

## *The Context-Insensitivity of 'Knowing More' and 'Knowing Better'*

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This paper argues that if epistemological contextualism is correct, then not only have knowledge-ascribing sentences context-sensitive truth conditions, certain comparative and superlative constructions involving 'know' have context-sensitive truth conditions as well. But not only is there no evidence for the truth of the latter consequence, the evidence seems to indicate that it is false.

The position I aim to criticize has been defended by, most notably, Stewart Cohen, Keith DeRose, and David Lewis.<sup>1</sup> While the contextualist theories offered by these authors differ in their details, the problem to be presented seems to arise irrespective of these details. And though in most of the illustrations below I rely on Lewis's account, I could have made essentially the same points in terms of any of the other accounts.

### I

According to contextualists, the truth conditions of instances of the schema

(+) S knows that *P*

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1 See, e.g., Cohen 1987, 1988, 1999; DeRose 1992, 1995, 1999a; Lewis 1979, 1996.

are sensitive to context. That is to say, whether an instance of (+) is true depends not only on the referents of 'S' and 'P' and the holding of certain relations between these referents, but also on the conversational context in which the sentence is uttered or being evaluated. More formally, we can say that on this account for a person S to know a proposition P, S must have evidence ruling out all relevant not-P possibilities, but not necessarily the nonrelevant not-P possibilities — where it depends on the context which possibilities are relevant and which are not. As a result, S may qualify as knowing that P in one context and at the same time, but in a different context, as not knowing that P; certain not-P possibilities that S's evidence fails to rule out may be relevant in the latter, but irrelevant in the former context.

The theory has recently been much touted for allowing us to acknowledge the force of the skeptic's arguments while maintaining — though not in the same breath — that we have a good deal of everyday knowledge. We are asked to recognize that what qualifies as knowledge in a context in which some skeptical scenario is relevant is not the same as what qualifies as knowledge in the more pedestrian types of context in which the vast majority of knowledge claims are being made. If the skeptic brings to our attention that, for all we know, we are brains in a vat (say), thereby making that possibility relevant, she in effect induces a shift in the contents of the words 'know' and 'knowledge'.<sup>2</sup> Thus when in a skeptical context we deny most or all instances of (+), we are only *apparently* contradicting our former selves who affirmed the very same sentences.

## II

Contextualists are well aware that if the mechanism they allege to be operative in our use of the words 'know' and 'knowledge' were associated only with those words, their position would appear egregiously ad hoc. They are thus concerned to show that the linguistic behavior 'know' exhibits (according to their theory) is not in any sense peculiar but is in fact common to a large class of words.<sup>3</sup> So when they tell us — as they often do — that 'know' linguistically behaves in a fashion similar to such

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2 And in that of their cognates, such as '(epistemically) possible' and '(epistemically) certain'; see DeRose 1999a, 189.

3 Cohen even goes so far as to assert that the behavior may be shared by most predicates in natural language (Cohen 1999, 60).

words as 'short,' 'flat,' 'high,' and 'bald,' this is meant to serve more than merely pedagogical purposes.<sup>4</sup>

Grant, then, that the content of 'high' is context-sensitive; what counts as high may vary from one context to another. While it follows from this that sentences of the form '*x* is high' have context-sensitive truth conditions, it does not follow that sentences of the form '*x* is higher than *y*' or '*x* is highest' ('*x* is higher than every *y* different from *x*'/'*x* is the highest *N*,' with *N* a count noun) have context-sensitive truth conditions as well. I say the pile of firewood behind my house is high. But then we start recollecting our last holiday in the Swiss Alps, particularly discussing the altitudes of various of the mountains we saw, and it may no longer be true that the pile of firewood behind my house is high. It remains true, however, that the Eiger is higher than the pile of firewood. In effect, this remains true even in a (presumably rather outré) context in which the Eiger fails to qualify as high. Similarly, if there is no pile of firewood in the world higher than the one behind my house, the latter is the highest pile of firewood even in contexts in which it does not qualify as high at all. Thus, in contrast to sentences attributing height to some object(s), sentences comparing two or more (or all) objects with respect to their height, do *not* have context-sensitive truth conditions. More generally, 'high' satisfies the following principles:<sup>5</sup>

