Epistemic Contextualism Can be Stated Properly

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It has been argued that epistemic contextualism faces the so-called factivity problem and hence cannot be stated properly.[1] The basic idea behind this charge is that contextualists supposedly have to say, on the one hand, that knowledge ascribing sentences like "*S* knows that *S* has hands" are true when used in ordinary contexts while, on the other hand, they are not true by the standard of their own context. In my paper, I want to show that the argument to the factivity problem fails because it rests on the mistaken premise that contextualists are committed to the truth of particular ordinary knowledge attributions.

Let me start by presenting the factivity problem. To begin with, let me clarify what exactly the factivity problem is supposed to show. The factivity problem, I take it, is an argument to the conclusion that anti-skeptical epistemic contextualism cannot be stated properly if it is conjoined with contextualistic versions of the principles (KNA) that one can properly assert that *p* only if one knows that *p*, (Fact) that knowledge that *p* entails that *p* and (Clos) that we know the things that follow from what we know so long as we know that they follow from what we know. (KNA) is the knowledge norm of assertion, (Fact) is the factivity principle for knowledge and (Clos) is the principle of epistemic closure.

Epistemic contextualism is the semantic thesis that "knows" expresses more or less demanding epistemic relations depending on the epistemic standard in play at the context of its use.[2] Anti-skeptical epistemic contextualism, as I will understand it here, entails the following two additional claims. First, it entails that skepticism is false. Skepticism is most commonly construed as the thesis that "[o]rdinary knowledge attributions are generally false." (Stanley 2005: 82)[3] Hence, anti-skeptical epistemic contextualism

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[1] See e.g. (Williamson 2001; 2005), (Wright 2005), (Brendel 2005; 2009), (Baumann 2008; 2010) and (Jäger 2012).

[2] There are some views that would presumably have to be called "contextualist" even though they do not fall under the above definition (for example, the view that "knows" invariably expresses one and the same relation, a relation though that has, say, an epistemic standard as one relatum). I take it that my subsequent arguments apply to these views as well. But, to keep the discussion simple, I will not discuss them explicitly.

[3] See also (Hawthorne 2004: 53), (Davis 2007: 427), (Rysiew 2007: 627) and (DeRose 2009: 124).

entails that it is not the case that ordinary knowledge ascriptions are generally false. And I will assume here that this, in turn, means that anti-skeptical contextualism entails that ordinary knowledge ascriptions are generally true.[4] Second, anti-skeptical epistemic contextualism entails a particular response to a particular form of skeptical argument, a response that typical epistemic contextualists endorse. Let me elaborate.

The skeptical argument I have in mind is an argument to the conclusion that skepticism is true and goes, very roughly, as follows: You don't know that you are not a (just recently envatted) handless brain in a vat. If you don't know that, then you also don't know that you have hands. So, you don't know that you have hands. Analogous arguments show that, for most ordinary claims p, we don't know that p. If we don't know all these things, then ordinary knowledge ascriptions are generally false. So, ordinary knowledge ascriptions are generally false. Hence, skepticism is true. (Note here that ordinary claims are supposed to be those claims that are said to be "known" in ordinary contexts.)

The anti-skeptical contextualist responds to that argument not only by pointing out why the argument is not sound but also by explaining why it seems sound to begin with. The argument is not sound, according to the anti-skeptical contextualist, because it is not true that ordinary knowledge ascriptions are generally false if we don't know that p for most ordinary propositions p. The reason is that once the skeptical argument is presented, our epistemic standard rises such that, in the scope of the argument, "knows" comes to express the very demanding relation of knowledge$_S$. In ordinary discourse, however, "knows" expresses the far less demanding relation of knowledge$_O$. And even if we don't know$_S$ a lot, it does not follow that we also don't know$_O$ a lot.[5] The argument nevertheless *seems* sound because the inference to the claim that we don't know$_S$ most ordinary claims *is* perfectly sound and because "we fail to realize […] that the skeptic's present denials

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4 Freitag (2011: 277n; 2013: 135) tries to defuse the factivity problem by claiming that the skeptic says that ordinary knowledge attribution are *necessarily* false, not that they are false as a matter of contingent fact. Correspondingly, on Freitag's view, the anti-skeptical contextualist only has to say that ordinary knowledge ascriptions *can* be true, and this claim does not give rise to the factivity problem (as will become apparent below). Freitag's definition of skepticism, however, goes against the grain of the contemporary discussion (see FN 3). That is why, I think, his response to the factivity problem is not fully satisfactory.
5 To simplify the discussion, I pretend that there are only two relations "knows" can express, the relation of knowledge$_O$ and the relation of knowledge$_S$. The contextualist will actually say that there are many more such relations.

that we know various things are perfectly compatible with our ordinary claims to know those very propositions." (DeRose 1995: 5)[6]

So, to repeat, the anti-skeptical epistemic contextualist endorses epistemic contextualism, anti-skepticism and the just sketched response to the skeptical argument. The factivity problem is not an argument against epistemic contextualism *per se* but an argument against anti-skeptical epistemic contextualism conjoined with contextualistic version of (KNA), (Fact) and (Clos).

