

Introduction: What is Epistemic Contextualism?
For the *Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Contextualism*
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The existence of epistemic contextualism refutes the tired complaint that there is nothing new in philosophy. Epistemological questions about the possibility, the nature, and the extent of human knowledge are as old as philosophy itself; seeking insight by placing these questions alongside more distinctively *semantic* questions about the language we use to *talk* about knowledge is an innovation of the twentieth century. It wasn't until the late twentieth century, once semanticists and philosophers of language created a formal apparatus for representing indexicals, that contextualism was even articulable.¹ Many contemporary epistemologists now hold that these linguistic questions have critical epistemological implications.

To an approximation, contextualism about “knows” is the idea that the word “knows” is context-sensitive—its contributions to the meaning of a sentence vary according to the conversational context in which the sentence is produced.² Here are some examples of uncontroversially context-sensitive words in English:

- “I”
- “she”
- “here”

There is a sense in which the word “I” has a stable meaning in English—one can look up that meaning in a dictionary. But there is another sense in which it means radically different things, depending on who is speaking. For example, when I use the word “I”, it means me—Jonathan. When Donald Trump uses the word “I”, it refers to a very different person—Donald Trump. In the same way, one utterance of a sentence like “it often rains here” may express a true proposition about Vancouver, while another might express a false proposition about Death Valley.

Most theorists—though not all—think the list of context-sensitive terms extends much further, encompassing *modals* (words like “must”, “might”, “necessarily”, and “probably”), *quantifiers* (“everyone”, “somewhere”, “most”), and *gradable adjectives* (“tall”, “wealthy”, “hot”). The literature on epistemic contextualism tends to assume that these terms are context-sensitive.³ The epistemic contextualist holds that “knows”, too, belongs on the list. The content expressed by a sentence involving “knows”, according to a contextualist, depends on particular kinds of features of the conversational context in which it is produced.

A simple toy model of contextualism may illustrate the shape of the view. Suppose there are two different “kinds” of knowledge—ordinary, low-standards knowledge (KL) and extraordinary, high-standards knowledge (KH). Maybe lots of KL is relatively easy to obtain; when I am in a cooperating epistemic environment and trust my senses and the testimony of the people around me, I end up with lots of KL, without having to think much about it at all. But suppose that KH is a weightier and dearer epistemic achievement. Sure, I can *KL* that it's raining just by using my

eyes and ears. But to *KH* that it's raining, I'd have to do much more. Maybe I'd need to *prove* that my eyes and ears are trustworthy. Maybe I'd need special evidence that *ensures* that no one is deceiving me into thinking that it's raining. Maybe I'd need to derive the fact that it's raining from self-evident or a priori principles. We can leave the details of the demand as schematic; the important thing for our toy case is that *KH* is pretty difficult to come by.

In distinguishing *KL* and *KH*, I'm making an epistemological posit—I'm saying that there are two different epistemic states, with particular kinds of features. This isn't to say anything about any words, so thus far, the toy view I'm sketching isn't a kind of contextualism. It becomes one when we add this linguistic stipulation: the English word "knows", we'll suppose, has a stable linguistic meaning—just as indexicals like 'she' do. But it also encodes a kind of context-sensitivity: sometimes "knows" picks out *KL*, and other times it picks out *KH*, and the conversational context determines which is which.⁴ When the word "knows" is used in a context in which we're just interested in who is keeping track of which information, it expresses *KL*; when it's used in a philosophical context in which we're wondering whether anybody can really be sure of anything, it expresses *KH*. Just as "I" might mean me or it might mean Donald Trump, depending on who's talking, so too for "knows": it might mean *KL* or it might mean *KH*, depending on the epistemic features of the conversation.

A view like this would have certain advantages. In particular, it would allow for a treatment of skepticism that is concessive to ordinary intuitions. It is puzzling that, when thinking about the ultimate justifications for our beliefs, we are inclined to admit that e.g. there's no way to know whether we're the victims of radical skeptical scenarios. (After all if we *were* brains in vats, wouldn't things appear just the same as they actually do?) On the other hand, it is very counterintuitive to draw the conclusion that I don't know such quotidian facts as that it's raining or that my dog is sitting beside me. But it's also very natural to suppose such knowledge facts *must* go together. If I can't even know whether I'm a brain in a vat, how could I possibly know whether it's raining?

