

# Epistemic Contextualism and the Knowability Problem

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**Abstract** The paper critically examines an objection to epistemic contextualism recently developed by Elke Brendel and Peter Baumann, according to which it is impossible for the contextualist to know consistently that his theory is true. I first present an outline of contextualism and its reaction to scepticism. Then the necessary and sufficient conditions for the knowability problem to arise are explored. Finally, it will be argued that contextualism does not fulfil these minimal conditions. It will be shown that the contrary view is based on a misunderstanding of what contextualists are claiming.

**Keywords** Epistemic contextualism · Scepticism · Knowability problem · Factivity problem

Epistemic contextualism has met with a number of objections. It has been argued that it is implausible as a linguistic theory about “know” (e.g., Schiffer 1996), that it does not give the right interpretation of linguistic data (e.g., Lehrer 2000, Schaffer 2004a, Stanley 2005, Hawthorne 2004 and Pritchard 2005), and that it is epistemologically irrelevant since it does not give the right answer to scepticism (e.g., Sosa 2000, Kornblith 2000, Williams 2001). While these types of criticism are directed against the motivation and application of contextualism, recently there have been doubts about its very tenability. Timothy Williamson (2001), Elke Brendel (2003, 2005, 2007, 2009), Peter Baumann (2008, 2010) and Anthony Brueckner & Christopher T. Buford (2009) argue that, given some very plausible epistemic principles, contextualism has what I call the *knowability problem*,<sup>1</sup> i.e., the problem that contextualism implies that the thesis itself (or some important consequences) cannot be consistently known, or claimed to be known, by its proponents.<sup>2</sup> Brendel and Baumann (not Williamson and

<sup>1</sup>Brendel and Baumann speak of the *factivity problem*, since the problem arises only given the factivity of knowledge. I call it the *knowability problem*, since this label better characterises the type of problem we are confronted with.

<sup>2</sup>Crispin Wright (2005) presents a similar difficulty for contextualism. I will not explore whether, and to what extent, the present discussion affects his arguments.

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Brueckner & Buford, however) conclude that either one of the mentioned epistemic principles or contextualism itself must be abandoned.

This article critically examines the thesis that epistemic contextualism has the knowability problem and concludes that this charge is misplaced. It is shown that the argument for the unknowability of contextualism derives from a misunderstanding of its commitments. The article is therefore meant to contribute not only to the understanding of the dialectical situation with respect to the knowability problem, but also to a clarification of the position of contextualism itself. I will remain neutral on the further issues of whether contextualism is correct as a linguistic theory and whether it is significant for epistemology at all.

My argument develops in three steps. In the first section, I introduce the basic tenets of contextualism and its contributions with respect to epistemological questions. In particular, I will discuss what is necessary for contextualism to provide its distinctive answer to the problem of scepticism. Section 2 abstracts from the question of contextualism altogether and considers the knowability problem in general. It will determine the minimal conditions for the knowability problem to arise for arbitrary theories. Once in possession of these conditions, we can straightforwardly determine for any theory whether it does or does not have the knowability problem. Section 3 discusses various suggestions on the commitments of contextualism. It will be argued that contextualism can give its distinctive answer to the problem of scepticism *without* having the knowability problem. Frequently-found stronger interpretations presume contextualism to be an (implausible) empirical theory and misinterpret extant positions of major contextualists.

## 1 Outlines of Contextualism

Epistemic contextualism is a way of explaining the phenomenon that, with respect to a single epistemic situation, we sometimes are and sometimes are not willing to ascribe knowledge to the epistemic subject. DeRose provides the following example:

*Bank Case A.* My wife and I are driving home on a Friday afternoon. We plan to stop at the bank on the way home to deposit our paychecks. But as we drive past the bank, we notice that the lines inside are very long, as they are often on Friday afternoons. Although we generally like to deposit our paychecks as soon as possible, it is not especially important in this case that they be deposited right away, so I suggest that we drive straight home and deposit our paychecks on Saturday morning. My wife says, "Maybe the bank won't be open tomorrow. Lots of banks are closed on Saturdays." I reply, "No, I know it'll be open. I was just there two weeks ago on Saturday. It's open until noon."