It should be noted that, even so, the factivity problem puts considerable pressure on epistemic contextualism *per se*: The factivity problem supposedly shows that, in order to have a view that can be stated properly, an epistemic contextualist must either reject anti-skepticism or her response to the skeptical argument or give up at least one of the principles (KNA), (Fact) and (Clos). But each of these disjuncts comes at a price. First, epistemic contextualists typically hold that one major merit of their theory is that it provides a response to skepticism. Correspondingly, they can give up anti-skepticism and their response to the skeptical argument only to the extent that they are prepared to give up what they take to be a major merit of their theory.[7] Similarly, second, (KNA) plays a crucial role in an important argument for epistemic contextualism. This argument has to be given up if (KNA) is given up.[8] Third, (Fact) seems intuitively very plausible. So, quite generally, it would seem to be a drawback of a theory if it can be maintained only if this principle is rejected. Finally, even if it may be disputable whether (Clos) holds in full generality, there should still be suitably restricted versions of that principle that are, on the one hand, true and, on the other, strong enough to underwrite the subsequent arguments. So, again, the contextualist would be ill-advised to reject this principle. Discussing in detail the issues mentioned in this paragraph is a topic for another occasion.

To save some breath, I will, in what follows, use "contextualism" to refer to anti-skeptical epistemic contextualism conjoined with contextualistic versions of (KNA), (Fact) and

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[6] It is, of course, debatable whether the contextualist response to the skeptical argument can ultimately be sustained. See e.g. (Schiffer 1996) for further discussion.

[7] This point is emphasized most strongly in Christoph Jäger's (2012: 494) recent presentation of the factivity problem. See also (Ashfield 2013: 121).

[8] See, again, (Jäger 2012: 494) for this point. See (DeRose 2002) for the argument in question.

(Clos) (unless indicated otherwise). The factivity problem, then, is an argument to the conclusion that contextualism, in this sense, cannot be stated properly.[9]

Let me now show how the factivity problem is supposed to arise. As a first step, we have to spell out the contextualistic versions of (KNA), (Fact) and (Clos). Let's start with (KNA). A contextualist will not say that one can properly assert that p only if one knows that p. For this would mean that assertions are governed by whatever it is that "knows" expresses in the context of this article. This certainly seems arbitrary. The contextualist will correspondingly say that one can properly assert the sentence "p" in a context C only if "S knows that p" is true in C. Descending to the object language, the contextualist will hold that for every C:

> (KNA$_C$) An assertion that p by a speaker S is proper in a context C only if S knows$_C$ that p,

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[9] Setting up the factivity problem in the way I did indicates two drawbacks of at least the presentation of the response to the factivity problem given in (Brueckner and Buford 2009; 2010). First, Brueckner and Buford seem to endorse what I take to be the conclusion of this argument. They write that a contextualist "cannot 'knowledgably' state the contextualist thesis that '[S knows that h at t]' is true in O." (2009: 436) We need not bother here about the specific thesis contextualists supposedly cannot "knowledgably" state. What matters for our purposes is only that this thesis is claimed to be a "contextualist" thesis. It is not entirely clear what this is supposed to mean. One plausible interpretation, though, is that a contextualist thesis is a thesis that is, in some sense, part of contextualism. If that is so, Brueckner and Buford are committed to hold that contextualists cannot "knowledgably" state a claim that is part of contextualism and, as a consequence, cannot "knowledgeably" state contextualism itself. Given (KNA), this just means that contextualism cannot be stated properly and hence entails the conclusion of the factivity problem. (I take this to be the bottom line of why Jäger (2012: 496) thinks that Brueckner and Buford's response to the factivity problem can be dismissed.) Brueckner and Buford may object that I am misconstruing their idea of a "contextualist thesis." A contextualist thesis need not be a thesis that is part of contextualism; it could also be a thesis that, say, just involves contextualistic vocabulary. Similarly, they may object that the claim quoted above is immaterial to their overall argument and that retracting it wouldn't do harm to their response to the factivity problem. Even so, the above considerations show that, *as it stands*, Brueckner and Buford's response to the factivity problem is not fully satisfactory because it has an obvious reading according to which it entails the conclusion of the factivity problem. Second, Brueckner and Buford mainly argue that the contextualist can accept the "contextualist dogma" that it "is possible for there to be two contexts C1 and C2 such that a sentence of the form '[X knows that p at t]' is true in C1 and *not* true in C2" without being committed to the factivity problem (2009: 434, 437). But this dogma seems to be just a statement of contextualism *per se*. If that is so, their argument is beside the point. Even proponents of the factivity problem do not (or at least should not) claim that contextualism *per se* cannot be stated properly. Only anti-skeptical contextualism (conjoined with the above general principles) is supposed to be unstatable. (I take this to be the bottom line of why Peter Baumann (2010: 85, 87) thinks that their argument can be dismissed.) Now, it may be that Brueckner and Buford's dogma is supposed to already entail a certain form of anti-skepticism. Similarly, it may be that, despite the fact that they to do not explicitly consider this issue, their arguments show that the contextualist can properly accept not only contextualism *per se* but also anti-skepticism. But be that as it may, a fully satisfactory response to the factivity problem should make these issues explicit.

where "knows$_C$" is the relation that, according to contextualism, "knows" expresses in a context C. For analogous reasons, the contextualist will spell out (Fact) and (Clos) as the claims that for every C:

(Fact$_C$) If S knows$_C$ that p, then p.