- (C) For all *x* and *y*: If it is true/false in a conversational context that *x* is *A*-er than *y* (or that *x* is more *A* than *y*), then that remains true/false given any shift in that context.
- (S) For all *x*, *y* and *N* a count noun: If it is true/false in a conversational context that *x* is the *A*-est *N* (that *x* is the most *A* *N*, that *x* is *A*-er than every *y* that is an *N* and that is different from *x*), then that remains true/false given any shift in that context.<sup>6</sup>

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4 Unger (1971) may have been the first to liken 'know' to adjectives such as 'flat' and 'bald' (saying they are all 'absolute' terms), though his purpose for so doing was rather different from that of contextualists, namely, to defend a sweeping skeptical view.

5 For the sake of explicitness, I am stating separate principles for the comparative and superlative constructions. As the reader can easily verify, however, it is not possible for an adjective to satisfy / fail to satisfy one without satisfying / failing to satisfy the other.

6 It is assumed that the count noun is not context-sensitive. Else it might well happen that a sentence of the form '*x* is the *A*-est *N*' is true before a context shift and false after it even though the superlative itself is context-insensitive.

And not only 'high' satisfies (C) and (S), but so do 'short,' 'flat,' and 'bald.' This is not to suggest, of course, that *every* adjective satisfies these principles. While I do suspect that adjectives violating (C) and (S) are rare, it will appear that nothing of essence hinges on how widely these principles apply.<sup>7</sup>

What for our concerns does matter, and crucially so, is that whether a given adjective satisfies the above principles has significant consequences for the legitimacy of certain inferential practices involving the adjective. Typically, when I'm told that some object *a* is higher than another object *b*, while earlier in the same conversation I was told that *b* is higher than a third object *c*, then, if I trust my conversation partner or partners, I unhesitatingly infer, or at least am willing to infer, that *a* is higher than *c*. In particular, I am typically willing to do so without seeing any need to first check whether during the course of the conversation a context shift has occurred that might affect the truth value of the earlier assertion. Similarly, when I'm told of a certain object *d* that it is an *N*, while some time earlier in the conversation I was told of another object *e* that it is the highest *N*, then, again provided I trust my conversation partner(s), I typically unhesitatingly infer or am willing to infer that *e* is higher than *d*. It is clear that such inferences constitute correct and legitimate intellectual procedure. But it is equally clear that they would not do so if 'high' did not satisfy (C) and (S). In that case the procedure might well lead to inferences that, given his or her conversational context at the moment the inference is made, the person making the inference should regard as being unsound.

It is further important to note that the foregoing suggests that, if a person can be held to care for correct intellectual procedure at all, testing his or her willingness in certain types of circumstance to unhesitatingly make certain types of inference involving an adjective *A* provides some-

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7 An anonymous referee suggested that 'beautiful' might be an example of an adjective not obeying principles (C) and (S); an anonymous editor suggested 'wealthy' as another candidate term. Both further suggested that this might be because 'beautiful' and, respectively, 'wealthy' are contextual along more than one dimension, and also that 'know' might fail to obey the principles for the same reason. I can easily grant their first suggestions: as was indicated in the text, for our purposes it is inessential what number of adjectives fail to obey (C) and (S). As to their suggestion regarding 'know,' it does matter for my argument *that* 'know,' on a contextualist understanding of it, fails to obey (C) and (S) (and I shall argue that, so understood, it fails to obey these principles indeed), but it is utterly unimportant *why* it fails to do so; in the end, the contextualist will be challenged to provide evidence, not an explanation, for the fact (as I will claim it must be if contextualism is right) that 'know' fails to obey (C) and (S).

