CHEAP KNOWLEDGE AND EASY QUESTIONS

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Summary

Contrastivism is the idea that knowledge is question-relative: to know is to be able to answer a contextually salient question. Contrastivism’s main selling point is that it promises to respect ordinary speakers’ judgments about knowledge claims made in various contexts. I show that contrastivism fails to fulfill this promise, and argue that the view I call epistemic pluralism does much better in this respect.

0. Introduction

In a highly stimulating series of articles, Jonathan Schaffer has developed a sophisticated version of contextualism, which he calls contrastivism. According to this view, knowledge is the capacity to answer questions: a subject S counts as knowing that \( p \) in a given context just in case S can answer a contextually salient, multiple-choice question, to which ‘\( p \)’ is the correct answer. Contrastivism is thus a form of relevant alternatives theory, for it holds that knowledge consists in the elimination of the relevant alternatives that are included in the contextually salient question. Although contrastivism has much to recommend it, this view fails on two fronts. First, the contrastivist’s condition for knowledge is, in some cases, too easily satisfied. This problem occurs in contexts in which the question is too easy to answer. Second, contrastivism is too restrictive. It seems correct, at least in some contexts, to credit subjects with the knowledge that certain skeptical hypotheses do not obtain. Contrastivism implausibly makes such knowledge attributions false, when the subject’s evidence does not strictly entail that the skeptical hypotheses are false. I will consider

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various responses contrastivists could make regarding these problems, and show that they are unsatisfactory. I will then argue that contextualists, if they wish to respect the wide diversity of our intuitive judgments about knowledge claims, ought to be epistemic pluralists, that is, they ought to admit a plurality of epistemic standards relative to which knowledge claims can be made.

1. **Contextualism and contrastivism**

Contextualism is the view that knowledge attributions of the form ‘S knows that \( p \)’ have context-sensitive truth conditions. What vary from context to context are the epistemic standards that S must meet for the knowledge claim to be true. In “ordinary”, or “low standards”, contexts, the truth of ‘S knows that \( p \)’ requires, in addition to S’s having a true belief that \( p \), that S satisfy relatively low epistemic standards, whereas in “skeptical”, or “high standards”, contexts, the knowledge claim will be false unless S satisfies higher epistemic standards.

There are different linguistic accounts of the context sensitivity of knowledge claims. One possible view, which we may call the *indexical account*, treats the verb ‘to know’ as an indexical in the broad sense: this verb belongs to the family of context-sensitive expressions that include “pure” indexicals such as ‘I’, ‘today’ and ‘tomorrow’, as well as third-person pronouns, demonstratives and other expressions whose denotations vary depending on the context. According to the indexical account, ‘know’, relative to a given context, designates a relation between a person and a proposition corresponding to certain salient epistemic standards.

But contextualists need not be saddled with the indexical account. Instead of holding that ‘know’ is a context-sensitive expression, contextualists could appeal to a “covert variable” analysis, according to which the context sensitivity of knowledge claims is traced to the presence of a structural position in logical form that is occupied by a hidden variable. On the *hidden variable account*, ‘know’ is a 3-place predicate with a covert argument place that takes epistemic standards as values. Thus, the logical form of ‘S knows that \( p \)’ is something like ‘S knows that \( p \) according to standards \( E \)’, where ‘\( E \)’ is a free variable whose value is fixed in context.

Another option for contextualists is what we may call the *unarticulated constituent account*. According to this account, knowledge sentences are syntactically complete, but fail to express complete propositions indepen-