(Clos$_C$) If S knows$_C$ that p and S knows$_C$ that if p, then q, then S knows$_C$ that q.

Proponents of the factivity problem use these principles to show that contextualism cannot be stated properly in the following way. By definition, contextualism entails anti-skepticism, that is, that ordinary knowledge ascriptions are generally true. Let's introduce "S" as a name for a contextualist, say, Keith DeRose, and "h" as an abbreviation for "S has hands." According to proponents of the factivity problem, the contextualist commitment to anti-skepticism then entails that "S knows that h" is true when uttered in an ordinary context. Correspondingly, the first premise of the factivity problem is that contextualists are committed to the claim that "S knows that h" is true in an ordinary context.[10] Let's use "knows$_O$" as a term for the relation that, according to contextualism, "knows" expresses in an ordinary context (as we already did above). We can then restate the first premise of the factivity problem as follows: According to contextualism,

(LOW$_C$) S knows$_O$ that h.[11]

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[10] The above reasoning to the first premise of the factivity problem seems to be present in most presentations of the factivity problem. Baumann (2008: 583; 2010: 87), for example, claims that contextualism without the claim that "knowledge attributions made in a lower context are in fact true" would be "not very attractive [...]." Wright (2005: 243) concurs that the contextualist "has no point to make" unless she can accept that "common sense's claims to knowledge are, in their proper context, perfectly good [...]." Jäger (2012: 491f) quotes DeRose in saying that we do not speak falsely "when we claim to know [...] in [ordinary] contexts in which no skeptics are calling our attention to [skeptical] hypotheses" (DeRose 1999: 18). And Williamson states that according to contextualism, "in everyday contexts many assertions of 'knowledge' are [...] correct." (2005: 689) All four authors use these claims to straightforwardly justify the premise that contextualists must concede that "S knows that h" is true in an ordinary context.

[11] Note that it is not entirely obvious that (LOW$_C$) follows from the thesis that "S knows that h" is true in an ordinary context. For contexts are often construed as *possible* situations of the utterance of a sentence. And even if there are *possible* ordinary situations in which "S knows that h" is true, it does not follow that S knows$_O$ that h. All that would follow is that *possibly S* knows$_O$ that h. So, contexts must be seen here as (something like) *actual* situations of the utterance of a sentence. I mention these points because confusion about these two notions of a context may easily make it seem that (LOW$_C$) is just a trivial consequence of contextualism: Contextualists clearly accept that there are ordinary (possible) contexts such that "S knows that h" is true. It is also trivial that if there are ordinary (actual) contexts such that "S knows that h" is true, then S knows$_O$ that h. But, contrary to what may seem to be the case if the two notions of a context aren't kept apart, these two claims cannot be put together to yield that contextualists trivially accept that S knows$_O$ that h. I don't want to claim that proponents of the factivity problem did confuse these notions of a context.

I will argue later in this paper that this first premise cannot be derived from the contextualist commitment to anti-skepticism in the way just presented and that, as a result, we should reject the factivity problem. For now, though, I will take it for granted.

The second premise of the factivity problem straightforwardly follows from the contextualist response to the skeptical argument. In response to this argument, our contextualist conceded that we don't know$_S$ most ordinary propositions. In particular, she conceded that we don't know$_S$ that we have hands. Correspondingly, the second premise of the factivity problem is that

(HIGH$_C$) S doesn't know$_S$ that h.

The factivity problem can now be derived as follows: According to the first premise, proponents of contextualism have to endorse (LOW$_C$). So, whenever a contextualist properly asserts her view, she also properly asserts (LOW$_C$). Assume S is a contextualist who properly asserts her position in a skeptical context. Then the following holds true:

(1) S properly asserts in a skeptical context that (LOW$_C$) i.e. that S knows$_O$ that h.

This claim, together with (KNA$_C$), straightforwardly entails that

(2) S knows$_S$ that S knows$_O$ that h.

 (KNA$_C$) analogously yields that

(3) S knows$_S$ that (Fact$_C$) i.e. that if S knows$_C$ that p, then p,

because, just as they endorse (LOW$_C$), contextualists endorse (Fact$_C$). But if we now combine (2), (3) and (Clos$_C$), we arrive at the conclusion that

(4) S knows$_S$ that h.

And this claim contradicts (HIGH$_C$). So, contextualists cannot properly state their theory in skeptical contexts. However, whenever they do state their theory they find themselves in "paradigmatic epistemology or 'philosophy classroom' contexts in which skeptical

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Certainly, though, a lax use of "context" can easily make their arguments seem more attractive than they are.

hypotheses are salient and taken seriously." (Jäger 2012: 492) These contexts arguably are skeptical contexts. So, contextualism cannot be stated properly at all.[12]

In what follows, I will show that the argument to this conclusion is not sound because its first premise, that contextualists are committed to (LOW$_C$), is false. Note, first, that this does not mean that (LOW$_C$) itself false and, second, that whether (LOW$_C$) is true or false is an issue that will not be addressed in this paper.