*Bank Case B.* My wife and I drive past the bank on a Friday afternoon, as in Case A, and notice the long lines. I again suggest that we deposit our paychecks on Saturday morning, explaining that I was at the bank on Saturday morning only two weeks ago and discovered that it was open until noon. But in this case, we have just written a very large and very important check. If our paychecks are not deposited into our checking account before Monday morning, the important check we wrote will bounce, leaving us in a *very* bad

situation. And, of course, the bank is not open on Sunday. My wife reminds me of these facts. She then says, “Banks do change their hours. Do you know the bank will be open tomorrow?” Remaining as confident as I was before that the bank will be open then, still, I reply, “Well, no. I’d better go in and make sure.” Assume that in both cases the bank *will* be open on Saturday and that there is nothing unusual about either case that has not been included in my description. It seems to me that (1) when I claim to know that the bank will be open on Saturday in case A, I am saying something true. But it also seems that (2) I am saying something true in case B when I concede that I don’t know that the bank will be open on Saturday. (DeRose 1992, p. 913–14)

With respect to the same epistemic situation, DeRose claims, “S knows that p” may be true in one context of utterance and false in another. To resolve the apparent conflict, contextualists propose the semantic thesis that knowledge ascriptions are context-sensitive. As Stewart Cohen, another major proponent of contextualism, describes the position:

[A]scriptions of knowledge are context sensitive. [...] The truth-value of sentences containing the words “know” and its cognates will depend on contextually determined standards. Because of this, such a sentence can have different truth-values in different contexts. [...] This view has the consequence that, given a fixed set of circumstances, a subject S, and a proposition p, two speakers may say “S knows p”, and only one of them thereby say something true. For the same reason, one speaker may say “S knows p”, and another say “S does not know p” (relative to the same circumstances), and both speakers thereby say something true. (Cohen 2000, p. 94; cf. 1998, p. 289 f., and 1999, p. 57; similarly DeRose 1992, p. 914, and 1995, p. 4)

According to this version of contextualism, “knowledge” is an indexical expression, meaning different things in different contexts. Independently of a context of utterance, a sentence containing the word “know” does not express a complete proposition. Though “know” has an invariant Kaplanian character, the context affects its content. Utterances of the same sentence in different contexts may express different propositions and may hence have different truth values.<sup>3</sup>

We can avoid metalinguistic representation of the contextualist ideas by indexing “know” to contexts – letting “know<sub>x</sub>” refer to knowledge of the kind that would be ascribed in context x – and by using a suitable disquotation principle.<sup>4</sup> This makes the representation of knowledge attributions simpler. Instead of “The utterance ‘S knows that p’ made in context x is true”, we say “S knows<sub>x</sub> that p”. And the

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<sup>3</sup> Since the contexts involved are those of the speaker or knowledge-attributor and not those of the epistemic subject herself, it is also customary to speak of “attributor-contextualism”. I here ignore other forms of contextualism, viz., the subject-contextualism defended by John Hawthorne (2004) and Jason Stanley (2005). I also ignore Schaffer’s (2004b) contrastivism.

<sup>4</sup> For this way of representing contextualism, see also Bach 2005. By indexing “know” in the way described, we are not threatened to fall prey to the *fallacy of semantic descent*, which we would be if we were to use disquotation without indexing (see Brendel 2005, p. 46, and Baumann 2008, p. 588 ff.).

statement “The utterance ‘S knows that the utterance “S\* does not know that p” made in context y is true’ made in context x is true” abbreviates to “S knows<sub>x</sub> that S\* does not know<sub>y</sub> that p”, etc.<sup>5,6</sup>

As opposed to the meaning of “know”, the meanings of “know<sub>x</sub>”, “know<sub>y</sub>”, etc., are context-invariant. “S knows<sub>x</sub> that p” says that S’s epistemic position with respect to p is strong enough to meet the standards for the correct application of “knows” operative in context x.<sup>7</sup> John knows<sub>x</sub> that p if and only if (i) knowledge<sub>x</sub> demands a certain strength of epistemic position, and (ii) John’s epistemic position with respect to the proposition p is of the strength demanded by knowledge<sub>x</sub>. Change of context affects neither (i) nor (ii). Knowledge<sub>x</sub> does not “get lost”, if the ascriber moves into a high-standard context. Knowledge<sub>x</sub>-claims are *invariantly* true or false.<sup>8</sup>

