

**Peter Baumann: *Epistemic Contextualism: A Defense*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2016. 265 pp.
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[FINAL DRAFT]

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Epistemic contextualism is the view that knowledge attributions can have different truth-values in different contexts of usage and that epistemic puzzles such as the skeptical puzzle can be solved by referring to this mechanism. Contextualism is still one of the most debated epistemological positions. Thus, a thorough defense of epistemic contextualism would already be a valuable contribution to the existing debate. However, Baumann's intriguing book achieves more than its title promises. First, it not only contains a convincing defense of contextualism against objections but also presents a novel contextualist theory that is presumably the most systematic contextualist account so far. Second, Baumann takes an unorthodox stance concerning some important epistemic issues, for example when he argues that knowledge and epistemic luck are compatible and that we can know lottery propositions. He convincingly shows that his systematic contextualist account can best incorporate these controversial epistemic positions. Thus, this book also provides a general account of Baumann's epistemology within a contextualist framework.

Let me provide a brief overview of the book. It consists of three parts. In Part I, Baumann presents core arguments in favor of contextualism. In Chapter 1, he sketches a version of contextualism that is less case oriented and more systematic, involving various parameters and determinants. Chapters 2 and 3 are devoted to central arguments for contextualism, namely to the argument from reliability and to the argument from luck. Part II presents problems for and extensions of the developed systematic contextualist account. In Chapter 4, Baumann applies his contextualism to the skeptical puzzle and related lottery puzzles. Chapter 5 defends contextualism against problems arising from cross-context attributions. In Chapter 6, Baumann argues that contextualism is not an ad hoc solution to epistemic puzzles because it is also applicable to other philosophically interesting notions such as 'responsibility.' Part III deals with objections and alternatives to contextualism. In Chapter 7, Baumann defends his contextualism against the most influential objections that classical invariantism provides. In Chapter 8, he discusses three prominent alternatives to contextualism – subject-sensitive invariantism, contrastivism, and truth-relativism.

Let me discuss the book chapter by chapter. In Chapter 1, Baumann outlines his version of contextualism that differs from standard contextualist accounts in two ways. First, standard contextualism is case driven. Contextualism (and opposing positions such as subject-sensitive invariantism) are usually developed with the aim of providing an explanation of particular cases, where we have opposite knowledge intuitions depending on whether the stakes are low or high. In contrast, Baumann intends to provide a more systematic case for contextualism that is based on more theoretical arguments. Second, Baumann correctly points out that standard contextualism is standards contextualism, i.e. contextualism about epistemic standards. (2) He argues that the idea of a hierarchy of more or less demanding contexts, which is central to standard contextualist accounts, is mistaken. In contrast to standard contextualism, Baumann develops in Chapter 1 “a multidimensional ‘space’ of standards which are independent and irreducible.” (20) He distinguishes two types of factors, first epistemic parameters of a context and, second, determinants. “Contextually variable parameters determine the meaning and truth conditions

of the relevant knowledge-sentences. These parameters are aspects of context and are, in turn, fixed by contextually variable determinants.” (13) The parameters that Baumann discusses are ruling out, evidence, reliability, degree of belief, and epistemic position. The determinants discussed are stakes, purposes and intentions, and norms and conventions. Baumann’s general theory of contextualism is not only valuable in its own right, it can also be used as a meta-epistemological framework for classifying other contextualist theories. Baumann concludes Chapter 1 by discussing whether his list of factors which determine epistemic standards is complete. (31) He suggests that it is complete and that the items on the list are mutually independent and not reducible to each other, while admitting that proving such a claim might be difficult or even impossible. Here the reader might wonder why other factors, such as sensitivity, that play a crucial role in DeRose’s version of contextualism, are not on Baumann’s list. Sensitivity might fall under one of the parameters discussed, but Baumann does not provide an argument for this claim and does not even explicitly say that this is the case.

Chapter 2 focuses on an influential argument for contextualism that Baumann labels “the reliability argument”:

- (1) If “S knows that p ” is true in C , then “S’s belief that p is reliable” is true in C ;
- (2) The truth conditions of sentences of the form “S’s belief that p is reliable” can vary with the context of the speaker;
- (C) Hence, the truth conditions of sentences of the form “S knows that p ” can vary with the context of the speaker. (33)