To show that the contextualist is not committed to (LOW$_C$), we have to show that none of the claims that make up contextualism carries with it a commitment to this claim. This is what I will be doing in what follows. Let's start by considering the commitment to anti-skepticism which, as argued above, is standardly taken to entail the commitment to (LOW$_C$). Here is why it doesn't. It seems clear that even if anti-skepticism is true, and thus that ordinary knowledge attributions are generally true, it simply does not follow that (LOW$_C$) is true. For it is certainly possible that all everyday utterances of the specific sentence "*S* knows that *h*" are false even if ordinary knowledge ascriptions are generally true. But if anti-skepticism doesn't entail (LOW$_C$), then it is perfectly consistent for the contextualist to accept anti-skepticism without accepting (LOW$_C$). Hence, the contextualist is not committed to (LOW$_C$) just in virtue of her commitment to anti-skepticism. Of course, the contextualist would be committed to (LOW$_C$) if she held that ordinary knowledge attributions are *one and all* true. But that would be absurd. We do make mistakes. What the contextualist accepts is that ordinary knowledge ascriptions are *generally* true. And this claim does not entail (LOW$_C$) and thus does not yield a commitment to this claim. Note that this result does not rely on my particular choice of *h* as the thesis that *S* has hands. "*h*" can stand for whatever ordinary claim we like. The contextualist will not be committed to the truth of this particular claim just in virtue of her commitment to anti-skepticism. For the claim that ordinary knowledge attributions

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[12] There is room for doubt as to whether philosophical contexts (or at least those philosophical contexts where contextualism is stated) need to be skeptical contexts and, indeed, I am not unsympathetic to the idea of rejecting the factivity problem on the basis of the claim that they are not. In this paper, however, I want to attack the factivity problem from a different, so far un(der)explored angle and hence take this point for granted. For arguments to the conclusion that philosophical contexts aren't skeptical, see e.g. (Montminy 2008: 2–6) and (Ashfield 2013: Sec. 8). For arguments to the conclusion that they are, see (Jäger 2012: 496f). Note also that Baumann (2008: 582f) argues that the factivity problem arises already if the contextualist tries to state her position in a demanding but not necessarily skeptical context. If that is so, the factivity problem requires only the weaker (and presumably indisputable) assumption that philosophical contexts are demanding contexts. All these issues though go beyond the scope of this paper.

are generally true does not entail the truth of any particular ordinary knowledge attribution.

One might want to respond to these considerations by arguing that the contextualist is committed to (LOW$_C$) not because anti-skepticism entails (LOW$_C$) but because *knowledge$_S$* of anti-skepticism entails *knowledge$_S$* of (LOW$_C$). Such an argument, however, would be bound to fail because it is far from clear that knowledge$_S$ of anti-skepticism should entail knowledge$_S$ of (LOW$_C$) (or, for that matter, of the truth of any particular ordinary knowledge attribution). For example, I may perfectly well know that the tickets of a yet to be drawn lottery will generally lose even if I don't know of any particular ticket that it will lose. In just the same way, it should be perfectly possible to know$_S$ that anti-skepticism is true, that is, that ordinary knowledge attributions are generally true, even if one does not know$_S$ of any particular ordinary knowledge attribution that it is true.

These considerations may leave one wonder what exactly the contextualist motivation for anti-skepticism is going to be if it is not the truth of particular ordinary knowledge claims. After all, whereas, in the lottery case, we normally have a guarantee that there is only one winning ticket, we certainly have no guarantee that there is only one false ordinary knowledge claim.[13] This question goes beyond the scope of my paper, but let me briefly indicate one such candidate motivation. DeRose, for example, accepts a principle of charity according to which it is "a strike against a theory of a common term of a natural language that it involves the speakers of that language in systematic and widespread falsehood in their use of that term." (DeRose 1995: 46) This principle, maybe together with the contextualist response to the skeptical argument above, may well be used in an argument for anti-skepticism that is entirely independent of the truth of particular ordinary knowledge claims. It might be debatable whether such appeals to charity are any good.[14] But in the light of the fact that leading proponents of contextualism do invoke such principles, they can certainly not be rejected out of hand in an argument supposed to show that contextualism cannot be stated properly. So, the present discussion may show that one way to corroborate the factivity problem would be to demonstrate that every possible

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[13] Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this worry.
[14] See e.g. (Hawthorne 2004: 126–133), (MacFarlane 2005: 211f) and (Davis 2007: 428–430) for further discussion.

justification of anti-skepticism appeals to the truth of particular ordinary knowledge attributions. Pending such demonstration, however, the factivity problem can be rejected. (In the foregoing paragraphs, I presupposed that knowledge$_S$ of anti-skepticism is possible. The question under discussion only was whether such knowledge$_S$ is possible *independently of knowledge$_S$ of the truth of particular ordinary knowledge claims*. However, this presupposition might be doubted. This, in turn, might then be thought to make contextualism unstatable. I will address this worry in the final sections of this paper.)

The analogy to the lottery case may also leave one wonder how exactly the contextualist will motivate that she doesn't know$_S$ that (LOW$_C$) obtains. After all, it would be question begging just to respond that this assumption leads to the factivity problem.[15] What the contextualist should say here is this: I fail to know$_S$ that (LOW$_C$) obtains, that is, that S knows$_O$ that h, simply because knowledge$_O$ is factive and because I don't know$_S$ that h. This reasoning is not at all be question begging. For it only relies on the factivity principle and the assumption that the contextualist doesn't know$_S$ a lot. And the proponent of the factivity problem uses these principles in her very own argument.