Our toy contextualism can accept all of these intuitions, by interpreting them as concerning different "knowledge" states. It will hold that I *KL* both that it's raining and that I'm not a brain in a vat, but that I don't *KH* whether it's raining, or whether I'm a brain in a vat. It remains consistent with a "closure" principle for both *KL* and *KH*—if I *KL/KH* that it's raining, then I must be able to *KL/KH* that I'm not a brain in a vat.⁵

This toy contextualism is just that: a toy. No contemporary contextualist argues that there are simply two candidate referents for "knows"—real contextualists tend to hold either that there are many different "knowledge" relations out there, or (more often) that the hidden syntax of knowledge ascriptions takes an additional argument place that can be filled by a variety of different parameters.⁶ I've given no attention to whether there are linguistic considerations in favor of the thesis that "knows" can refer to either *KH* or to *KL*. And we haven't considered *how* context influences the content of knowledge ascriptions. It is also not straightforward how to connect the linguistic questions that define contextualism to more traditional questions in epistemology. Contextualism, after all, is first and foremost a view about a particular verb, viz.,

“knows”. Few 21st-century epistemologists would accept that traditional questions in epistemology are primarily about this or any other word. Whether a suitable development of a more sophisticated version of contextualism will ultimately enjoy motivation or plausibility is deeply controversial; many of the chapters in this volume take up one or more of these and related questions. I’ll give an overview to the volume below. First, however, it will be helpful to make a very important distinction explicit. Discussions of epistemic contextualism have frequently fomented confusion by conflating *use* and *mention*.

Contextualism, Use, and Mention

In the abstract, the distinction between use and mention is simple. To *use* a word is to employ it, for instance in a spoken or written sentence, to talk about what it stands for. To *mention* a word is to talk or write *about* that word. Most sentences aren’t about words, so the words in sentences are typically used, not mentioned. For example, the sentence “it is rainy in Vancouver today” is not about any words. It says something about the weather, not about language. It *uses* “rainy”, “Vancouver”, and a few other words, but it doesn’t mention them. These sentences *mention* words:

- This city is called “Vancouver” in honor of an English Naval Captain.
- “Rainy” is an example of a context-sensitive gradable adjective.
- “Vancouver” is longer than “rainy”.

A standard convention—and one employed in this book—will be to designate the mention of words by enclosing them in quotation marks.

Discussions of context-sensitivity require careful treatment of use and mention. When I was a small child, tracking the context-sensitivity of words like “tomorrow” was a significant intellectual achievement.⁷ When I was three, I thought that with the passage of time, tomorrow and each subsequent day would become today. But when I became a man, I put childish things away. Now I see that today and tomorrow are each simply days, but the English words “today” and “tomorrow” refer to different days, depending on the context of utterance. Tomorrow will never become today—no Tuesday will ever become a Monday—but I will shortly enter into a conversational context in which tomorrow (Tuesday) is the referent of the word “today”.

Just as it’d be a use–mention confusion to say that tomorrow will become today, or that I will become you when you start talking, or that everybody shrinks when I restrict my attention to a smaller group of people (or to a group of smaller people), so too would it be a confusion to describe contextualism as the view that people stop knowing when the context changes, or that knowledge depends on context, or that it’s harder to know when the stakes are high.

Unfortunately, some discussions of contextualism have led to confusion by failing to make this distinction clear. The most notorious example is David Lewis’s (1996) articulation of contextualism. Lewis’s form of contextualism is a kind of relevant alternatives approach—a descendant of the kind of suggestion offered in Stine (1976). According to Lewis, which

alternatives are 'relevant' for the purpose of a knowledge ascription depends in part on the *attention* of the speakers; if one is thinking about the possibility of being a brain in a vat, then that is a relevant possibility that must be ruled out for a knowledge ascription to be true; but if one is ignoring such possibilities, knowledge ascriptions do not require evidence against them.

