

In this essay, I will be examining a case of knowledge attributions from the perspective of an ascriber contextualist. The case being one in which a woman, Brenda, has come to the belief that a lottery ticket she purchased has lost. At the same time, she happens to be walking along the beach and, by chance, sees some crabs. In fact, Brenda gets a good look at these crabs, in good conditions, from just a short distance away. It is given in the case that it is true that: (a) her lottery ticket lost, and (b) she judged correctly that there are crabs on the beach—making both beliefs, at minimum, true beliefs. However, it seems strange to attest that she *knows* her ticket, but intuitive that she knows there are crabs on the beach. I endeavor, then, to show how it's consistent that she *doesn't* know in the case of the lottery ticket, while simultaneously knowing in the case of the crabs. As such, in this essay I will provide a basic account of contextualism in general and argue that this account is the best to explain the consistency of these two premises, especially when considering David Lewis' "Rules of Relevance".

Contextualism

Contextualism is a theory concerning knowledge ascriptions. That is, it considers whether, in individual cases, we are allowed to apply knowledge to someone—in other words, whether or not we are allowed to state that they *know* something. Regarding knowledge attributions, the contextualist says that the truth-value of said ascription is sensitive to the context of that ascription. That is to say, in the case that subject S believes proposition p, and p is true, the positive epistemic standing required for S to be ascribed knowledge is variable according to features within the context. Positive epistemic standing here is simply referring to whatever may transform a true belief into knowledge (e.g., justification, warrant, etc.). However, this positive epistemic standing is not affected by the context, only the amount of standing required for the knowledge ascription.¹

¹ DeRose (1992): 914ff.

It is important to note that there are multiple theories that may all fall under the term ‘contextualism’. For example, Lewis eschews ‘justification’ as a necessary or sufficient element of knowledge, as such he adopts a “Relevant Alternatives” approach to contextualism that I’ll adopt partially for this argument. Furthermore, although Lewis denies justification in regard to knowledge, I tend to agree with Stewart Cohen that Lewis is merely denying a specific ‘justification’, rather than a general justification as it is usually used.² As such, I’d assert that it’s reasonable to utilize Lewis’ rules, though he might not subscribe to a ‘justification’ doctrine. There is also a ‘Subject’ Contextualism, described by DeRose, however it seems to simply be another way of saying either Ascriber Contextualism or Subject-Sensitive Invariantism, depending on who’s espousing it. DeRose too states that if the way he described it is correct, “then sign [him] up” implying that subject contextualism is essentially the same as the ascriber contextualism he subscribes to.³ For this argument, I’ll be using ascriber contextualism, of which Relevant Alternatives is a branch, which posits that it isn’t simply the ascribee’s context—only the context that the subject is aware of—but the ascriber’s context that affects the required amount of positive epistemic standing. With that said, we have sufficiently explained the basics of contextualism and can move on to the argument (fluff)

Crabby Case

When considering this case, it seems as though Brenda has equivalent positive epistemic standing for both her belief that her lottery ticket lost and that there are crabs on the beach. However, as it is under contextualism, we must look at the *context* in which she formed each of these beliefs. For her belief about her lottery ticket, she comes to be justified through probabilistic reasoning, a volatile basis for knowledge. On the crabs, she comes to be justified

² Cohen (1998): 290

³ DeRose (2009): 22-23

through sense-perception, a basis that (when setting aside skepticism) is quite strong. This appears to be an intuitive solution for the contextualist, unfortunately, it is **not**. This would be a solution (if it truly were one) for the invariantist, whose standards always remain the same and justification is dynamic. Furthermore, although this seems like a solution that would work, the case specifically states that, “The probability that her ticket wins is the same as the probability that, when she judges that there are crabs on the beach after a good look in good light conditions...” This means that the positive epistemic standing for both beliefs is *necessarily* the same; there is no variation in the “epistemic juice” that Brenda has between her two beliefs. What does change, however, with the context in the case, is the required standing for her beliefs to become knowledge. Her belief requires relatively low positive epistemic standing, due to the context that she’s just asserting that she saw crabs on a beach. Let’s consider ourselves, the ascriber in this case, and our intuitions about Brenda’s knowledge.