So much for the contextualist commitment to anti-skepticism. Is there any other ingredient of contextualism that might lead to a commitment to (LOW$_C$)? Consider contextualism *per se*. It might be thought that this thesis leads to (LOW$_C$) for the following reason. In explaining contextualism *per se*, contextualists typically present scenarios like the bank cases and then say of the particular knowledge ascriptions and denials made in these scenarios that they are true.[16] Maybe this is even the only way to properly explain contextualism *per se*. So, one might want to conclude that contextualists are committed to say of the particular ordinary knowledge attributions that occur in bank case like scenarios that they are true; and, hence, that they are committed to the truth of particular ordinary knowledge attributions after all. (LOW$_C$) will be just a placeholder for one of these claims.

This reasoning would be mistaken for the following reason. Saying of imagined assertions in imagined scenarios that they are true is entirely unproblematic as far as the factivity

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[15] Thanks to an anonymous referee for rasing this worry.
[16] See e.g. (DeRose 2009: 1f).

problem is concerned. For example, the contextualist in a skeptical context may perfectly happily say of DeRose's low stakes assertion of "I know that the bank will be open" that it is true. For this just means that the contextualist must know$_S$ that DeRose know$_O$ that the bank will be open *in the low stakes scenario*. Given the factivity principle, it does follow that the contextualist must also know$_S$ that the bank will be open *in the low stakes scenario*. But since the low stakes scenario is just defined such that the bank will be open, such knowledge$_S$ seems entirely unproblematic. So, contextualism *per se* does not entail the truth of any real life ordinary knowledge attribution and hence cannot be used to underwrite the supposed commitment to (LOW$_C$).[17]

Consider then the contextualist response to the skeptical argument. Does that response entail a commitment to (LOW$_C$)? It seems fairly clear that it doesn't. In response to the skeptical argument, the contextualist did say that *we cannot show that "S knows that h" is false in an ordinary context* by showing that it is false in a skeptical context. However, this is not to endorse (LOW$_C$), that is, that *"S knows that h" is true in an ordinary context*. As for (Clos$_C$), (Fact$_C$) and (KNA$_C$), these principles are obviously not involved in generating a commitment to (LOW$_C$). So, in sum, no ingredient of the contextualist position commits the contextualists to (LOW$_C$). The factivity problem should thus be rejected.

To clarify the dialectical situation here, let me emphasize that I am perfectly happy with the conclusion that, in a skeptical context, there is hardly any ordinary knowledge attribution such that the contextualist could properly say of that knowledge attribution that it is true. We can easily establish this result along the lines of the reasoning subsequent to (1) above. What I am saying is that this just does nothing to establish the conclusion of the factivity problem that contextualism cannot be stated properly. For the contextualist just isn't committed to say of any particular ordinary knowledge attribution that it is true.

Three further clarificatory remarks: First, when I say that in a skeptical context there is hardly any ordinary knowledge attribution such that the contextualist could properly say of that knowledge attribution that it is true, this is not to say that the contextualist should

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[17] See FN 11 for a related point.

deny the truth of most particular ordinary knowledge attributions in these contexts. This would certainly be incompatible with accepting anti-skepticism. When asked in a skeptical context whether a particular ordinary knowledge attribution is true, the contextualist's response should generally be "I don't know (because I don't know that the putatively "known" content is true)." (Remember the discussion of the lottery example to see that this does not preclude the contextualist from properly saying that anti-skepticism is true.) Second, the previous comment is not to be understood such that the contextualist in a skeptical context should say things like "I don't know whether those ordinary people know that I have hands." This would implausibly suggest that the contextualist should generally consider it an open question whether ordinary speakers meet the excessive epistemic demands of the present skeptical context. All that the contextualist should say is "I don't know whether this particular ordinary standards usage of 'I know that the contextualist has hands' is true." This claim is perfectly compatible with the assumption that the ordinary speaker in question does not meet the skeptical epistemic demands. It only suggests that it is an open question whether she meets the far less demanding epistemic standard that governed her own assertion. And this latter contention seems entirely unproblematic.[18] Third, even if there is hardly any ordinary knowledge attribution such that the contextualist in a skeptical context could properly say of that knowledge attribution that it is true, the same is not true when the contextualist finds herself in an ordinary context. In such a context the contextualist can properly say of an ordinary knowledge claim that it is true as long as she knows$_O$ that the relevant speaker knows$_O$ the propositions she professes to "know" (which will often be the case). Note though that the contextualist will have to retract such claims as soon as she finds herself in a skeptical context. For if she were to retain a commitment to them, she could no longer properly state her views, as the factivity problem shows.[19]

In the remainder of this paper, I will discuss and reject two revised versions of the factivity problem that might have come to mind already in the course of my discussion of the original factivity problem. Here is the first. Given that our contextualist accepts that ordinary knowledge ascriptions are generally true, she will also have to accept that, for some ordinary sentence *p*, there are ordinary contexts in which "*S* knows that *p*" is true.

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[18] Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing out the need to clarify this issue.
[19] Thanks to another anonymous referee for pointing out that this point needed clarification as well.