Epistemic contextualism as such holds that, in different contexts, different standards operate. Different versions of contextualism may, and do, disagree on what exactly these standards are, i.e., what kind of epistemic position and what strength of it is required in the respective contexts for knowledge ascriptions to be true. To illustrate: For DeRose (1995) the standards concern the distance in logical space through which the belief must track the truth, while Cohen (1988) thinks these standards to concern the degree of justification needed for knowledge. DeRose and Cohen may disagree on whether an epistemic subject with a certain epistemic position does or does not possess knowledge<sub>x</sub>. Contextualism alone does not determine the standards operative in a certain context. It is also silent about such empirical questions as whether a given epistemic subject is or is not in an epistemic position with a certain strength. Whether John’s belief that p does or does not track the truth far enough through the space of possibilities, or whether he has justification to the right degree, is as undetermined by contextualism as whether John has this belief, or whether this belief is true at all. Contextualism alone does not determine whether S does or does not know<sub>x</sub> some proposition p.

The major epistemological motivation for contextualism lies in its promise of successfully responding to the sceptic. Scepticism of the sort considered claims that the standards for knowledge are so high that it is impossible (or at best barely possible) to have any knowledge of empirical, contingent propositions. Let  $\mathfrak{X}$  be the set of possible contexts,  $\mathfrak{S}$  the set of epistemic subjects,  $\mathfrak{T}$  the set of times and  $\mathfrak{P}_e$  the set of contingent empirical propositions.<sup>9</sup> To simplify matters, let me represent “s

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<sup>5</sup> Disquotation can be used only given the legitimate oversimplification that neither ‘S’ nor ‘p’ contains any indexical expression.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Schaffer (2004a, p. 144) has called contextualism “epistemic pluralism”. My rendering makes the pluralistic aspect especially obvious. Note that the object-language rendering can be retranslated into a meta-linguistic version without loss of content.

<sup>7</sup> I borrow the term “strength of epistemic position” and its cognates from DeRose (1995, e.g., p. 34). Note that the strength of the epistemic position is independent of the context of knowledge ascription.

<sup>8</sup> Again, I simplify by assuming such claims to be about complete propositions, not involving other indexical terms, etc.

<sup>9</sup> Throughout this paper, I shall assume that  $\mathfrak{X}$ ,  $\mathfrak{S}$ ,  $\mathfrak{T}$  and  $\mathfrak{P}_e$  are not empty. If one of them is empty, the knowability problem does not arise in the first place.

knows<sub>x</sub> at t that p” by “K<sub>x</sub>(s, t, p)”. The following represents the position of ‘global’ scepticism:<sup>10</sup>

$$(GS) \quad \forall x \in \mathcal{X} \quad \forall s \in \mathcal{S} \quad \forall t \in \mathcal{T} \quad \forall p \in \mathcal{P}_e: \neg \Diamond K_x(s, t, p).$$

Given the contextualist reconstruction, scepticism relies on the following assumptions (in the following, let  $\mathcal{X}_i \subseteq \mathcal{X}$  be the set of possible contexts with knowledge-standard i. In particular, let  $\mathcal{X}_h \subseteq \mathcal{X}$  be the set of high-standard contexts and  $\mathcal{X}_l \subseteq \mathcal{X}$  the set of low-standard contexts. I will make the simplifying assumption that  $\mathcal{X} = \mathcal{X}_h \cup \mathcal{X}_l$ . To abbreviate, I sometimes write ‘K<sub>i</sub>(s, t, p)’ for the more cumbersome ‘ $\exists x [K_x(s, t, p) \text{ and } x \in \mathcal{X}_i]$ ’ and speak of ‘knowledge<sub>i</sub>’ in this respect):

$$(\text{Invariantism}) \quad \forall x, y \in \mathcal{X} \quad \forall s \in \mathcal{S} \quad \forall t \in \mathcal{T} \quad \forall p \in \mathcal{P}_e: \Box(K_x(s, t, p) \leftrightarrow K_y(s, t, p));$$

$$(\text{High Standard}) \quad \mathcal{X}_h \neq \emptyset;$$

$$(\text{Scepticism}_h) \quad \forall x \in \mathcal{X}_h \quad \forall s \in \mathcal{S} \quad \forall t \in \mathcal{T} \quad \forall p \in \mathcal{P}_e: \neg \Diamond K_x(s, t, p).$$

Assumption (Invariantism) claims that, necessarily, a knowledge ascription that is true if made in one context is also true if made in any other possible context. According to (Invariantism), knowledge ascriptions are not sensitive to context. Assumption (High Standard) says that there is at least one possible high-standard context. Assumption (Scepticism<sub>h</sub>) is the claim that it is impossible to fulfil the high standard. These three assumptions jointly entail (GS).

