation, thereby changing what we knew. Lewis suggests that there is an asymmetry in this rule, in that standards are raised more readily than they are lowered [19]:

> Because of this asymmetry, a player of language games who is so inclined may get away with it if he tries to raise the standards as high as possible.

In the case of **SKP**, the skeptic raises them all the way to **LP**; the result is the skeptical puzzle.

6 A Contextualist Solution

Our solution emerges once we specify the standards for knowledge at play. Consider **SKP** rewritten as follows:

I. I don't know that I am not a brain in a vat being stimulated electrochemically in order to have exactly the same physical, mental and sensory experiences that I am having right now under the tough standards[20] of knowledge. $(\neg K(\neg BIV))T_s$
II. If I don't know I am not a brain in a vat being stimulated electrochemically in order to have the same physical, mental and sensory experiences that I am having right now, then I don't know that I have hands under the tough standards of knowledge . $(\neg K(\neg BIV) \supset \neg K(H))T_s$
III. I know that I have hands under the tough standards of knowledge. $K(H)T_s$.

In this case, $K(H)T_s$ is clearly false.

Or, consider **SKP** rewritten as follows:

I. I don't know that I am not a brain in a vat being stimulated electrochemically in order to have exactly the same physical, mental and sensory experiences that I am having right now under the tough standards of knowledge. $(\neg K(\neg BIV))T_s$
II. If I don't know I am not a brain in a vat being stimulated electrochemically in order to have the same physical, mental and sensory experiences that I am having right now, then I don't know that I have hands under the tough standards of knowledge. $(\neg K(\neg BIV) \supset \neg K(H))T_s$
III. I know that I have hands under the easy standards of knowledge. $K(H)E_s$.

Here the three are clearly compatible.

Consider too, that the principle of epistemic closure is false if indexed with standards of knowledge as follows:

[19]Lewis does not really offer an explanation for this asymmetry. Lewis, David. "Scorekeeping in a Language Game", page 245
[20]The tough standard being **LP**

$$(K(P)\&K(P \supset Q))E_s \supset K(Q)T_s$$

$$(K(P)\&K(P \supset Q))T_s \supset K(Q)E_s$$

So, what is and what could be wrong with the contextualist approach?

7 Problems for the Contextualist

One objection to the contextualist is that the multiplicity of knowledge standards that she claims exists are being confused with the *different ways that we come to know those propositions*. I think this objection is mistaken.The multiplicity of standards for knowledge claims that the contextualist suggests exist, are related directly to the different ways of obtaining knowledge. The standard that we use to evaluate a knowledge claim is dependent on the possible ways of coming to know a proposition expressed in the knowledge claim. Consider the following:

IK_1. I know the sun is 93 million miles from the earth.
IK_2. I know the Indian Air Force has Russian jets in its fleet.

In each of IK_1, IK_2 above there are different ways that I come to know the propositions contained therein. Consider someone that listens to me and uses me[21] as a source of knowledge to make subsequent knowledge claims. If I said statement IK_2 above, anybody that knew my background, would say "X knows that the Indian Air Force has Russian jets in their fleet". They might doubt another speaker of that sentence but they wouldn't doubt me. I've seen plenty of Russian jets being flown by IAF pilots, I've seen pictures of Indian politicians signing contracts to buy Russian jets, there simply is no way that every single Russian jet being used by the IAF has been sold, scrapped, destroyed or decommissioned in the past 3 months and so on and so forth. My listener accepts my testimony as a perfectly good way of being able to say two days later "I know there are Russian jets in the Indian Air Force". The same claim if made by my colleague from Kansas would need more vigorous support and is unlikely to lead to someone claiming that they know IK_1 based on his testimony. My testimony is enough; his repeated assertions probably wouldn't be.

The way I think I know IK_2 is a bit different, but once I explained my education and interest in astronomy, we'd be home free again. No one is going to contest my knowledge claims. My listeners know which standards are at play: the standards for evaluating claims made by an astronomy buff. The same claim would be adjucated slightly differently if listening to a 5th grader. Different agents come to know propositions in different ways and in doing so, establish the standards for evaluating knowledge claims made by them.

[21]As testimonial. For a treatment of the way in which testimony is treated as a perfectly good source of knowledge in the epistemological tradition, see C.A.J Coady, *Testimony*, Oxford University Press, 1993.

7.1 Does the Contextualist offer too easy a solution?

Does a solution to any paradox have to meet requirements beyond providing a logical, consistent answer? Consider DeRose's requirement on any solution to a paradox that it *explain* the appearance of paradox in the first place[22]:

> In seeking a solution to the puzzle, we should seek an explanation of how we fell into the skeptical trap in the first place, and not settle for making a simple choice of among three distasteful ways out the trap. We must explain how two premises which together yield a conclusion we find so incredible can themselves seem so plausible to us.

This is perhaps too strong. Sometimes, all that's needed to get rid of a paradox is to be brought face to face with the realization that an assumption that we took to be plausible is not that plausible at all. The assumptions in question here are a) standards for knowledge remain the same throughout the conversation with the skeptic and b) we aren't considering any possibilities in addition to the ones normally considered.