Descending to the object language, the contextualist has to say that there are ordinary propositions p such that S knows$_O$ that p. Given the contextualist response to the skeptical argument, the contextualist will even have to accept that there are ordinary propositions p such that S knows$_O$ that p *and* S *doesn't knows that* p. Now, let's introduce "h" as an arbitrary name for one of the propositions that S knows$_O$ but doesn't know$_S$. We then arrive at the conclusion—which strongly resembles (LOW$_C$) and (HIGH$_C$)—that, according to the contextualist, S knows$_O$ that h while S doesn't know$_S$ that h. Suppose now that the contextualist finds herself in a skeptical context. Then, given (KNA$_C$), she can properly assert the just derived commitment only if, among other things, she knows$_S$ that S knows$_O$ that h. Given (Fact$_C$) and (Clos$_C$), she must thus knows$_S$ that h. But, by assumption, she doesn't. Hence, contextualism cannot be stated properly (in a skeptical context).

Here is my response to this revised factivity problem. I have nothing to object to the reasoning that leads to the conclusion that the contextualist has to accept that there are ordinary propositions p such that S knows$_O$ that p and S doesn't know$_S$ that p. The rest of the argument, however, rests on a logical mistake as the following analogy brings out. Consider the arguably plausible view that sentences express different propositions depending on the time at which they are uttered. One way of specifying this view would be to assign different properties to each predicate depending on the time of its utterance. We would then presumably say that "knows" expresses different relations depending on the time at which it is used. It could express e.g. the relations of knowledge$_{t1}$, knowledge$_{t2}$ etc. Assume that this view is true. Now suppose that I want to say that there are things that I have forgotten. I will then be committed to the claim that there are proposition p such that I know$_{tpast}$ that p but don't know$_{tnow}$ that p. Certainly, though, it would be absurd to present the following argument to the conclusion that I cannot properly assert that I have forgotten something: Let's introduce "h" as an arbitrary name for one of the propositions that I know$_{tpast}$ but don't know$_{tnow}$. We then arrive at the claim that I am committed to hold that I know$_{tpast}$ that h and don't know$_{tnow}$ that h. Given the knowledge norm of assertion, I must thus know$_{tnow}$ that I know$_{tpast}$ that h (given that I *now* want to say that I have forgotten something). Given the factivity of knowledge and epistemic closure, I must thus also know$_{tnow}$ that h. But this contradicts the assumption that I don't know$_{tnow}$ that h. So, I cannot properly say that I have forgotten something. Clearly, we

cannot accept that reasoning if just because its conclusion is entirely absurd: We *can* properly say that we have forgotten something. But whatever mistake it is that afflicts the argument, this mistake will carry over to the completely analogous argument to the factivity problem described above. So, both these arguments should be rejected.[20]

Here is a second, very much neglected variation on the factivity problem that is taken from (Williamson 2001: 26).[21] It is based on the already mentioned idea that the contextualist might not be able to properly state her view because she doesn't know$_S$ that anti-skepticism is true. Let me elaborate. Instead of starting with the assumption that the contextualist is committed to (LOW$_C$), Williamson starts with the premise that the contextualist is committed to the following claim:

(LOW$_C$*) Ordinary knowledge attributions are generally true.

In the present context, there is certainly no doubt that this premise is true. For (LOW$_C$*) is just a statement of anti-skepticism and, on the present understanding, contextualism entails anti-skepticism. Next, Williamson introduces the following premise instead of (HIGH$_C$):

(HIGH$_C$*) S doesn't know$_S$ that ordinary claims are generally true.

Williamson does not provide a reason to accept this premise and I will argue later that there is no such reason. But if we accept it, we can derive that the contextualist cannot properly state her view in the following way. Given (KNA$_C$), the contextualist must know$_S$ that (LOW$_C$*), that is, that ordinary knowledge ascriptions are generally true in order to properly state her position in a skeptical context. Given (Fact$_C$) and (Clos$_C$), she must then also know$_S$ that ordinary claims are generally true in order to properly state her position in a skeptical context. But given (HIGH$_C$*), she doesn't have that knowledge$_S$.

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[20] I do not want to commit myself to saying where exactly the arguments go awry because this seems to be a tricky logical issue. One possible source of the wrongness of the arguments could be that "*h*," as introduced, is ambiguous between what we could call a referential and a descriptive reading. On the referential reading, I don't know$_{tnow/S}$ that h because I do not stand in the knowledge$_{tnow/S}$ relation to the proposition denoted by "*h*." On the descriptive reading I do know$_{tnow/S}$ that h because I do know$_{tnow/S}$ that whatever proposition "*h*" picks out, this proposition is true because it is supposed to be a proposition I know$_{tpast/O}$ and hence, given factivity, a true proposition.

[21] Kompa (2005: 18f) endorses the argument but doesn't add any substance.

So, given that philosophical contexts are skeptical contexts, it follows that contextualism cannot be stated properly.

Why should we accept (HIGH$_C$*)? Why should the contextualist be forced to construe knowledge$_S$ such that it turns out impossible for her to know$_S$ that ordinary claims are generally true (setting aside the already discussed issue that the contextualist cannot appeal to the truth of particular ordinary knowledge claims)? In what follows, I will lay out what I take to be the most promising answer to these questions and show that it is mistaken. On that basis, I conclude that (HIGH$_C$*) should be rejected. Here is the answer I have in mind.

In her response to the skeptical argument, the contextualist conceded the soundness in a skeptical context of arguments like the following, call them "Conceded:"

> You don't know that you are not a (just recently envatted) handless brain in a vat.
>
> If you don't know that, then you also don't know that you have hands.
>
> So, you don't know that you have hands.