Denying (High Standard) is the traditional reaction to the sceptical argument. The distinctive *contextualist* reaction is to deny (Invariantism):

According to contextual analysis, when the sceptic presents her arguments, she [...] creates a context in which she can truly say that we know nothing or very little. But the fact that the sceptic can thus install very high standards which we don’t live up to has no tendency to show that we don’t satisfy the more relaxed standards that are in place in ordinary conversations. Thus, it is hoped, our ordinary claims to know will be safeguarded from the apparently powerful attacks of the sceptic, while, at the same time, the persuasiveness of the sceptical arguments is explained. (DeRose 1992, p. 917)<sup>11</sup>

According to DeRose, the sceptical standards are indeed sometimes operative, but only in very special contexts. In ordinary, non-sceptical contexts more moderate standards are at work. The distinctively contextualist answer to the problem of scepticism is hence the negation of (Invariantism), resulting in the following thesis:

$$(\text{Compatibility}) \quad \neg \forall x, y \in \mathcal{X} \quad \forall s \in \mathcal{S} \quad \forall t \in \mathcal{T} \quad \forall p \in \mathcal{P}_e: \Box(K_x(s, t, p) \leftrightarrow K_y(s, t, p)).$$

<sup>10</sup> “[T]he sceptic typically argues that we do not know because we *cannot* know” (Williamson 2001, p. 27; cf. Grundmann 2008, p. 346). Sometimes the sceptic position is described as stating the much weaker claim that all knowledge ascriptions are false as a matter of contingent fact. Such a characterisation, however, is not really distinctive of scepticism. A moderate (non-sceptical) invariantist may – *pace* Hawthorne (2004, p. 53) – also hold that all knowledge ascriptions are, as a matter of fact, false, if he thinks that, for one reason or another, people do not fulfil his moderate demands. Surprising as this empirical fact would be, this would not turn moderate invariantism into a form of scepticism.

<sup>11</sup> I have sympathies with those who claim that this answer to scepticism is not adequate (see, e.g., Sosa 2000, Kornblith 2000 and Williams 2001). But this debate is only tangential to the purposes of this essay.

Every theory that supports (Compatibility) is a contextualist theory, for this thesis says that there is a subject, a time, and a proposition such that it is possible that a knowledge ascription is true if made in one context and false if made in another, and thus that knowledge ascriptions are context-sensitive. Given (Compatibility), (GS) cannot be derived from (Scepticism<sub>h</sub>) and (High Standard), and therefore the argument for (GS) is blocked.

(Compatibility) and the assumption that  $\mathcal{X} = \mathcal{X}_h \cup \mathcal{X}_l$  jointly entail:

(Low Standard)  $\mathcal{X}_l \neq \emptyset$ .

(Low Standard) is intended to cover DeRose's claim when he says that there are "more relaxed standards that are in place in ordinary conversations". Given (Compatibility), the impossibility of knowledge<sub>h</sub> does not conflict with the possibility of knowledge<sub>l</sub>. In this way, scepticism can, in a sense, be reconciled with our ordinary understanding of knowledge ascriptions as being true at least sometimes.

## 2 The Minimal Conditions for the Knowability Problem

In Brueckner & Buford (2009, p. 431), we find the following description of the knowability problem (I adapt their argument to my style of presentation). Let  $S$  and  $S^*$  be two subjects,  $T$  be some point in time and *hands* denote the proposition that  $S$  has hands. Consider the following propositions:

- (I)  $K_l(S, T, \textit{hands})$ ,
- (II)  $\text{Non-}K_h(S^*, T, \textit{hands})$ ,
- (III)  $K_h(S^*, T, \text{(I)})$ .

These three propositions lead to contradiction given the following principles, to which a contextualist usually subscribes (with  $\mathfrak{P}$  the set of all propositions):

(Fact)  $\forall x \in \mathcal{X} \forall s \in \mathcal{S} \forall t \in \mathcal{T} \forall p \in \mathfrak{P}: (K_x(s, t, p) \Rightarrow p)$ ,<sup>12</sup> and

(Clos-KE)  $\forall x \in \mathcal{X} \forall s \in \mathcal{S} \forall t \in \mathcal{T} \forall p, q \in \mathfrak{P}: ([K_x(s, t, p) \wedge K_x(s, t, (p \Rightarrow q))] \Rightarrow K_x(s, t, q))$ .