As Lewis points out, insofar as epistemological projects often involve attention to skeptical scenarios, knowledge ascriptions in such distinctively epistemological contexts will typically be rather strong. There is probably something right about this,⁸ but Lewis's own bald statements to this effect are rather misleading. Lewis writes:

Do some epistemology. Let your fantasies rip. Find uneliminated possibilities of error everywhere. Now that you are attending to them, just as I told you to, you are no longer ignoring them, properly or otherwise. So you have landed in a context with an enormously rich domain of potential counter-examples to ascriptions of knowledge. In such an extraordinary context, with such a rich domain, it never can happen (well, hardly ever) that an ascription of knowledge is true. Not an ascription of knowledge to yourself (either to your present self or to your earlier self, untainted by epistemology); and not an ascription of knowledge to others. That is how epistemology destroys knowledge. But it does so only temporarily. The pastime of epistemology does not plunge us forevermore into its special context. We can still do a lot of proper ignoring, a lot of knowing, and a lot of true ascribing of knowledge to ourselves and others, the rest of the time.

... Unless this investigation of ours was an altogether atypical sample of epistemology, it will be inevitable that epistemology must destroy knowledge. That is how knowledge is elusive. Examine it, and straightway it vanishes. (Lewis 1996, pp. 559–60)

I find little fault in the first half of this quotation. (A stickler might prefer the use of quotation marks to signify mention of "knows", but I'm happy to read "knowledge ascription" as something like "sentence applying the word 'knows'".) Where Lewis runs into trouble is in his transition to talk of "destroying knowledge". If one starts to take skeptical possibilities seriously, thus moving into a conversational context where "knows" expresses a stronger relation that does not obtain, there is no literal sense in which one has "destroyed" knowledge.

Go back to the toy model, where a token of "knows" refers to the ubiquitous KL in contexts that ignore skeptical possibilities, and to the rare KH in context in which skeptical possibilities are considered. You KL that it's raining but you don't KH whether it's raining. If you start in a non-skeptical context where "knows" is used to refer to KL, then your sentence "I know that it's raining" will be true. Then you start thinking about brains in vats, thus generating a skeptical context. Now "I know that it's raining" will be false if you say it. But this isn't because knowledge is destroyed. Nothing has been destroyed—you still have KL, and you never had KH. Knowledge hasn't vanished. (In no context is "knowledge has vanished" true.) You've just moved into a context where certain sentences express logically stronger propositions than they used to.

Lewis admits at the end of his paper that he is writing loosely; strictly speaking, he ought to have been careful to distinguish use and mention. His attitude seems to have been that the precision wouldn't have been worth the effort.⁹ I think that Lewis underestimates the importance of keeping this distinction clear. This is particularly true in light of some of the 21st-century alternatives to contextualism that have since emerged. (There *are* views that say that considering skeptical possibilities destroy knowledge, but they're not typically contextualist ones; see the discussion of ch. 19 below.) Throughout this volume, we will endeavor to keep this distinction as clear as possible. Sometimes the price will be a somewhat cumbersome semantic ascent. I have tried to convince the authors that this price is worth paying; I hope readers will also be convinced.

Overview of the Volume

This volume commissions thirty-seven original pieces on contextualism and related topics. All chapters are newly written for this volume, although in many cases, indicated within the chapters, they are based on previous works or bodies of work. The aim is to give the reader a clear idea of the current state of the literature around “knows” contextualism—what it is, in what ways it might be supported or denied, how it is developed, with what alternatives it competes, and how it fits in with more foundational linguistic questions. Most researchers on contextualism, including most of the authors for this book, divide into two categories: those who have approached questions about contextualism primarily from the *epistemological* side, and those who have done so from the *linguistic* side. One of my aims in this volume has been to integrate these discussions more thoroughly than has often happened organically in the literature to date.

The volume is divided into eight Parts. In the remainder of this introduction, I'll set out the central questions for each, and give a brief overview as to the contents of each chapter. The division of Parts is inevitably somewhat artificial, and many chapters contain material of relevance to the themes of various Parts. I'll draw some of those connections in the outline below.

Part I. Data and Motivations

Contextualism is a linguistic thesis about certain bits of natural language. Although it may have significant payoffs in epistemological theorising, if it is to be taken seriously as a description of linguistic reality, it must be grounded at least partly in linguistic considerations. Part I of the book considers these considerations. What kinds of motivations are there, or could there be, for contextualism? What is the most important kind of data, and how can and should we go about collecting it?

