Chapter 10

Comparativism, Question-Sensitivity and Experiments

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Abstract

In my paper I try to throw some doubt upon the motivation behind epistemic comparativism (Schaffer & Szabó 2014), which is a version of epistemic contextualism in which knowledge ascriptions are sensitive to the question under discussion. Schaffer and Szabó propose a semantics for “know” which makes it question-sensitive and which is based on an analogy with adverbial quantifiers, such as “always.” They claim that the question-sensitivity of “know” has been empirically confirmed (2014, p. 495) and they describe an experiment which supposedly demonstrates such question-sensitivity. Firstly, I will argue that it might be better to regard sentences such as “Claire always steals the diamonds” as ambiguous and not merely context-sensitive. Secondly, I will try to show that the experiment has not been properly designed and it does not prove what it was supposed to prove. Finally, I will claim that while knowledge ascriptions are presupposition-sensitive (and question-sensitive only in a derivative sense), such sensitivity cannot be used as an argument for contextualism.

1 Epistemic Contextualism and Question-Sensitivity

Epistemic contextualism is the view that knowledge ascriptions such as “S knows that p” can have different truth-values in different contexts, where the difference in truth-value is traceable to the verb “know.” One might distinguish between indexical epistemic contextualism and nonindexical epistemic contextualism. The proponents of the former view argue that “know” is a covert indexical akin to expressions like “I” and “here.” In different contexts it picks out different relations of knowing. The proponents of the latter view claim that “know” is not an indexical, but is a relational term involving a covert contextually sensitive argument (for instance a standard). In their paper Schaffer and Szabó propose a nonindexical version of contextualism in which knowledge ascriptions are sensitive to the question under discussion: “the question under discussion plays a role in truth evaluation” of knowledge
ascriptions (Schaffer & Szabó 2014, p. 494). They dub their version “comparativism.” Comparativism is akin to contrastivism in that it involves a comparison between two propositions, one of which is explicitly given and one is contextually supplied. While contrastivism assumes that the proposition contextually supplied is incompatible with the proposition given, comparativism does not make this assumption.

Schaffer and Szabó propose a semantics for “know” which makes it question-sensitive and which is based on an analogy with adverbial quantifiers, such as “always”. In what follows I will not argue with the semantics they offer, which is extremely subtle and sophisticated, but I’ll try to throw some doubt on the motivation behind it. Their version of epistemic contextualism is motivated by the following example:

Claire always steals the diamonds.

It is argued that this sentence is context-sensitive and has different truth-values in different contexts. Schaffer and Szabó describe two situations:

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(WhoAlways) \text{ Claire has stolen the diamonds. Ann and Ben are wondering who stole the diamonds, and Ann learns that there have been numerous recent diamond and ruby thefts and that Claire has been the thief every time. So Ann says:}
\]

1. Claire always steals the diamonds.

\[
(WhatAlways) \text{ Claire has stolen the diamonds. Ann and Ben are wondering what Claire stole, and Ann learns that there have been numerous recent diamond and ruby thefts and that Claire has been the thief every time. So Ann says:}
\]

1. Claire always steals the diamonds.

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1 N.B. Schaffer (2007) also argues that knowledge-\textit{that} includes a question: To know-\textit{wh} is to know that \(p\), as the true answer to \(q\). According to him knowledge-\textit{that} is not a 2-place relation between a person and a proposition, but a 3-place relation between a person, a proposition and a question, which is usually implicit in the context. Knowledge is a question-relative state: “Knowledge-\textit{that} claims express the same relation as knowledge-\textit{wh} claims, and since the latter express KspQ, so must the former” (Schaffer 2007, p. 397).

2 Contrastivism is the view that “\(s\) knows that \(p\) rather than \(q\)” where \(q\) is the implicit argument for contrast (see Schaffer & Knobe 2012).

3 Previously analogies have been drawn between “know” and indexicals, gradable adjectives and quantificational determiners. Schaffer and Szabó review all these options.