(Fact) is a contextualist version of the factivity condition for knowledge. (Clos-KE) is the claim that knowledge is closed under known entailment, given that the context of knowledge ascription remains constant. My policy in this paper will be to grant all 'transitional' principles to the authors who argue that contextualism has the knowability problem. For ease of presentation and argumentation, I will even assume that the contextualist holds a stronger principle than (Clos-KE), namely,

(Clos)  $\forall x \in \mathcal{X} \forall s \in \mathcal{S} \forall t \in \mathcal{T} \forall p, q \in \mathfrak{P}: ([K_x(s, t, p) \wedge (p \Rightarrow q)] \Rightarrow K_x(s, t, q))$ .

(Clos) states that knowledge is closed under entailment *simpliciter*: given (Fact), (Clos) implies (Clos-KE). If a theory turns out to be knowable given (Clos), it will also be knowable given the weaker principle (Clos-KE).

<sup>12</sup> The symbol ' $\Rightarrow$ ' stands for entailment.

Back to the argument: From (I)<sup>13</sup> and (III) we can derive (with (Fact) and (Clos)) the proposition

(IV)  $K_h(S^*, T, \text{hands})$ ,

which contradicts (II).<sup>14</sup> Brueckner & Buford (2009, p. 432) conclude that “this seems to be a *reductio* of contextualism given [(Fact) and (Clos)]”. In order to resolve the conflict, they suggest abandoning (III). According to their view, the fact that “[a] contextualist [...] cannot ‘knowledgably’ state the contextualist thesis [(I)]” (Brueckner & Buford 2009, p. 436) is not a problem for contextualism: a true theory need not be knowledgably statable. Baumann objects that statability limitations like those accepted by Brueckner & Buford are “bad enough for contextualism to not deserve acceptance” (Baumann 2010, p. 87). I will not enter this debate. Although it is an interesting question whether a theory that is not knowledgably statable can be maintained, this question need not be answered here. In Section 3 I argue against the common presupposition that (I) and (II) are part of contextualism, and for the position that contextualism is indeed knowledgably statable; contextualism does not have those commitments that would prevent it from being knowable. Before discussing the commitments of contextualism, however, let me explore the necessary and sufficient, i.e., the minimal, conditions for the knowability problem to arise.

The Brueckner-Buford example is an instance of an (alleged) knowability problem. If the argument is cogent, contextualism cannot be known<sub>h</sub> to be true.<sup>15</sup> Here is a general definition of the problem. A theory *c* is said to have the *knowability problem* if and only if *c* implies that it cannot be known, i.e., that knowing the consistent theory *c* leads to inconsistency.<sup>16</sup> (I) and (II) are jointly consistent, but they entail [given (Fact) and (Clos)] that they cannot at *T* (jointly) be known<sub>h</sub> to be true by *S\**. If a theory implies that it cannot be known<sub>x</sub> by *S* at some time *T*, I shall speak of the *knowability*<sub>x,S,T</sub> *problem*. I will now show that, given (Fact) and (Clos), the following is true:

(Thesis) Theory *c* has the *knowability*<sub>x,S,T</sub> *problem if and only if*<sup>17</sup>

(Condition)  $\exists p \in \mathfrak{P}: (c \Rightarrow [p \wedge \neg K_x(S, T, p)])$ .<sup>18</sup>

To prove that (Condition) is sufficient for the *knowability*<sub>x,S,T</sub> *problem* to arise, it must be shown that, given (Condition), the proposition  $c \wedge K_x(S, T, c)$  is

<sup>13</sup> Of course, proposition (I) is not needed, since it follows with (Fact) from (III).

<sup>14</sup> For proof, see Brueckner & Buford 2009, p. 432, and my argument below.

<sup>15</sup> The argument does not show that knowledge<sub>h</sub> of (I) and (II) is impossible. In this paper I usually identify the question of knowability with knowability<sub>h</sub>, as the critics of contextualism must do.

<sup>16</sup> Throughout this paper I assume that *c* is a proposition:  $c \in \mathfrak{P}$ . (Of course, I also assume that  $\mathfrak{P} \supset \mathfrak{P}_c$ .)