Given that, it might be held, the contextualist should also grant the soundness in a skeptical context of the following seemingly very similar argument, call it "General:"

> You don't know that it is not the case that we all are and have always been brains in vats.
>
> If you don't know that, then you also don't know that ordinary claims are generally true (because if we all are and have always been brains in vats, then ordinary claims are generally false).
>
> So, you don't know that ordinary claims are generally true.

But if that argument is sound in a skeptical context, then the contextualist doesn't know$_S$ that ordinary claims are generally true, and that is precisely what (HIGH$_C$*) says.

The premise in the foregoing paragraph that the contextualist must grant the soundness in a skeptical context of General if she grants the soundness in a skeptical context of the Conceded arguments is far from trivial. After all, even if these arguments are similar, this

does not entail that they should be treated alike in every respect. So, it will have to be supported by a further argument. The argument adduced here would presumably go as follows: If the contextualist wants to hold that General is not sound in a skeptical context, she needs to provide a reason why the argument is not sound in such a context. But whatever reason the contextualist puts forward here, this reason will also show that the Conceded arguments are not sound in a skeptical context either. So, the contextualist will have to grant that General is sound in a skeptical context if she grants that the Conceded arguments are.

The just stated argument for (HIGH$_C$*) fails because it far from clear that every reason the contextualist could have for rejecting the soundness in a skeptical context of General will also be a reason to reject the soundness in a skeptical context of the Conceded arguments. For example, the contextualist could reject General on the basis of semantic externalism. The idea here would be that if we all are and have always been brains in vats, the meanings of our words adapt such that ordinary claims turn out to be true after all.[22] Such an approach would not carry over to the Conceded arguments. For these arguments turn on scenarios like that of being an *only recently envatted* handless brain in a vat. And such more local scenarios certainly do not give rise to meaning adaptation.[23] To be clear, I am not endorsing the semantic externalist response here. I just want to bring out that it would be unfounded to assume that the contextualist cannot argue that General is not sound in a skeptical context without undermining her response to the Conceded arguments. Further considerations would be required to make that contention plausible, but, as far as I can see, such considerations have yet to be delivered.

Admittedly, even if the contextualist manages to show that General is not sound in a skeptical context without thereby undermining her response to the Conceded arguments, she will still make contextualism obsolete as far as responding to General itself is concerned. For a contextualist response to that argument would start from the assumption that the argument *is* sound in a skeptical context. This, however, doesn't seem to be much of a drawback. For it simply might well be that different skeptical arguments require

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[22] This line of argument is, of course, inspired by Putnam. For helpful discussion, see (Brueckner 2012).
[23] See e.g. (DeRose 1999) for this last observation.

different solutions and that contextualism is only part of the overall response to skepticism.[24]

An anonymous referee has pointed out that the proponent of the above factivity problem might respond to the previous considerations in the following way. She could argue that while it may be that the contextualist can appeal to semantic externalism to respond to General without undermining her response to the Conceded arguments, she cannot respond in the same way to the following argument, call it "General*:"

> You don't know that it is not the case that you are a recently envatted brain in a vat in a world where ordinary claims are not generally true.

> If you don't know that, then you also don't know that ordinary claims are generally true.

> So, you don't know that ordinary claims are generally true.

I agree that the contextualist cannot respond to that argument by appealing to semantic externalism. However, there are other potential response strategies. First, let me just flag that it may be possible to argue, again on the basis of general semantic considerations, that it is simply incoherent to assume that ordinary claims are not generally true.[25] This would yield a basis for rejecting the first premise of General* but, as before, not endanger the contextualist response to the Conceded arguments. Let me also lay out a second, more straightforward candidate objection to General*. Consider the first premise of the above described Conceded argument. At least part of the reason why it appears plausible that I don't know that I am not a (recently envatted) handless brain in a vat seems to be this. I would believe that I am not handless even if I were a handless brain in a vat. For the evidence I consider myself to have for not being handless—e.g. that I seem to perceive my hands—would equally be present if I were a handless brain in a vat. However, it is not at all obvious that similar considerations apply to the first premise of General*. For it is not at all obvious that the contextualist would believe that ordinary claims are generally true if she were a recently envatted brain in vat in a world where ordinary claims are not generally true. Suppose the contextualist were to live in a world where ordinary claims

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[24] Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing out the need to address this issue.
[25] See e.g. (Davidson 1983).

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are not generally true (no envattment so far). I take it to be at least unclear that, in such a world, the contextualist would still believe that ordinary claims are generally true. After all, why wouldn't she recognize the general falsity of ordinary claims? Now suppose that, at some point in her life, such a contextualist became envatted so that, from then on, her experiences were merely the product of stimulations from a supercomputer. It seems that if, before the envattment, the contextualist did not believe that ordinary claims are generally true, she will still not believe that after being envatted. Again, why would she? The supercomputer will feed her with faulty experiences. But why would these faulty experiences make her adopt the belief that ordinary claims are generally true? Of course, the supercomputer could continually induce experiences of true ordinary claims. Maybe, at some point, the contextualist would, as a result, come to belief that ordinary claims are generally true. But it is unclear whether, at this point, she could still be counted as being *recently* envatted in the relevant sense. For example, meanings might be adapting already. So, to the extent that it is unclear that the contextualist would believe that ordinary claims are generally true in a world where they are not, it is also unclear whether she would believe that ordinary claims are generally true in a world where they are not *and she is recently envatted*. Thus, here we have another potential asymmetry between the Conceded arguments and General* that the contextualist might want to employ to reject General*.[26]

