

Contextualism in Contemporary Philosophy

Theme Note

Contextualist approach in Philosophy has been gaining momentum in recent years, especially in the fields of Logic, Epistemology, philosophy of language and Moral science. It is an interesting question why contextualism enjoys this privileged status in contemporary philosophical discussions: In Logic it might be due to the fact that contextualism promises a respectable approach to the closure principle, and in Epistemology it might be due to the fact that most people share the intuition that contextual factors are important when it comes to evaluating whether someone has knowledge. The fact that there emerged no consensus among epistemologists to resolve problems regarding knowledge analysis that arose during the post Gettier period gave an added impetus to contextualist solutions to the knowledge crisis. A third possibility would lie in that epistemologists already being tired of the ongoing debate on knowledge analysis were prepared to welcome any theory that departs from this. As far as Moral field is concerned, that moral discourses need to be context sensitive has been approved as a norm since the beginning postmodern era. However, despite the enormous interest recorded on contextualism, there is a general feeling that contextualist solutions to philosophical analyses have certain inherent difficulties. Thus, while contextualism remains as the most fashionable and acceptable theory in epistemic circles, philosophers also have reservations in accounting contextualist elements in normative epistemology. This dual stand towards contextualism demands a careful study and attention of scholars to discern what is worthwhile, if any, in this theory.

The versions of contextualism that have received attention in the contemporary epistemological literature are the versions developed by De Rose, Cohen, Lewis and Williams. There are some commonalities ascribed to all these four versions: First, all of them express that truth conditions of knowledge attributing and knowledge denying sentences somehow involve contextual matters due to certain characteristics of *knows*. Second, they all claim to solve the sceptical paradox in a way better than the other contenders in the field. However, contextualist theories vary in respect of the different positions philosophers adopt with regard to the following: 1) whose context is relevant, and 2) what it is that changes in accordance with features of the context. With regard to the first issue *Attributer Contextualists* defend that the

relevant context is the context of the attributer of knowledge. *Subject contextualists*, on the other, have maintained that the context of the subject is what matters. Leading Attributer Contextualists Cohen and De Rose found their versions of contextualism in the semantic thesis; both argue that the term *knows* has a fixed character but a shifty content. However, they differ with regard to the nature of the indexical model for *knows*: for Cohen gradable terms like *tall* or *flat* are the models for *knows*, while for DeRose *I* and *here* function as the models for indexicals. The present seminar aims to move beyond generic contextualism and concentrate on the semantic mechanism essential for attributer contextualism, the mechanism that provide an account of the underlying linguistic factors responsible for the varying truth conditions that govern knowledge – attributing and knowledge - denying sentences.

Contextualism that functions as a semantic thesis attend to the word *knows* and related language rather than contextualism as a thesis responding to the traditional problems in epistemology. In order to explore the semantic implications to knowledge analysis we may take a closer look at the *Attributor contextualism*, a version of contextualism popular for supporting semantic thesis. It maintains that the truth value of a knowledge claim can vary across attributor contexts. To put it formally:

AC: For the very same S and p, at the very same time t, a sentence of the form ‘S Knows that p’ can be true relative to one speaker context and false relative to a different speaker context.

There is a charge that Contextualism as a position explained above is about knowledge attributions and denials of knowledge, and isn't a theory about knowledge at all, hence it is not a piece of epistemology but of the philosophy of language. The question whether Contextualism is a part of epistemology or Philosophy of language remains as a major worry with regard to contextualism. The worry is that contextualism robs epistemology of its proper subject matter. If *knows* picks out different properties in different contexts, there could not be *knowledge* as such, instead we will be confined to *knowledge language* and their properties that vary according to changing contexts. In other words, if truth conditions of locutions such as ‘S knows that’ vary wildly across contexts, it would amount to epistemology losing its status as a discipline. To borrow the language of Greco, “... our

epistemological language (would) fail to pick out a class of phenomena that admits of theoretical study.” (John Greco: *Philosophical Quarterly*, P.423).

We may note that the above objector is not seeking to deny the importance of the Philosophy of language as such, but its importance in epistemology. This denial seems extremely rash; though contextualism / Invariantism is an issue in philosophy of language it has definite potential to be of profound importance to epistemology. As Keith De Rose points out, “It is essential to a credible epistemology as well as to a responsible account of the semantics of the relevant epistemologically important sentences, that what is proposed about knowledge and one’s claims about the semantics of know(s) work plausibly together across the rather inconsequential boundary between these two subfields of philosophy.” (Keith De Rose, *The Case for Contextualism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, .2009, P. 19). The present seminar aims at analyzing this interplay between the concepts of language and knowledge, and also seeks to focus on the philosophy of language as applied to the epistemologically vital terms of knowledge.