- 1) Our claim that Brenda does know that there are crabs on the beach is true.
- 2) Our claim that Brenda *does not* know that her lottery ticket lost is true.
- 3) The positive epistemic standing for both of Brenda’s beliefs is equivalent.

From the combination of these three premises, if one is arguing that (1) and (2) are consistent, that there is a distinction in the required epistemic standing for the two beliefs—precisely the position held by the contextualist. In other words, they lead us to accept:

- 4) The claim that (1) and (2) are true at the same time, is due to the context in which they were uttered.

At this point, one might wonder what exactly it is about the context makes the required positive epistemic standing increase. Why is it that the context of Brenda’s belief about her lottery ticket makes her, seemingly watertight, justification not enough? For this I appeal to David Lewis’ so called “rules of relevance”.⁴

⁴ Most information in the succeeding section is found in: (Lewis (1996): 554-560)

Lewisian Support

I begin this analysis of context with the “Rule of Actuality”, we cannot rule out the actually obtaining possibility, which, in this case, is that the ticket did, in fact lose. Then we move to the “Rule of Belief”, that we cannot rule out the possibility which the subject believes to obtain, in this case the same as the actually obtaining possibility. Now the final prohibitive rule of relevance: “Rule of Resemblance”, which states that we aren’t able to “properly ignore” a possibility that can be said to “saliently resemble” another possibility that is already unable to be ignored. That is to say, if we have possibility A, unable to be ignored (due to the Rule of Actuality or Belief), then possibility B, given that it saliently resembles possibility A. To saliently resemble another possibility would be to resemble that possibility with respect to an important or noticeable aspect.⁵ In our case with Brenda, possibility A would be that her lottery ticket lost, unignorable due to both the Actuality and Belief rules, possibility B is that her lottery ticket won, for, as we get from Lewis, “For every ticket there is the possibility that it will win.”. Therefore, the possibility that Brenda’s ticket won saliently resembles the possibility that her ticket lost; thus, we are not allowed to ignore the winning possibility. From this, we have confirmed that, when considering the contextualist viewpoint, premise 2 can be said to be true.

One might attempt to take this point and turn it against us with premise 1, asserting that: “Well if a winning possibility saliently resembles the losing possibility and can’t be ignored, then doesn’t the possibility that there are no crabs on the beach saliently resemble the possibility that there are crabs, thus rendering it unignorable?” While I do acknowledge this point, I think it only truly becomes a problem once we reach the “Rule of Attention”. The rule of attention requires that, if a possibility is brought to our attention, we can’t legitimately ignore it. Further, it only becomes a problem once it reaches *that* point due to the “Rule of Reliability”, as this states that

⁵ This part of Lewis’ account isn’t very substantiated to be fair, however, I will not attempt to substantiate it here.

so long as our means of knowing something (in this case that there are crabs on the beach) is reliable, then we can simply “take them for granted”—that is, possibilities where they fail can be reasonably ignored. For this piece of knowledge, our means of knowing was sense-perception, specifically in completely *good* conditions, therefore, it is safe to assume that we can take this possibility for granted and ignore the possibilities where our senses failed and there were actually no crabs on the beach. It does reach a problem at the rule of attention, however, because the rule of attention essentially allows for skepticism. Bringing up the possibility that Brenda was on hallucinogens and simply thought she saw crabs on the beach, makes such a possibility unignorable—we can only run into hard skepticism from this rule. **However**, it was said in the case that the skeptic can be ignored, **and** no possibility is brought up *within* the case, only in my defense here, so I believe that any case where premise 1 may be said to be false (i.e., due to sense failure) can be reasonably ignored. Therefore, I have successfully argued that, in the face of opposition, both premise 1 and premise 2 are consistent attributions of knowledge to Brenda under the pretense of contextualism.

Works Cited

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