thing of a method of determining whether s/he regards *A* as satisfying principles (C) and (S). Clearly, unwillingness to make instantaneously an inference of any of the types in question does not necessarily mean that the person believes *A* to not satisfy (C) and (S). For instance, you may be told that Harry is taller than Sue, and also that Sue is taller than Kate, but not trust your conversation partner on this matter and hence refuse to infer — not just instantaneously — that Harry is taller than Kate. But if you persistently are unwilling to make this type of inference involving 'tall' instantaneously, regardless of the specificities of the conversational setting, then that gives reason to believe you regard 'tall' as not satisfying (C) and (S).<sup>8</sup> Conversely, if you typically *are* willing to make this type of inference instantaneously, then that gives reason to believe you do regard 'tall' as satisfying (C) and (S). And supposing that it makes little sense to say that all or most speakers of a language regard a certain term belonging to that language as being context-sensitive/context-insensitive but that it really *is* context-insensitive/context-sensitive, it can be concluded that, if all or most speakers tend to be willing/unwilling to make, in certain types of circumstance, certain types of inference involving a particular adjective, that gives reason to believe the adjective does/does not satisfy (C) and (S).<sup>9</sup>

### III

Can we sensibly speak of comparative and superlative constructions involving 'know' or 'knowledge'? It seems we can. Let Kate's knowledge (given our present context) consist of propositions  $P_1$ ,  $P_2$ , and  $P_3$ , none of which is known by Harry. Harry's knowledge (given the same context) consists of propositions  $P_4$  and  $P_5$ . Then we may say that Kate knows more, has more knowledge, is more knowledgeable, than Harry. (If such verdicts should also depend on some measure of the informativeness of

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8 How *much* reason to believe it gives will depend on the extent to which alternative explanations of your persistent unwillingness can be ruled out or at least are implausible. For instance, suppose an evidently rational person who appears to understand the word 'tall' perfectly well is typically willing to make inferences of the types in question unhesitatingly if these inferences involve some adjective or adjectives other than 'tall.' Further suppose that, by contrast, s/he is typically willing to make similar inferences involving 'tall,' if at all, only after some reflection. Then that would seem to give excellent evidence that s/he considers 'tall' as not satisfying (C) and (S). Under other conditions the evidence may be less good, of course.

9 But the supposition is not entirely uncontroversial; see §IV.

propositions, just stipulate that all the  $P_i$  are equally informative according to that measure.) Correspondingly, we may say that, of the two, Kate knows most, or is the most knowledgeable person.

And if Lewis (1996, 234) is right, there is another, 'qualitative' type of comparative/superlative construction involving 'know' besides the above 'quantitative' type. According to him, we can have better or worse knowledge of a given proposition.<sup>10</sup> Better knowledge 'rests more on the elimination of ... possibilities, less on the [proper] ignoring of them' (ibid.; Lewis refers to the contextually irrelevant possibilities as the ones properly ignored in the given context). Put graphically, if the line dividing the not- $P$  possibilities that are eliminated by  $S$ 's evidence from the not- $P$  possibilities that are not eliminated by that evidence precisely coincides with the line dividing the not- $P$  possibilities that are from those that are not relevant in a given context, then  $S$ 's knowledge of  $P$  is worse (in that context) than it would be were his/her evidence to rule out also some of the not- $P$  possibilities that are irrelevant. In the latter case,  $S$ 's knowledge of  $P$  is better because it is 'more stable ... : it stands more chance of surviving a shift of attention in which we begin to attend to some of the possibilities formerly ignored' (ibid.). So if, given some context, one person's evidence rules out not only all relevant not- $P$  possibilities but also some irrelevant not- $P$  possibilities, whereas another person's evidence only rules out the relevant not- $P$  possibilities, then, in that context, the former person knows  $P$  better than the latter does, and thus also, of the two, the former knows  $P$  best. We'll say that, if one person knows a proposition  $P$  better than another person, the former is more knowledgeable with respect to  $P$  than the latter, or, more briefly, the former is more knowledgeable( $P$ ) than the latter.

Let us now see how 'knowledgeable' and 'knowledgeable(\_)' behave with respect to principles (C) and (S).