The second worry is that contextualism robs knowledge claim of its objectivity. To be more specific, contextualism makes the truth of knowledge claims interest - depend in a way that steals them of their objectivity. A closer look at the problem would reveal that the issue at hand is raised against interest - dependent theories in general, theories maintaining that the truth value of knowledge claims depends on the interest and orientation of a person or a group. The opposite camp of interest independent theories rule out the possibility of truth value of knowledge claims varying in terms of the interest of people. The present project would address this problem, whether knowledge claims which are interest dependent threatens the subject matter of epistemology or the objectivity of knowledge claim.

Hypothetically it is proposed that even if the interest dependent truth conditions of knowledge claims vary across practical environments, the social function of those claims will severely restrict the ranges and kinds of variability that are allowed. Suppose that I need to know whether p , and that in a different context S announces, ‘I know that p ’. In order for her to be a source for my knowledge I will have to assure myself that the standards by which S counts as *knowing* in whatever context she claims knowledge, are as high, or higher than my epistemic commitments. Also note that the information sharing function of our language puts pressure on the

standards for knowledge in an upward direction, in other words, the standards for knowledge cannot be so low as to make knowledge unusable. In fact the need for sharing knowledge across different practical environments creates pressure towards stability. Given the information – sharing function of our knowledge language, we can expect that the mechanisms by which explanatory salience are distributed will be largely stable across practical contexts. Therefore, we may reasonably presume that interest relativity, either in terms of attributor’s interest or in terms of subject’s interest, poses no threat to epistemology or its subject matter.

It is indeed disturbing for any epistemologist to assume that the truth values of knowledge claims are interest – dependent. It seems wrong to claim that S’s belief that the next plane will reach Chicago by 5 pm (basing her belief on a published schedule) is false so long as her life depends on it, but true when that is no longer the case. This worry let’s resolve it this way: Interest – dependent theories are not committed to the claim that interests can affect the truth value in just any way; on the other hand, such theories will restrict the ways in which interests affect the truth values of the epistemic claims. Here we need to make a distinction between perceived interests and actual interests. Also often it is misleadingly propagated that it is the interest of some individual alone that is taken into consideration. It is more plausible that the truth values of knowledge claims depend on the actual interests of some relevant group than that of an individual. The present project, it is anticipated would dive deep in to this problem seeking ways in which knowledge analysis can be made context sensitive while all through retaining the objectivity it has been holding.

Objectives of Conducting the Seminar:

1. Even as Contextualism receives attention of epistemologist’s globe wide, philosophers also have reservations in accepting contextualist solutions as they fear it would robe off its objectivity and normative status. The present project aims to examine the dubious dual stand maintained by philosophers on this matter.
2. To focus on the semantic mechanism essential for attributer contextualism, the mechanism that provide an account of the underlying linguistic mechanism responsible for the varying truth conditions that govern knowledge – attributing and knowledge - denying sentences.

3. To examine the charge that Contextualism as a position is about knowledge attributions and denials of knowledge, and hence it is not a piece of epistemology but of the philosophy of language.
4. It aims at analyzing the interplay between the concepts of language and knowledge, and also seek to focus on the philosophy of language as applied to the epistemologically vital terms of knowledge.
5. The present Seminar project would also address whether knowledge claims that are interest dependent threatens the subject matter of epistemology.
6. Seek ways in which knowledge analysis can be made context sensitive while retaining the objectivity it has been preserving.
7. The project endeavours to extend the scope of research to Indian epistemology, especially Buddhist knowledge analysis to see the implications it carries for a contextualist approach.
8. Revise the notion of Justification in terms of Contextualism.
9. To examine the viability of contextualist solution to skepticism.
10. To determine the limits of Contextualism as an epistemic theory.

(b) Sub-titles or allied aspects of the theme/area in which papers from contributors will be invited

1. Contextualism and the Linguistic Turn in Epistemology
2. Epistemic Modals in Contexts
3. Contextualism and Skeptical Paradox
4. Semantics in Contextualism
5. Contextualism and Indexicality
6. Contextualism, Invariantism and Relevant Alternatives
7. Varieties of Contextualism

8. Challenges and Limits to Contextualism
9. Contextualism in Ethics
10. Contextualism in Logic

You are cordially invited to present a well-researched and well thought out paper. We appreciate analytic papers only and not descriptive ones. Selected papers will be presented after evaluation by competent experts. Kindly send your learned papers latest by 10th January, 2017 via email to sree_kala_nair@yahoo.com , chaaaavi@gmail.com in Hindi or English (Typed, doc format, English – Times New Roman fonts size 12, Hindi –Unicode or any other font, size 14-16 (in the case of any other fonts than Unicode please send font also). The venue of the seminar will be ICPR Academic Centre, Lucknow. Selected participant shall be provided free hospitality and travel as per ICPR rules.