<sup>17</sup> One direction of (Thesis), from right to left, is no more than a complicated way of stating what we may conclude from Fitch’s paradox, namely, that a proposition of the form ‘ $p \wedge \neg K(S, T, p)$ ’ cannot be known to be true by *S* at *T*.

<sup>18</sup> The scope of the propositional quantifier is important. The *knowability*<sub>x,S,T</sub> *problem* is not derivable if (Condition) is replaced by “ $c \Rightarrow \exists p \in \mathfrak{P}: [p \wedge \neg K_x(S, T, p)]$ ”.

inconsistent. It suffices to demonstrate that, given (Condition),  $K_X(S, T, c)$  is inconsistent:

1. Proof of 'if':

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(i)	$K_X(S, T, c)$	
(ii)	$\exists p \in \mathfrak{P}: (c \Rightarrow [p \wedge \neg K_X(S, T, p)])$	(Condition)
(iii)	$c \Rightarrow [p^* \wedge \neg K_X(S, T, p^*)]$	(ii), $\exists$ -elimination (with $p^*$ new)
(iv)	$K_X(S, T, [p^* \wedge \neg K_X(S, T, p^*)])$	(i), (iii), (Clos)
(v)	$K_X(S, T, p^*)$	(iv), (Clos)
(vi)	$K_X(S, T, \neg K_X(S, T, p^*))$	(iv), (Clos)
(vii)	$\neg K_X(S, T, p^*)$	(vi), (Fact)

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Proposition (vii) contradicts (v). Hence, given (Condition),  $K_X(S, T, c)$  entails a contradiction, which had to be shown.

Let me now demonstrate that (Condition) is also necessary for the knowability $_{X,S,T}$  problem. It must be shown that, given  $\neg$ (Condition),  $K_X(S, T, c)$  is consistent with  $c$ .

2. Proof of 'only if':

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(i)	$\neg \exists p \in \mathfrak{P}: (c \Rightarrow [p \wedge \neg K_X(S, T, p)])$	$\neg$ (Condition)
(ii)	$\forall p \in \mathfrak{P}: \neg(c \Rightarrow [p \wedge \neg K_X(S, T, p)])$	(i), $\forall/\exists$
(iii)	$\neg(c \Rightarrow [c \wedge \neg K_X(S, T, c)])$	(ii), $\forall$ -elimination with $c$
(iv)	$\neg(c \Rightarrow \neg K_X(S, T, c))$	(iii)
(v)	$c \wedge K_X(S, T, c)$ is consistent	(iv)

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(Condition) is thus necessary for the knowability $_{X,S,T}$  problem to arise. It follows that if (Condition) is false, then  $c$  is knowable $_X$  by  $S$  at  $T$ .<sup>19</sup>

(Thesis) explains why the conjunction of (I) and (II) has the knowability $_{h,S^*,T}$  problem. If  $c = (I) \wedge (II) (+(\text{Fact}) + (\text{Clos}))$ , (Condition) is true; (I) and (II) jointly entail [together with (Fact) and (Clos)] that there is a true proposition (namely *hands*) that  $S^*$  does not know $_h$  at  $T$ . Baumann and Brueckner & Buford conclude from the fact that (I) and (II) jointly have the knowability problem that epistemic contextualism has the knowability problem. I will now argue that this inference is mistaken. Epistemic contextualism does not entail the conjunction of (I) and (II). We are able to attain an even stronger result. Since (Condition) is

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<sup>19</sup> Note that (Thesis) does not involve different contexts for knowledge attribution and therefore does not point out a constraint relevant specifically for contextualism. As a consequence there are also invariantist theories of knowledge that have the knowability $_{X,S,T}$  problem. It can, for example, easily be shown that

(GS\*)  $\forall x \in \mathfrak{X} \forall s \in \mathfrak{S} \forall t \in \mathfrak{T} \forall p \in \mathfrak{P}: \neg \diamond K_X(s, t, p)$ ,

the strengthened version of global scepticism, is not knowable $_X$  by  $S$  at  $T$ . I leave the proof to the reader.

demonstrably not true of it, contextualism is shown not to have the knowability problem.