Suppose Kate's and Harry's respective belief sets are almost identical. The only differences are that, first, in addition to the beliefs she shares with Harry, Kate believes  $P_1$  and  $P_2$  and, second, in addition to the beliefs he shares with Kate, Harry believes  $P_3$ . Suppose further that, in our present conversational context, we can truly ascribe knowledge of every proposition they believe to Kate and Harry. Thus, in that context Kate can be said to know more than Harry. But now it may well happen that, because of something one of us says, a shift in context is brought about which makes some not- $P_1$  possibilities as well as some not- $P_2$  possibilities relevant that are not ruled out by Kate's evidence. We thus can no longer

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10 Hetherington (2001) offers a book-length defense of the same claim.

ascribe knowledge of  $P_1$  and  $P_2$  to her. This assumption is perfectly consistent with our still being in a position to ascribe knowledge to Harry of all the propositions that he was said to know in our earlier context (that a not- $P_1$  and/or a not- $P_2$  possibility not ruled out by Kate's evidence becomes relevant in our conversation does not entail that some not- $P_3$  possibility not ruled out by Harry's evidence becomes relevant, too). So, in our new context, Harry has suddenly come to have more knowledge than Kate.<sup>11</sup> And if, before the shift, Kate knew most (of all people), then she will no longer do so after the shift. In fact, after the shift it may be Harry who knows most.

The context-sensitivity of quantitative comparisons of people's knowledge is even clearer when we assume that one of us introduces some skeptical scenario into the conversation. That will leave both Kate and Harry with very little or even no knowledge, and in any case with no appreciable difference regarding the amount of knowledge they possess. So, after a shift to a skeptical context neither can be said to know more than the other does. (Shifts to less extreme contexts can of course also have this effect: if in the example in the previous paragraph only certain not- $P_1$  possibilities not eliminable by Kate's evidence [and so no not- $P_2$  possibilities] had become relevant after the shift in context, that would have made Kate and Harry equally knowledgeable, too — and it would have done so in a nontrivial sense, in contrast to a shift to a skeptical context.)

*First intermediate conclusion:* if contextualism is correct, then 'knowledgeable' does not satisfy (C) and (S).

To see that the same holds with respect to 'knowledgeable(,)', consider the following, adapted version of an example given in Lewis 1996, 234. Both Kate and Harry know there is no cat in their office, but Kate's knowledge of this is better than Harry's. Harry's evidence allows him to rule out the possibility that there is a cat hiding in the wall cabinet but not to rule out (the, given our current context, nonrelevant possibility) that there is one hiding in the filing cabinet nor (the nonrelevant possibility) that there is one in the desk's drawer. Kate's evidence, on the other hand, does allow her to rule out both that there is a cat hiding in the filing cabinet and that there is one hiding in the

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11 In case knowledgeability is taken to be also a matter of the informativeness of the propositions known, then, if the measure of informativeness should be context-sensitive, too, stipulate that at least the shift of context considered here does not affect the informativeness of any of the propositions believed by either Kate or Harry. We may assume that not every shift in context will incur a shift in the measure of informativeness (if that should be context-sensitive).

desk, although it does not allow her to rule out (the nonrelevant possibility) that there is a cat in the wall cabinet. Now one of us says something that makes relevant the possibility that there is a cat in the wall cabinet, but not the possibility that there is a cat hiding in the filing cabinet nor the possibility that there is a cat hiding in the desk. That suffices to destroy Kate's knowledge of there not being a cat in the office, but it leaves Harry's knowledge of that fact unscathed.<sup>12</sup> As a result, Harry now is more knowledgeable([the proposition] that there is no cat in the office) than Kate, even though only moments ago Kate was more knowledgeable(that there is no cat in the office) than Harry. Also, at least of the two, Harry now is the most knowledgeable(that there is no cat in the office) person. And, of course, had we mentioned some skeptical scenario, that would have made Kate and Harry equally knowledgeable(that there is no cat in the office) (namely, not knowledgeable[that there is no cat in the office] at all).

*Second intermediate conclusion:* if contextualism is correct, then 'knowledgeable(\_)' fails to satisfy (C) and (S), too.

#### IV

What are we to make of these conclusions? A first, quite reasonable (I think) answer goes as follows: That at one point in time Kate knows more than Harry does, does not imply that at some later point in time