In ch. 1, Crispin Wright gives a broad overview of many of the kinds of phenomena that have motivated contextualists, as well as other “variabilists”. This discussion will set the stage for much of the volume, anticipating the exploration of contextualism's alternatives in Parts IV and V. Geoff Pynn (ch. 2) and Wesley Buckwalter (ch. 3) each consider the importance of ordinary speakers' intuitions in evaluating contextualism, but they offer competing interpretations to some

of the data. Evelyn Brister's contribution in ch. 4 approaches contextualism from a different angle, bringing feminist approaches in the philosophy of science to bear on our epistemic and linguistic questions.

Part I is concerned primarily with the *prima facie* case for contextualism—its focus is on the degree to which considerations often taken to motivate contextualism can get off the ground. More involved dialectical considerations for and against contextualism will be considered elsewhere in the volume—especially in Parts IV and VI. See descriptions of those Parts below.

Part II. Methodological Issues

Part II of the volume foregrounds methodological questions that were near the surface in Part I. What *kinds* of considerations are relevant for the debate about contextualism, and why? E. Diaz-Leon's ch. 5 relates contextualism to the normative, arguing that language and meaning are tied up with how we *should* use terms as well as how we *do*. (This piece also connects importantly to the discussions of disagreement and relativism in Part V.) In ch. 6, Mikkel Gerken, Jie Gao, and Stephen B. Ryan suggest that debates about the truth of contextualism and those about the methodology for discerning it are tied importantly together. Jennifer Nagel and Julia Jael Smith canvass psychological data on knowledge, belief, and mental state attribution, arguing that some of the attraction to contextualism might be explicable on psychologistic, rather than semantic, grounds.

In ch. 8, Derek Ball introduces a central methodological question to which authors in other Parts will also return: just what is it, ultimately, for something to be context-sensitive? I gestured at indexicals and other apparent examples above, but, especially when it comes to cases like "knows" where things are less clear, a handful of clear cases isn't enough to delineate the subject matter, or what is at stake behind the question. Ball argues that the question is ultimately tied up in an even larger methodological question: just what *is* semantics, and what is it for? Ball's contribution connects closely with other contributions elsewhere in the volume—particularly chs. 18 and 34.

Part III. Epistemological Implications

Although contextualism is a linguistic thesis, to be adjudicated on linguistic grounds, it is no accident that much of its development and consideration has happened in epistemology. Part III canvasses the connections between contextualism and epistemic matters. What are the costs and benefits of contextualism to epistemological theorizing?

Once we keep clear use and mention, it's not *entirely* obvious that there should be *any* connection between contextualism and epistemology. This line of thought is taken up by Brian Montgomery in ch. 9. As Montgomery observes, contextualism does seem at least to have significant methodological implications for epistemology, so it is proper for epistemologists to consider and attend to it.

Chs. 10–15 consider, in turn, the application of contextualism to various matters of traditional epistemological concern. In some cases, authors argue that contextualism provides a satisfactory resolution of an epistemological puzzle—e.g. Michael J. Hannon on skepticism (ch. 10) and Keith DeRose on fallibilism (ch. 11), while in other cases, authors will point to challenges or unresolved questions about the integration of contextualism and epistemological theorizing—e.g. Maria Lasonen-Aarnio on closure (ch. 12), Matthew A. Benton on lotteries and prefaces (ch. 13), Alex Worsnip on knowledge norms (ch. 14), and John Greco on Gettier cases (ch. 15).

Of course, the degree to which these chapters point to advantages or disadvantages of contextualism depends in part on how non-contextualist options fare. Examining competitors is the project of Parts IV and V.

Part IV. Doing Without Contextualism

Assuming (perhaps *pace* ch. 3) that there really are puzzling patterns of intuitions concerning knowledge ascriptions, there are various choices. Grant for the purpose of argument that it is intuitive that I know that it's raining, but that it's also intuitive that I don't know whether I'm a brain in a vat. (Set aside the possibility of allowing the "abominable conjunction" of these two intuitions.¹⁰) One choice is to be a contextualist—each intuition is correct, but they are intuitions about distinct "knowledge" states. Another choice is relativism, which is the topic of Part V. Three remaining choices are:

- A. Univocal low standards. There's just one "knowledge" state, and contrary to some skeptical intuitions, I know the negation of skeptical scenarios. (The "Moorean" stance.)
- B. Univocal high standards. There's just one "knowledge" state, and it is demanding. In fact, contrary to some ordinary intuitions, I don't know much at all. (The skeptical stance.)
- C. Univocal, yet shifty. There's just one "knowledge" state, but it varies in how demanding it is. Both intuitions tend to be true because the facts about knowledge tend to change.