### 3 Does Contextualism Have the Knowability Problem?

Let CT be the contextualist theory. If (Thesis) is true, CT has the knowability<sub>X,S,T</sub> problem if and only if

$$\text{(Condition*) } \exists p \in \mathfrak{P}: (\text{CT} \Rightarrow [p \wedge \neg K_X(S, T, p)]).$$

Whether (Condition\*) is true depends on the claims of CT. Obviously, if CT = (Compatibility)  $\wedge$  (Fact)  $\wedge$  (Clos), (Condition\*) is false.<sup>20</sup> As (Compatibility) is all that a contextualist has to claim in order to block the argument to scepticism (see the argument in Section 1), a contextualism that restricts itself to its distinctive anti-sceptic aims does not have the knowability problem.

Some contextualists might want to claim more than only (Compatibility).<sup>21</sup> But it is obvious that no reasonable version of contextualism should claim anything that fulfils (Condition\*), not because such a version of contextualism would fall prey to the knowability problem, but because it would have to make the *empirical* claim that a certain proposition  $p^*$  is true and S does not know<sub>X</sub>  $p^*$  at T. Let us call the former the ‘truth commitment’, the latter the ‘no-knowledge<sub>X</sub> commitment’ and begin with the no-knowledge<sub>X</sub> commitment. If  $p^*$  is an empirical proposition, the no-knowledge<sub>X</sub> commitment concerning  $p^*$  follows from (Scepticism<sub>h</sub>) for  $X \in \mathfrak{X}_h$ . (Scepticism<sub>h</sub>) is usually conceded by contextualists,<sup>22</sup> but it is worth emphasizing that it is no part of contextualism as such. Contextualism does not entail (Scepticism<sub>h</sub>), though contextualism may be irrelevant for epistemology if (Scepticism<sub>h</sub>) is false. Recall that contextualism as such is silent about (i) the standards for knowledge operative in different contexts and (ii) whether these standards are, or can be, fulfilled by epistemic subjects. A contextualist may consistently reject (Scepticism<sub>h</sub>), and she may even do so without compromising the anti-sceptic force of her position. However, if (Scepticism<sub>h</sub>) is denied, (Compatibility) is not needed to undermine the sceptical argument and contextualism is a lot less attractive. The concession to scepticism in the form of (Scepticism<sub>h</sub>) is therefore a vital part of the interest of contextualism, but not part of its content. The attribution of the no-knowledge<sub>X</sub> commitment to contextualism is unwarranted. In particular, proposition (II) from the Brueckner-Buford argument seems not to be a consequence of contextualism.

<sup>20</sup> A simple way of showing this is by pointing out that (Compatibility) is consistent with (Omniscience) (Omniscience)  $\forall x \in \mathfrak{X} \forall s \in \mathfrak{S} \forall t \in \mathfrak{T} \forall p \in \mathfrak{P}: [p \rightarrow K_x(s, t, p)]$ .

<sup>21</sup> The standard way of presenting contextualism is as follows:

$$\text{(SC) } \forall s \in \mathfrak{S} \forall t \in \mathfrak{T} \forall p \in \mathfrak{P}_e: \diamond(K_{I_1}(s, t, p) \wedge \neg K_{I_1}(s, t, p)).$$

(SC) seems to be a faithful rendering of Cohen’s and DeRose’s views. (See, for example, the quotes in sect. 1.) Contextualism of this sort entails (Compatibility) and therefore serves the contextualist’s anti-sceptic aims. But if CT = (SC), (Condition\*) is as false as it is for CT = (Compatibility). (SC) does not have the knowability problem.

<sup>22</sup> See the quote from DeRose given above, but also, for example, Cohen 1998, p. 292, and Lewis 1999, p. 434 ff.

What about the truth commitment? Baumann (2008) claims to be in possession of an empirical truth to which contextualism is committed, namely, *hands*. If contextualism indeed entailed *hands*, contextualism would be surprisingly empirical. Not only would the truth of contextualism be dependent on the most contingent vagaries of life, but it would also open up unexpected paths for falsifying the contextualist: just chop off S's hands (before T)! Baumann holds that the contextualist is committed to *hands* because it follows, via (Fact), from (I).<sup>23</sup> But contextualism is committed to (I) even less than to *hands*. I would expect a normal subject to know<sub>1</sub> to have hands, provided, of course, she has any. But such knowledge<sub>1</sub> is no part of the contextualist theory. Surely it is possible for a contextualist to hold that S does not know<sub>1</sub> to have hands! Indeed, contextualism may be true in a world with only handless epistemic subjects. So proposition (I) is not part of contextualism either. Given that neither (I) nor (II) is part of contextualism, the Brueckner-Buford argument is based on false premises. Nor can the case be remedied in any obvious way. There seems to be no other empirical proposition with respect to which the contextualist has a no-knowledge commitment as well as a truth commitment.