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12 Does not the becoming relevant of the possibility that there is a cat in the wall cabinet, at the same time make relevant the possibilities in which there is a cat hiding in the filing cabinet and the desk, respectively? If so, then Harry would stop knowing that there is no cat in the office, too. It might seem that Lewis's (1996, 227f) Rule of Resemblance indeed has this effect. However, as Lewis emphasizes, for this rule to apply the resemblance has to be salient, where salience is also a matter of context. And we can just stipulate that, in the present context, the resemblance between the possibility in which a cat is in the wall cabinet and, say, the possibility in which there is one in the filing cabinet is not salient. Alternatively, we could add further details to the story so as to make the resemblance not even *prima facie* salient. Surely that some possibility that undermines Kate's knowledge of there not being a cat in the office is brought to our attention does not *ipso facto* bring to our attention a possibility undermining Harry's knowledge of the same fact. Apart from this, even if the becoming relevant of the possibility that there's a cat in the wall cabinet should necessarily make relevant one or both of the other mentioned possibilities, the point to be made in the text would still hold. For in that case after the context shift Kate and Harry would have become equally knowledgeable with regard to the proposition that there is no cat in their office, even though before the shift Kate was more knowledgeable with regard to it.

Harry cannot know more than Kate does. All sorts of things could happen to Kate and/or Harry that would make Harry the more knowledgeable (and/or more knowledgeable[*P*], for some *P*) of the two. Such phenomena are commonplace and philosophically entirely unproblematic. By contrast, that no more than a shift in conversational context should be needed to radically change or annihilate previously existing quantitative and/or qualitative distinctions between different people's knowledge states, is downright absurd — about as absurd as the thought that a mere shift in conversational context is sufficient to reverse the order of height between the Eiger and the pile of firewood behind my house, or to make them the same height. Thus we must reject contextualism on the grounds that it has some absurd consequences.

What I expect contextualists to say in response to this, though, is that the apparent absurdity is due only to a failure to recognize that what (in some of the examples) Kate is said to possess to a lesser degree than Harry after a shift in context is not the same as what before that shift she was said to possess to a greater degree than Harry; in each of the examples, the shift in context causes a shift in the reference of 'know.' They might add that there is not really anything special about the previous examples, given that, apparently at least, a shift in context may suffice to turn a high pile of firewood into a nonhigh one (and perhaps even a low one), or a flat surface into a nonflat one, or a tall person into a nontall person, and so forth.

For all I have said in this paper, we are under no obligation to accept a contextualist semantics for terms such as 'high,' 'flat,' and 'short,' and the foregoing may well provide a reason to reject that kind of semantics, both for these terms and for 'know.'<sup>13</sup> Still, since — notoriously — intuitions about what is and what is not absurd vary widely among philosophers, it seems preferable not to rest a case against contextualism on just such intuitions. And we need not, for a safer strategy appears to be at hand.<sup>14</sup>

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13 See Stanley (2000) for some compelling arguments against context-sensitive semantics generally.

14 For those wanting to pursue the absurdity charge against contextualism, it is worth mentioning that, even if a contextualist semantics is granted for 'high' and the like, it seems arguable that the — at least *prima facie* — absurdness of the consequences of the context-sensitivity of comparatives and superlatives of 'knowledgeable' and 'knowledgeable(\_)' is of a different order than the *prima facie* absurdness associated with other allegedly context-sensitive terms. Put formally, the difference is this: the extension of a predicate like 'high' will, provided it is affected by some shift in

The safer strategy starts by asking what evidence there exists for believing that 'know' really has context-sensitive comparatives and superlatives. That feature, if 'know' does have it, might well make the term a linguistic peculiarity; as we saw above, it in any event distinguishes 'know' from most or all paradigmatic cases of putatively context-sensitive terms. Thus the feature would seem to be the sort of thing worth reporting about in the scientific literature. But I have gone through numerous volumes of the top linguistics journals, intensively searched the Linguist List Web Site: there was not the slightest mention of the (putative) context-sensitivity of 'knowing more' and 'knowing better.' In fact, there was not even an indication that the word 'know' (or 'knowledge') has attracted any special attention in linguistics. And yet I did find, rather unsurprisingly, that, like philosophers, linguists have a penchant for the peculiar.