One challenge for A-type strategies is to explain why it is, if we know skeptical scenarios not to obtain, that so many of us feel intuitively as if we don't.¹¹ One common strategy along these lines is to attribute the intuitive repugnance of e.g. "I know that I'm not a brain in a vat" or "I know that my lottery ticket will lose", not to its falsity, but to its *pragmatic infelicity*. Some things would sound bad or improper to say, even though they are true, because they're too likely to mislead the hearer into thinking something false. If I have already finished the manuscript, it would be misleading in most contexts if I were to say, "by next Christmas I will have finished the manuscript". This would be misleading, even though it is true. Patrick Rysiew (ch. 16) applies a strategy of this kind in defense of an A-style univocal approach to "knows".

The more skeptical way, corresponding to B, is to hold that the one and only standard for knowledge is a high standard that is rarely met. Instead of explaining away the *skeptical* intuitions, an invariantist of this sort needs to explain away the *non-skeptical* ones. If I don't know where my car is (after all, it might have been stolen in the past hour), why is it so natural in

many contexts for me to say I do know where it is (after all, I parked it myself, only an hour ago)? Wayne A. Davis (ch. 17) offers, in defense of this sort of a skeptical invariantism, a treatment of many knowledge ascriptions as cases of “loose use”. Saying that I know where my car is, according to Davis, is a pragmatically fine, albeit imprecise, way to use a literal falsehood to convey a truth. Davis also emphasizes that some apparent disagreements about knowledge can be attributed straightforwardly to a difference in the speakers’ beliefs.

Herman Cappelen articulates a different kind of defense of a skeptical invariantism in his (ch. 18) contribution. He develops past work on semantic minimalism and speech-act pluralism to give a general strategy for denying the context-sensitivity of terms, consistent with the facts about divergent usages. According to Cappelen’s speech-act pluralism, utterances of sentences like knowledge ascriptions amount to the assertion of many different propositions—and although the proposition *semantically expressed* may be false, other asserted propositions may well be true.

The other central invariantist strategy is to hold that there is only one knowledge relation, but whether it obtains depends on certain surprising features of the subject. Brian Weatherson (ch. 19) offers an explication and defense of this sort of view. On this kind of approach—what is sometimes called a ‘subject-sensitive’ or ‘interest-relative’ approach to knowledge, whether a subject knows that *p* may depend on how important to the subject the question whether *p* is, or on which skeptical possibilities one is considering or ignoring. For example, one might hold that so long as I’m ignoring the possibility that my car is stolen, I may know where it is, but the act of considering a possible theft constitutively undermines my knowledge. Or perhaps, I know where my car is, so long as the question isn’t too important, but if the stakes go up, I lose my knowledge.

This view has a certain superficial resemblance to contextualism, but the view itself is deeply separate. Contextualism is a view about *language*; this kind of interest-relativity is a view about the nature of knowledge itself. Relatedly, the family of views considered in ch. 19 suggest that the *subject’s* practical interests are relevant for determining whether one counts as knowing; the *speaker’s* practical interests are irrelevant. (If I make a knowledge ascription about you, an “interest-relative invariantist” like Weatherson will hold that *your* interests, not mine, are relevant to whether the ascription is true. Contextualists will hold that *my* interests are relevant, because they influence the content of my sentence.¹²) This sort of invariantism, unlike contextualism, *is* a view on which knowledge may be “elusive”, vanishing upon examination.¹³

Part V. Relativism and Disagreement

Another major competitor to contextualism is *relativism*. Relativists agree with contextualists that there are shifty patterns of intuitions about knowledge ascriptions for which accounting is needed; they disagree with contextualists as to which context is relevant for locating the linguistic flexibility. Where contextualists locate the work that is to be done in the context of utterance, relativists turn instead to the context of *assessment*. Relativism has it that holding fixed my state, the weather, and the features of my context when I utter a sentence like “I know that it’s raining in Vancouver”, isn’t enough to determine whether what I’ve said is true. It may be

true relative to some contexts of assessment, and false relative to others. For example, if two groups of people overhear my utterance, one might think the proposition I expressed is true, and another might think it false—and both might be right.