DeRose suggests too that Lewis' rule of accommodation does not distinguish between the sophisticated version of the skeptical argument and the simple skeptic (one that simply asserts that we don't know that we that have hands)[23]:

> ..a rule of Accommodation cannot really explain the persuasiveness of AI [argument from ignorance], or more generally, of any argument by skeptical hypothesis..we should hope for a solution that..will explain why the AI skeptic is more convincing than is the simple skeptic. If our explanation does not do this much, then we haven't explained how the skeptical argument works on us in any way sufficient to differentiate it from a bald (and dogmatic!) skeptical assertion.

This is not much of an objection if one considers that the rule of accommodation deals with conversational ploys and not simple declarative statements. But in addition, DeRose makes the mistake of thinking that the simple skeptical assertion puzzles us just as much. The **SKP** is more convincing, not just because of the strategies used in its setup but because of its extremely suggestive nature.

More problematically for Lewis, DeRose also suggests that **SKP** can be created just by a solitary thinker with no one saying anything. The contextualist solution seems only to work in conversational situations. Can we generalize the solution to the following?[24]:

> there is a rule for changing the standards of knowledge that governs the truth conditions of our thoughts regarding what is and is not known that

[22] DeRose, page 3

[23] Ibid., page 10

[24] Ibid., page 7

> mirrors the rule for the truth conditions of what is said regarding knowledge...our judgement regarding whether something can or cannot be truly asserted (under appropriate conditions) might be held to affect our judgement regarding whether it's true or false, even when we make this judgement in solitude, with nothing being said at all..

DeRose suggests that such a generalization is not possible or is at least not forthcoming in this present solution. As we will soon see, an objection to the kind of semantics that Lewis' solution will need to employ supports DeRose.

Is the solution offered by the contextualist unsatisfactory since it does not meet DeRose's requirement? Schiffer suggests[25] that it offers too easy a solution: if the change in context or change in standards being introduced for every proposition in the paradox were the issue at heart then we would find even the following puzzling:

LM_1. Larry is tall.
LM_2. Moe is taller than Larry.
LM_3. Moe is a really short guy.
But, for Schiffer, our intuitions tell us that there is no puzzle at all; we are aware that predicates of the type being used in these sentences are relational in nature. In each sentence, we are aware that the predicate attribution is being made with reference to some standard; Larry is 'short' for a high school basketball player while Moe is 'really short' for a power forward in the NBA. Why aren't we similarly comfortable with the skeptical paradox? Maybe the contextualist isn't offering a solution at all. I think there is a problem in rejecting the contextualist in this fashion.

Consider someone that thinks that relational predicates have no vagueness about them, someone who thinks 'big' univocally means big and 'small' univocally means small and so on for other relational predicates. Someone who doesn't know the meaning of the word 'context' or 'context sensitive'. It's not hard to imagine[26] that such a person exists. It's fair to say this person would be confused by the Sorites paradox, by the problem of vague predicates and so on. Wouldn't our subject find the following puzzling?

1. 'Jack is bald' is true
2. 'John has more hair than Jack' is true
3. 'John is bald' is true

Wouldn't a resolution of the apparent paradox require an education in the relational nature of certain predicates and in the vagueness inherent in claims of predicate attribution? Wouldn't such an education *explain* the appearance of paradox to the person previously ignorant of the relational nature of predicates? If we had systematically misled ourselves about certain concepts inherent in our discourse, it would seem that

[25]Schiffer, Stephen, 'Contextualists Solutions to Scepticism', *Proceedings of the Aristotelean Society*, 96, 1996:317-333

[26]Maybe this is simple trading in intuitions. At the very least, there is a way in which the problem of predicates still interests us. People still are fascinated by a recounting of the problem with calling something red.

we have a 'deep' enough solution if someone points out this particular conceptual confusion. But this brings us to a more serious problem for Lewis' solutions.

If we grant DeRose's objection that contextualism or Lewis' rule of accommodation does not explain the appearance of paradox then it seems that we need something else to do so. Consider what the contextualist is saying:

- When you make a knowledge claim, you make it with reference to a standard.
- When you change standards (by the suggestion of the logical possibility of the **BIV** hypothesis) you do not always notice that you've done so.
- Not noticing you've changed standards leads you to paradoxes.
- If you noticed, you would simply deny $\neg K(\neg BIV)$ or $K(H)$.

Ergo, you don't know that you are making knowledge claims with reference to some standard. What does this amount to? The contextualist is asserting that: a) there is a certain *vagueness* in our knowledge claims in that it might make perfect sense to ask of someone "With respect to what standard of knowledge are you making this claim?" b) we are often confused or just plain wrong about what we are trying to say when we make knowledge claims.

So, the contextualist needs a semantics for our knowledge claims; how are we to understand them and how do we go about framing knowledge claims (what are the contents of our thoughts that are reflected in our knowledge claims). Schiffer terms this a *radical error theory*[27] since it would explain why we are systematically mistaken about our knowledge claims. What sort of error theory does the contextualist require?