But even if the feature should be common, or otherwise devoid of scientific interest, *we* should expect to find evidence for it when we consider our thoughts and reactions in everyday conversations, for it follows from contextualism that this feature manifests itself not just in shifts to skeptical contexts, but also — as some of the examples of §III lay bare — in quite mundane shifts in context. What form such evidence could take can be gleaned from our discussion (in §II) of the relation between principles (C) and (S) and certain of our inferential practices. Suppose we were to find that, typically, when in a conversation we conclude that one person knows more than a second person, while some time earlier in that conversation we had concluded that the second person knows more than a third person, we are, if at all, prepared to infer that the first person knows more than the third person only after we have carefully checked that in the meantime we have not shifted to some context in which our earlier verdict that the first person knows more than the second no longer holds good. Then, as previously explained, that would be evidence for the context-sensitivity of 'knowing more.' But that's clearly not what we find.<sup>15</sup> Rather we seem to find the

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context at all, be either a proper subset or a proper superset of the predicate's extension before the shift. But the extension of the predicate '... knows more than \_' (or the predicate '... knows *P* better than \_' for fixed *P*) may, by a shift in context, be turned into its *anti-extension*, and vice versa. And this is parallel to the — surely not just *prima facie* absurd — possibility that, after some shift in context, each pair of objects  $\langle a, b \rangle$  in the extension of '... is higher than \_' has traded places with the corresponding pair  $\langle b, a \rangle$  that before the shift was in the extension of '... is lower than \_.'

15 The apparent lack of evidence for the context-sensitivity of 'knowing more (most)'

opposite: we seem typically prepared to make inferences of the kind in question quite instantaneously. And if so, then (as was also explained) that provides evidence for the context-*insensitivity* of 'knowing more.'

In response to this, contextualists might admit that we do not find any reports of the linguistic phenomena implied by their position, and that indeed there rather seems to be linguistic evidence for the context-*insensitivity* of 'knowing more' and 'knowing better.' But then they might add that this is not because, as I suggest, 'knowing more' and 'knowing better' are not context-sensitive, but because most speakers are mistaken about the semantics of 'know.' You were much too quick — the reply might go on — when in §II you assumed that from 'all or most speakers *regard* an adjective A as obeying (C) and (S)' we may infer 'A *obeys* (C) and (S)'; people can *wrongly* regard an adjective as obeying (C) and (S).

Prima facie such an error-theoretic response may seem in line with Cohen's (1999) response to Schiffer 1996. In the latter paper, Schiffer charges contextualism with implausibility. Roughly, his claim is that if 'know' really were a context-sensitive term, then a competent speaker of English should know this. But, as Cohen (78) concedes, when asked, most people flatly deny that 'know' is context-sensitive. According to Cohen this does not refute contextualism, however. In his view most people are simply unaware of the correct semantics of 'know,' just as — he claims — most people are unaware of the correct semantics of, for instance, 'flat' (*ibid.*).

But he is quite careful in formulating the concession. He says: 'competent speakers can fail to be aware of [the] context-sensitive standards [for "know"], *at least explicitly ...*' (77), and a bit further on: 'ascriptions of knowledge are relative to context-sensitive standards and yet many competent speakers do not know it — *at least not explicitly*' (78). I have added emphases to these quotations because, though Cohen does not mention this, the restriction of the concession to explicit awareness is crucial. For suppose that, in defense of their position, contextualists had to claim that most competent speakers are not just explicitly but also implicitly unaware of the correct semantics of 'know.' Then it would be hard to make any sense of the contextualist project. It in that case couldn't very well be an attempt to give an account of *our* concept of knowledge. Rather it would have to be viewed as a proposal for replacing that concept by a different one. Such a revisionary project, it appears, would

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seems more serious than the apparent lack of evidence for the context-sensitivity of 'knowing better (best)': the former indisputably is part of everyday discourse, the latter may be somewhat less natural (cf. Lewis 1996, 239n for a possible explanation).

be of little or no interest, and in any event it is clear that this is not the project contextualists want to engage in.

Speakers' implicit awareness of the context-sensitivity of 'know,' if it exists, will have to surface at the level of language usage. And Cohen, and also DeRose, are indeed concerned to give examples of such usage that in their view exhibit that speakers at least implicitly regard 'know' as being context-sensitive.<sup>16</sup> As Rysiew (2001) has recently shown, the linguistic phenomena these authors point to do not require a (semantically) contextualist explanation at all; they can also (and more plausibly, according to him) be explained by making certain assumptions about the pragmatics, instead of about the semantics, of 'know.'<sup>17</sup> This leaves open, of course, that contextualism is a potential explanation of them. But now consider that in the cases of 'knowing more' and 'knowing better' it is not just that people will explicitly deny that these terms are context-sensitive. Their linguistic usage of them seems to betray that they do not implicitly regard them as being context-sensitive either. So in response to the problem presented in this paper, contextualists would have to hold that competent speakers not only fail to be explicitly aware of the correct semantics of 'know,' but also fail to be implicitly aware of it — which, for the reason just mentioned, can only be maintained on pain of denying the contextualists' enterprise any interest.