Until rather recently, few analytic philosophers would have thought this possibility even coherent. But recent work, especially that of John MacFarlane, has brought relativism forward as a serious candidate view, both for “knows” and for other terms.¹⁴ Relativism is introduced in this volume in ch. 1, where it receives some attention and evaluation; Part V considers relativism in a more focused way. In ch. 20, Justin Khoo articulates the disagreement challenge to contextualism, which is widely considered to be a—or *the*—central advantage of relativism over contextualism. Torfinn Thømesen Huvenes (ch. 21) considers foundational questions about the nature of disagreement, with attention to whether it will sustain the challenge. Elke Brendel (ch. 22) argues that both contextualism and relativism face a challenge related to disagreement, while J. Adam Carter (ch. 23) considers more broadly the epistemic implications of relativism.

Part VI. Semantic Implementations

Because it is a linguistic thesis, contextualism is answerable to semantic considerations.

Perhaps the most influential challenge contextualists have faced is the call for a semantic implementation of contextualism. How, from the point of view of a compositional semantics, does the kind of context-sensitivity the contextualist cites work? Opponents of contextualism have argued that “knows” seems to behave unlike paradigmatic instances of context-sensitive language, such as indexicals, gradable adjectives, and quantifiers; they have also argued that contextualism is committed to the untenable idea that ordinary speakers make systematic errors concerning the context-sensitivity of “knows”.¹⁵ Proponents have attempted to meet these challenges or find new models. Patrick Greenough and Dirk Kindermann (ch. 24) explain and consider this challenge to contextualism, and argue that it is not dispositive. However, Robin McKenna (ch. 25) argues that a serious challenge for semantic implementations of contextualism remains unsolved, and expresses pessimism about its resolution—he suggests that the project of explaining contextualism in terms of the dynamics of conversation should be abandoned; if McKenna is right, contextualism will need to be implemented in a very different way.

Nathan R. Cockram (ch. 26) and Michael Blome-Tillmann (ch. 27) attempt to rebut the idea that “knows” patterns importantly unlike other context-sensitive terms. Cockram exploits the analogy between knowledge ascriptions and quantifiers and modals; Blome-Tillmann argues that knowledge ascriptions are more similar to sentences involving gradable adjectives than many have argued. Each offers a defense of contextualism along these grounds.

Part VII. Contextualism Outside “Knows”

Most of this book is focused on contextualism about “knows”. But contextualism itself is a general framework, potentially applicable in a variety of areas. This section takes up contextualist debates in other fields, with an eye towards connecting them to the case of

“knows”. In what respects are the prospects for contextualism in other fields stronger or weaker than in epistemology? What lessons from the debates in one area might benefit the debates in another?

Berit Brogaard (ch. 28) draws explicit connections between epistemic contextualism and contextualism about *moral* vocabulary. Daniel Fogal and Kurt Sylvan (ch. 29) apply a contextualist framework to discourse about epistemic reasons, and J. L. Dowell (ch. 30) gives a sophisticated defense of contextualism about epistemic modals. Roger Clarke (ch. 31) and Karen S. Lewis (ch. 32) each apply a framework similar to a contextualist relevant-alternatives approach to knowledge—Clarke applies it to belief ascriptions, and Lewis to counterfactual conditionals. Daniel Greco (ch. 33) develops a form of contextualism about epistemic foundations.

Part VIII. Foundational Linguistic Issues

This final section takes up deeper questions about the semantic project that defines contextualism, examining some of the assumptions made throughout the literature and earlier in the volume. For example, (as ch. 16 made clear) the very idea of contextualism seems to presuppose some kind of clear distinction between semantics and pragmatics; in what exactly might any such distinction consist? This question has been broached already in ch. 8, but we return to it with further focus here. Maite Ezcurdia (ch. 34) offers a theoretical distinction between semantics and pragmatics, along with a suggestion for what kind of methodology is best-suited for determining whether a term like “knows” is context-sensitive.