Baumann claims that everybody is a reliabilist in the broadest sense, since even internalists accept that a belief can only constitute knowledge if it is properly based. He mentions Lehrer’s and Paxson’s defeater theory as one example, a rather unfortunate example since Lehrer is, due to his gypsy lawyer cases, the most pronounced opponent of the basing relation. Baumann then argues in favor of a probabilistic, and against a modal, interpretation of reliability, since the probability calculus is a powerful notion that avoids problems of ordering worlds in terms of closeness which modal reliability accounts face. One might oppose the reliability argument by arguing that “reliable” is linguistically gradable whereas “knowing” is not. Baumann briefly takes up this objection later in Chapter 7 (178), but it might have been useful to already discuss it in Chapter 2. One of the most intriguing ideas of Chapter 2 is Baumann’s take on the notorious generality problem, which is usually formulated as the problem of determining the relevant process type for a target token of a belief forming process. Baumann extends this problem to the individuation of topics to which a particular target belief belongs. He suggests that contextualism offers a solution to this extended generality problem. Speakers have specific topics and process types in mind when making knowledge attributions, and these topics and process types guide their judgements about whether a subject knows a particular proposition. The relevant topics and process types are determined by the intentions and interests of the knowledge attributor. This solution of the generality problem is plausible and deserving of attention. Moreover, it provides independent evidence for the correctness of contextualism.

Chapter 3 discusses the luck argument – Baumann’s second central argument for contextualism:

- (1) If “S knows that p ” is true in C , then “S’s belief that p is not lucky” is true in C ;
- (2) The truth conditions of sentences of the form “S’s belief that p is not lucky” can vary with the context of the speaker;
- (C) Hence, the truth conditions of sentences of the form “S knows that p ” can vary with the context of the speaker. (65)

Chapter 3 is dialectically very interesting, since Baumann also argues against the orthodox view on knowledge and luck. Authors such as Pritchard emphasize that knowledge excludes (a certain kind of) luck, as for Pritchard,

fulfillment of the safety condition excludes veritic luck. Baumann opposes this commonly held view by presenting intuitively appealing examples of lucky knowledge. Based on previous work, Baumann argues that knowledge and luck “can come apart because attributions of knowledge are sensitive to track-record-related factors (correlated with temporal distance or important consequences) to which attributions of luck (which are more origin-related) do not seem to be so sensitive.” (86) He concludes that contextualism provides the best explanation of the compatibility of knowledge and luck. Chapter 3 connects Baumann’s work on contextualism in an insightful way with his work on knowledge and luck. However, his overall line of argumentation is slightly misleading. Baumann argues that “knowledge” and “luck” are both context sensitive, but in his argumentation he assumes that knowledge and luck are compatible. Thus, Baumann applies the luck argument under this controversial compatibility assumption. He does not show that the luck argument supports contextualism independently of whether knowledge and luck are compatible or not. Accordingly, the luck argument does not provide a general case for contextualism. It offers a case for contextualism only within Baumann’s compatibility account of knowledge and luck. This is an application of contextualism to Baumann’s theory of knowledge and luck rather than a general argument for contextualism. Baumann’s overall contextualist picture of knowledge and luck is intriguing, but Chapter 3 would be better located in Part II of the book, which is devoted to problems and extensions of his contextualist account, than in Part I, which provides general arguments for it.

In Chapter 4, Baumann uses the developed contextualist account for solving the skeptical puzzle and related lottery puzzles which are instances of local skepticism, focusing on the lottery puzzles. Baumann is skeptical about contextualist solutions to the traditional skeptical problem but thinks that contextualism does not stand or fall with the success of solving these problems. (91) Lottery puzzles arise if a subject *S* intuitively knows an ordinary proposition *o*, does not know that a lottery proposition *l* is false, where *l* states that an unlikely but (easily) possible event occurs, and knows that *o* entails $\neg l$. To begin with, Baumann argues, against the mainstream, that we can know lottery propositions. Next, he investigates existing contextualist solutions to lottery puzzles, which typically have it that *S* knows that *o* and that $\neg l$ in an ordinary context where the standards for knowledge are rather low, but knows neither that *o* nor that $\neg l$ in a more demanding context. Baumann argues against contextualist solutions that suggest that the growing salience of error possibilities pushes the standards for knowledge up. He suggests that in lottery cases the following condition (EP) is violated: “If *S* knows that *p*, then *S*’s epistemic position with respect to *p* is not fixed and *S* can get into better or worse epistemic positions with respect to *p*.” (115) This is a promising approach, since there is a feeling of epistemic powerlessness, especially concerning the skeptical hypothesis, that (EP) captures. However, (EP) is also violated in ideal epistemic scenarios, e.g. when I know a very simple mathematical proposition via an obvious deductive proof. I do not see how I can get into a better or worse epistemic position with respect to such a proposition, but this speaks in favor of my epistemic position and does not preclude me from knowing. Here, Baumann could have spelled out the principle in more detail in order to avoid such problems.