#### 4 Conclusion

The position that some empirical proposition (e.g., "S has hands") is true or known<sub>1</sub> is frequently, but wrongly, attributed to contextualism. Contextualism need not endorse this position. I also think that, as a matter of historical fact, contextualists (*qua* proponents of contextualism) never did endorse it. Views to the contrary are based on a more or less subtle confusion in contextualists' writings. In order to motivate their positions, contextualists often describe situations in which, according to their view, the epistemic agent knows<sub>1</sub> some proposition p\*, although she does not know<sub>1</sub> it. Such a view does not, however, entail the unconditional commitment towards knowledge<sub>1</sub> of proposition p\*. The contextualist's claim that there is knowledge<sub>1</sub> that p\* is held *conditionally* on the assumption (i) that a certain standard for knowledge is operative in the imagined context and (ii) that this standard is met in the given situation. Contextualism as such is noncommittal with respect to both (i) and (ii). Whether a certain epistemic subject actually is, with respect to p\*, in an epistemic position strong enough to meet the standard I is independent of the contextualist thesis. For illustration, consider DeRose's bank case, which I cited at the beginning of this essay.<sup>24</sup> DeRose evaluates a hypothetical situation with respect to the question whether he has knowledge<sub>1</sub> that the bank is open on Saturday. According to DeRose, the answer is positive: in the situation imagined he knows<sub>1</sub> that the bank is open on Saturday. This hypothetical claim does not, however, amount to a categorical one. It is no part of DeRose's contextualism that he has ever actually been in the epistemic situation described. If he and his wife had never considered depositing a check at the bank, or if the bank had not been open on Saturday, this would render fictional his example, but not falsify his theory. The

<sup>23</sup> Similarly Schaffer 2004a, p. 143, Brueckner & Buford 2009, p. 431, and Baumann 2010, p. 83.

<sup>24</sup> Analogous remarks apply, of course, to Cohen's (1999) airport example.

view that contextualism is committed to the claim that there is knowledge<sub>i</sub> of some specific proposition p\* – from which commitment to p\* could be derived via (Fact) – cannot be derived from the contextualist’s reactions to purely hypothetical examples.

Let me end by discussing the prospects for knowing actual contextualist scenarios. Contextualism (and the knowledge thereof) is compatible with there being *actual* contextualist scenarios, i.e., situations in which a subject knows<sub>i</sub>, but does not know<sub>h</sub>, some proposition. But can it, according to contextualism, be known<sub>h</sub> that such scenarios occur? Can a subject know<sub>h</sub> that *another* subject knows<sub>i</sub>, but does not know<sub>h</sub>, some proposition p\*? Contextualism does not prevent that; it does not embrace (Scepticism<sub>h</sub>)!<sup>25</sup> Can a subject know<sub>h</sub> that *she herself* knows<sub>i</sub>, but does not know<sub>h</sub>, p\*? Yes, as long as the second-order knowledge occurs at a time different from that of the occurrence of the contextualist scenario. Can a subject, *at T*, know<sub>h</sub> that she herself *at T* knows<sub>i</sub> that p\*, but does, *at T*, not know<sub>h</sub> that p\*, i.e., that she is *at T* in a contextualist scenario with respect to p\*? Of course *not* – given (Clos) and (Fact)! But I fail to see why this consequence should be problematic for epistemic contextualism.

**Acknowledgements** The research for this paper has been generously supported by the *Zukunftskolleg* of the University of Konstanz. I wish to thank Christopher von Bülow, Wolfgang Spohn, Holger Sturm and especially Alexandra Zinke for many helpful discussions, and two anonymous referees for useful comments.

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<sup>25</sup> If (Scepticism<sub>h</sub>) is embraced, then the impossibility of knowing<sub>h</sub> an empirical proposition is trivial. Any problem concerning the impossibility of knowledgably<sub>h</sub> stating a contextualist scenario derives from (Scepticism<sub>h</sub>), not from contextualism. Contextualism cannot be the culprit.

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