Another foundational question concerns the nature and determinants of semantic context itself. Contextualists say that contexts determine various semantic features, but just what sort of a thing *is* a context? In ch. 35, Giovanni Mion and Christopher Gauker argue that, contrary to widespread assumptions, conversational contexts are mind-independent. This, they argue, has significant consequences for contextualism. Their project is related to that of ch. 25.

Brian Rabern’s (ch. 36) contribution offers formal frameworks for various approaches to knowledge, including the contextualist approach whereby “knows” is a context-sensitive intensional operator. Rabern also offers models for some of the competing theories discussed above, thereby connecting some of the more purely epistemological work on contextualism to formal semantics.

Finally, Mark Jary and Robert J. Stainton (ch. 37) consider the relationship between contextualism and relevance theory. They identify a challenge for contextualism: it is empirically implausible as a semantic thesis, but insufficiently powerful as a merely pragmatic one. According to Jary and Stainton, relevance theory offers a way out: one can literally state a range of things with “know”, even though it is not a context-sensitive term.

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¹ Kaplan 1989 (presented in 1977) was particularly important in laying the semantic groundwork on which contextualism relies. Epistemic contextualism developed as a reasonably natural implementation of “relevant alternatives” approaches to knowledge. See especially Stine 1976. More explicit early commitments to contextualism were Cohen 1988, DeRose 1995, Lewis 1996.

² The term “contextualism” has sometimes been used differently in epistemology. See e.g. Williams 2001. In this Introduction, I reserve the term for its distinctively linguistic sense. This seems to be the general convention in contemporary philosophy. Ch. 4 discusses this terminological question further, and uses “context” in a broader sense.

³ Chapter 18 outlines some of the pressure against this assumption.

⁴ A more linguistically plausible alternative to this toy view would be that “knows” is *ambiguous* between KL and KH, the way that “match” is ambiguous between a device for starting fires and a compatible partnership. Ambiguity contrasts with context-sensitivity; there are two separate meanings attached to the sound “match”, not one context-sensitive meaning. If there really were just two different knowledge states, the idea that “knows” is ambiguous would be more plausible than that it’s context-sensitive. That’s part of why this is just a toy model. (For more on the distinction between context-sensitivity and ambiguity, see ch. 37.)

⁵ I believe that Stine (1976) was the first to point out this advantage for this kind of package of views.

⁶ This is one reason the suggestion that contextualism requires that “knows” pick out different relations in different contexts is only an approximation; one might hold instead that “knows” univocally expresses a polyadic relation, with an argument place for something like an “epistemic standard” provided by context.

⁷ My mother's diary attributes this utterance to three-year-old Jonathan: "It's hard to understand but tomorrow will be 'today' and the next day will be 'today'. So we're going to new church today and EVERYDAY is today. It's hard to understand though."

⁸ It is debatable to what degree Lewis is right to assume that epistemological contexts are inevitably skeptical ones. See Ichikawa (2017), §6.3.

⁹ "It would have been tiresome, but it could have been done. ... If you want to hear my story told that way, you probably know enough to do the job for yourself. If you can, then my informal presentation has been enough." (pp. 566–7) See also e.g. Cohen (1998), p. 292, fn. 10.

¹⁰ DeRose 1995, pp. 27–8.

¹¹ Another challenge, not taken up in detail in this volume, is to explain *how* it is that we can know skeptical scenarios not to obtain. For a reasonably representative essay, see e.g. Sosa 1999.

¹² Contextualists often deny that the practical interests of the subject are relevant, but contextualism itself does not carry any such commitment, and some contextualists have explicitly held that both subject interests and speaker interests are relevant. See Ichikawa (2017), §1.9.

¹³ A different strategy, related closely to interest-relative invariantism, would have a change in salience or stakes contribute *causally*, rather than *constitutively*, to the loss of knowledge. For example, when the stakes go up, subjects' confidence goes down below the point at which they could have knowledge. Such a view arguably could explain the shifty intuitions without positing a change in epistemic standards. See Nagel (2010). See also ch. 7.

¹⁴ See e.g. MacFarlane (2014).

¹⁵ Schiffer (1996) was particularly influential on this score.