There are additional reasons why an error-theoretic response to our problem is highly problematic. For one, it confronts the contextualist with a seemingly formidable explanatory problem (how come we are so vastly mistaken about the meaning of words that figure so prominently in quotidian speech?). In this connection it is telling that Cohen (1999) does not even attempt to explain our explicit unawareness of what he alleges is the correct semantics of 'know.' For another, since (at a minimum) contextualism does not deliver the direct or full-blown kind of response to skepticism epistemologists have traditionally been after,<sup>18</sup> saving it (i.e., contextualism) from the problem presented above by attributing massive error not only to people's explicit knowledge of their language but also to their usage of it will in the eyes of many just be too high a price to pay for the position. And for a third, as Rysiew

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16 See for instance Cohen 1999, 58 and DeRose 1992, 913.

17 See Oakley 2001, 325 for yet another possible explanation.

18 As contextualists are of course aware: cf., for instance, Cohen 1999, 80, 83, DeRose 1999b, 18, and Lewis 1996, 231. According to some critics of the position, it simply addresses the wrong question and thus does not offer a response to skepticism at all; see, among others, Feldman 1999 and Oakley 2001.

(2001, 485) rightly remarks, an error-theoretic response goes straight against the contextualist's rationale, which is to avoid having to attribute too many erroneous beliefs to people. I thus submit that the strategy here depicted can only lead to the conclusion that there is considerable reason to doubt that the comparatives and superlatives of 'know' considered in this paper do behave as they should behave if contextualism were correct.

## V

The first step in my critique was to show that if 'know' is a context-sensitive term, then it has context-sensitive comparatives and superlatives, too, in contrast to many or even most other allegedly context-sensitive terms. For some, this contrast might already be reason to distrust the central contextualist tenet. But that line of thought should be resisted: languages tend to be replete with all sorts of exceptions. Nor could one very well maintain that contextualists should have difficulty explaining *why* 'know' fails to obey (C) and (S): the examples given in §III make it abundantly clear how, on a contextualist understanding of 'know,' this comes about (and contextualists may well be able to provide a 'deeper' explanation; cf. n. 7). As a second step in my critique I urged that the more promising strategy exploits the contextualist's commitment to the context-sensitivity of 'knowing more' and 'knowing better' by pointing out that, first, were these expressions really context-sensitive, this should have noticeable consequences for certain of our inferential practices involving them, and second, that the available evidence about these inferential practices rather seems to support the hypothesis that 'knowing more' and 'knowing better' are *not* context-sensitive. That ought to be an unsettling conclusion for contextualists, whose aim, after all, is to develop a descriptively adequate theory of knowledge.

I can think of two possible ways in which contextualists could successfully counter my critique. First, they might be able to show that there actually *is* linguistic evidence of the sort one would expect to find if 'know' does not satisfy (C) and (S); in my opinion, that would provide *very* strong evidence in favor of contextualism. Second, they might be able to point to certain terms other than 'know' that do not obey (C) and (S) and show that our linguistic practices involving the comparative(s) and/or superlative(s) of these terms are not as we might wish they were, given that we think of ourselves as caring for sound reasoning; that would teach us something new and important about ourselves *qua* reasoners. Plainly, either type of response would, if successful, constitute an advance in our understanding. Pending the development of any such

response, however, I think the foregoing provides ample reason for doubting contextualism.<sup>19</sup>

*Received: October 2002*

*Revised: September 2003*

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19 I am greatly indebted to two anonymous referees and an anonymous editor of the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* for very detailed and helpful comments on a previous version of this paper. Versions of the paper were delivered at the universities of Amsterdam (Free University) and Leuven; I thank the audiences on these occasions for their helpful questions and remarks.