8 A Possible Semantics for Contextualist Theories

A hidden indexical theory of semantics seems to offer the best hope[28] for the contextualist. After all, the contextualist asserts that the three constituent statements of **SKP** aren't propositions but sentences that derive their truth conditions from the context in which they are spoken. If so, there is a *hidden indexical* component of the sentence expressing a knowledge claim; the indexical component is the knowledge context within which the statement is true or false. So, the sentence:

S_1: I know I have hands.
is really:
S_1': I know I have hands$_{undertheeasystandardsforknowledge}$.
Similarly, the sentence:
S_2: I don't know that I'm not a brain in a vat.

[27]Schiffer, page 325

[28]Strictly speaking, if a semantics for vague terms was ever developed, and knowledge is a vague term as far as the contextualist account is concerned, it would really be the best for the contextualist

is really:
S_2': I don't know that I'm not a brain in a $\text{vat}_{underthetoughstandardsofknowledge}$.

Schiffer objects however[29], to hidden indexical semantics as a possible semantical theory for the contextualist. Consider an ordinary sentence that is a paradigmatic example of context sensitive sentences: 'It's now 2 PM'. It is understood that the hidden indexical component in this sentence is the place and location of the speaker so that the sentence above is really 'It's now 2 $\text{PM}_{ontheEastCoastoftheUnitedStates}$'. But, the speaker of the sentence has privileged access to the entire content of his thoughts with there being no vagueness in the content of his thoughts. The content of the thought if introspected by the speaker would be "It's now 2 PM on the East Coast of the United States". Such an introspection is always available.

If the contextualist is right, then a similar sort of claim can't be made for a person making knowledge claims. The speaker of a knowledge claim is only made aware of the contents of his thoughts once he is forced to look at the standards for his knowledge claims by a listener. Does a speaker really know that he is making knowledge claims with reference to a particular standard? Or this is a tacit assumption? Does this mean that a speaker does not have full access to the contents of his thoughts? Are we *ever aware* that we are making claims with respect to some standard? Given that we consider privileged access to the contents of our thoughts as being a relatively unproblematic concept and the knowledge obtained therein to be incorrigible, where does this leave the contextualist?

This objection carries weight if one is prepared to admit that self knowledge is incorrigible and immediately available. Granting this, however, seems to deepen the puzzle since it seems plausible to suggest that there is a certain amount of *vagueness* that enters into knowledge claims.

Consider the following example: I have just finished typing up my IRS tax returns and someone asks whether it contains any errors. I answer "I know I didn't make any mistakes on it". Now we are informed that the IRS has revised its penalty for incorrectly filled tax forms. Instead of an agonizing audit, the penalty is a bullet between the eyes. Our friend now asks us again: "Do you know that you made no mistakes?". I revise my opinion at this stage "I don't really know. Let me check". Does this example back up the contextualist's claim that there a shift in standards? Did I make my first claim assuming that a certain standard for evaluating my knowledge was at play? That that standard was the one implicitly assumed in our conversation? That I was prepared to revise my knowledge claim based on the change in standards? I knew what standard was at play when I made my first knowledge claim, but when advised (implicitly) that the standards had changed, I revised my knowledge claim. Is it plausible to suggest then, that there is a default 'easy' standard assumed in daily conversation?

One line of defense that the contextualist has against objections to hidden indexical semantics as the basis of the error theory is to attack the very notion of privileged

[29]Schiffer, page 326

access (**PA**) itself. After all, what makes **PA** so privileged? But the burden of proof lies with the contextualist. The error theory required by the contextualist needs to explain why it is that **PA** suffers when making knowledge claims. Why is it that **PA** fails only in this case? Why not in any other kind of reports about our beliefs or mental states? DeRose's earlier objection now stands as more significant. Does the contextualist have a theory to explain why this failure of **PA** happens? Not really and neither does it claim to have one. And till that is explained, the contexualist solution remains partially flawed.

A solution of the paradox might be handled by a revision of our concept of knowledge as well, albeit along different lines. What sorts of revisions are these? The revisions to be made start by taking the skeptical puzzle as not a paradox at all but as providing a sort of yardstick for our knowledge of the world. In a sense the paradox is a useful anomaly in our philosophical discourse; it helps us to assess the standards of knowledge. Our knowledge of the external world is of a certain type and the skeptical puzzle helps to bring that out in the clearest fashion. The paradox might not be seen as a paradox at all but as a way of refining our relationship to the external world.

Knowledge of the existence of the external world that is absolutely certain can be rejected as being a desirable feature of our epistemic claims. Why would we want our epistemic claims to possess a feature that gets us nothing beyond anything that we have today? Whatever the desirable attributes for epistemic claims, making them invulnerable to paradoxes generated by the use of logical possibility doesn't seem like something on the high priority list. A demand for certainty gets us precisely one thing: nasty paradoxes that refuse to go away. What difference would it make to any sphere of human inquiry if our knowledge claims came with a label "All logical possibilities of error in making this claim eliminated?" Is there any additional cash value to be derived from such a certainty?