Chapter 5 deals with the problem for contextualism that cross-context contributions of knowledge can lead to inconsistencies and that contextualism gives rise to Moore-paradoxical situations. This problem, or set of problems, which Baumann labels “the knowability problem”, has been rather neglected in the literature so far, as he correctly notes. Chapter 5 contains a thorough investigation of this problem. Baumann suggests that the knowability problem can be solved by contextualizing the closure principle. This take not only provides a sophisticated solution to this problem, but also sheds light on the correct contextualist understanding of the closure principle in general. The last point deserves much attention in the further literature on contextualism and closure.

Contextualism is an ad hoc theory if it is only applicable to the notion of “knowledge.” In Chapter 6, Baumann defends contextualism as a general linguistic theory by showing that not only “knowledge” but also other philosophically relevant notions should be given a contextual understanding. The example that he discusses is “responsibility.” Baumann argues that the “judgements of an attributor of responsibility vary in many cases with their description of the situation.” (152) In this sense, “responsibility” behaves contextually like “knowledge” and epistemic contextualism is not an ad hoc theory as opponents might claim. Baumann presents the example of a court room where the lawyer of the victim presents a car accident in a way to point out that the defendant is responsible and, therefore, guilty, but where the defendant’s lawyer presents it in a different way in order to argue that the defendant is not responsible, hence, not guilty. This is an interesting example but does not support the case for contextualism. Contextualists about “responsibility” must admit that both presentations of the lawyers are true, but in different contexts. However, conflicts in court are not resolved by pointing out that different presentations are true in different contexts. Rather presentations of conflicting parties are utilized to discover the truth about a particular case. Thus, Baumann’s example supports invariantism about “responsibility” rather than contextualism. However, Baumann’s overall argumentation for the context sensitivity of “responsibility” is not touched by the implausibility of this particular example.

In Chapter 7, Baumann defends contextualism against the most influential arguments that classical invariantists put forward, a chapter committed to the issue noted by the subtitle of the book. Baumann focuses on WAMs, warranted assertibility maneuvers. Based on Gricean rules of conversation, WAMs typically involve arguing that in some contexts false assertions can be warranted due to pragmatic implicatures. Accordingly, invariantists solve contextualist puzzles by arguing that in different contexts not the truth-value of the knowledge ascription changes but its warrant. Where contextualists see a semantic difference, adherents of WAMs see a pragmatic one. Baumann argues against WAMs that similar contextual mechanisms also apply to inner speech, which lacks the pragmatic dimension of public speech. He concludes that the difference between the cases must be on a semantic level, as contextualism claims, and not on a pragmatic one, as WAMs suggest. This is an inspiring defense and, to the best of my knowledge, novel. Moreover, in Chapter 7 Baumann discusses further objections against contextualism, including semantic blindness.

After defending contextualism against classical invariantism in Chapter 7, Baumann discusses in the final chapter the most prominent alternatives to contextualism beyond classical invariantism, subject-sensitive invariantism (SSI), contrastivism, and truth-relativism. Contextualism is the view that the practical interests of the knowledge attributor determine the standards of knowledge, whereas SSI argues that the practical interests of the believing subject are crucial. The dispute between contextualism and SSI is one of the most lively debates in contemporary epistemology. Baumann argues that contextualism fares better in explaining tricky cases than SSI does and that SSI faces more serious problems itself than contextualism. Baumann’s dialectic diagnosis about the relations between contextualism and contrastivism is slightly different. He contends that contrastivism should take a contextualist turn and that the resulting contextualist version of contrastivism comes close to his own. Finally, he argues that relativism does not offer a better alternative to contextualism. Baumann formulates the overall conclusion of Chapter 8 as follows: “[I]f one does not want to embrace classical invariantism (see the arguments against that especially in Chapters 1–3), then the version of contextualism defended here does better than the three main ‘variantist’ alternatives, SSI, contrastivism, and relativism.” (230)

Baumann's *Epistemic Contextualism. A Defense* is compelling for various reasons. The presented investigation of contextualism is presumably the most systematic one so far. Furthermore, it incorporates persuasive new approaches, for example, incorporating the compatibility of knowledge and luck into the contextualist account. Baumann is clear in style and his analysis raises the discussion with regard to systematicity to the next level. Moreover, the book provides an illuminating overview of the state of the art of the debate about contextualism, extensively engaging with the existing literature. Thus, any reader of *Epistemic Contextualism* will get an excellent overview of the existing debate about contextualism and the central literature. This intriguing book is a must-read for everybody working on contextualism and highly recommended to any professional epistemologist and any reader interested in the topic.

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