Let me emphasize once more that I am not endorsing the above responses to General*. I only want to show that, so far, we have no compelling argument for $(HIGH_C*)$. Again, even if the contextualist grants the soundness in a skeptical context of the Conceded arguments, it just doesn't follow that she also has to grant the soundness in a skeptical context of arguments like General or General*. To vindicate this transition, the above mentioned responses to General and General* would have to be ruled out, and at least a case would have to be made that there is no possible argument that could plausibly play their part. So far, however, this just hasn't been done.

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[26] The present response may seem to rely on too simplistic a construal of the brain in a vat scenario. Maybe the supercomputer not only feeds faulty experiences but also directly modifies the beliefs of the contextualist. If, however, such a construal of the brain in a vat scenario is required to get General* going, this by itself may already betray a relevant disanalogy to the case of the Conceded arguments. For these arguments do go through on the simplistic interpretation (if they go through).

Admittedly, this is not to say that it can't be done. So, let me conclude this paper by showing that there still is room for maneuvering even if it turns out that the contextualist has to accept General or General* if she accepts the Conceded arguments. This latter conditional leads to trouble only if its antecedent is true, that is, only if the contextualist has to accept the Conceded arguments. In the present paper, contextualism has just been defined such that this assumption is unproblematic. However, as I will show in what follows, this definition might not be the only sensible option.

Note, to begin with, that it can easily seem that the skeptic, in presenting the above mentioned Conceded argument, uses the sledgehammer to break a walnut. As has frequently been observed, we need not appeal to alternatives as far-fetched as that of being a brain in a vat to challenge most ordinary knowledge claims. So-called "lottery propositions" will generally suffice.[27] For example, the skeptic could argue that I don't know that my bike is parked outside because I don't know that it hasn't been stolen; I don't know that the bank will be open tomorrow because I don't know that it hasn't changed its hours; I don't know that I will never be rich because I don't know that I will not win the lottery; etc. It would seem that such consideration could be leveled against almost all ordinary knowledge claims. So, in this way, the skeptic could argue for her position independently of any appeal to far-fetched alternatives such as that of being a brain in a vat.

Now, contextualism could be construed as a theory designed to respond to precisely this kind of what we may call "lottery skepticism," that is, skepticism supported by the just mentioned lottery considerations. As before, the contextualist would admit that the individual arguments the lottery skeptic presents are sound but object that they only show that we don't know$_S$ a lot but not that we don't know$_O$ a lot. The contextualist, however, would no longer apply this strategy to what we may call "brain in a vat skepticism," that is, skepticism supported by considerations involving brains in vats and similarly far-fetched possibilities. Correspondingly, she would no longer apply her strategy to the above mentioned Conceded argument. Assuming this conception of contextualism, there is no longer any pressure for the contextualist to concede the soundness in a skeptical

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[27] See e.g. (Vogel 1990: 20f) and, following Vogel, (Hawthorne 2004: 5f).

context of General and General*. For she could simply claim that these arguments do not fall within the purview of her theory because they involve brains in vats.[28]

Would this differential treatment of lottery and brain in a vat skepticism be *ad hoc*? Would it be too much of a concession to admit that contextualism does not provide a response to brain in a vat skepticism? Plausibly not. Hawthorne:

> Indeed, lottery-style considerations are arguably a more dialectically effective tool for the skeptic than standard brain in a vat or deceiving demon thought experiments. While many contemporary philosophers are inclined to resist the skeptic by claiming that they can, after all, know that they are not brains in vats, […] they are not nearly so eager to embrace the claim that they know they will lose a lottery for which they hold a lottery ticket. And once this has been conceded, it is extremely hard to justify a different attitude to the other 'lottery propositions' that figure in the above examples. (Hawthorne 2004: 6)

To the extent that Hawthorne is correct, the just outlined response would neither be *ad hoc* nor, arguably, involve too much of a concession. It wouldn't be *ad hoc* because the differential treatment of lottery and brain in a vat skepticism would just line up with the differential reactions to these arguments of "many contemporary philosophers." It would arguably also not involve too much of a concession. For, Hawthorne plausibly suggests that the strongest case for skepticism is not made by the brain in a vat skeptic but by the lottery skeptic. And the present version of contextualism still purports to respond to the latter.

So, to sum up, the original factivity problem fails because even though the contextualist cannot properly state (LOW$_C$), she is not committed to this claim and thus can still properly state her view. The first revised factivity problem fails because it rests on a logical mistake. The second revised factivity problem fails because even though the contextualist is committed to (LOW$_C$*), it couldn't be shown that she cannot properly state that claim. In particular, the premise (HIGH$_C$*) that was supposed to establish this result turns out to be unfounded at least insofar as the contextualist only professes to respond to lottery but not to brain in a vat skepticism. We can thus conclude that there is no factivity problem for contextualism. Contextualism can be stated properly.

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[28] This raises the question whether there is a lottery proposition for the thesis that ordinary claims are generally true. I take this to be at least unclear. But fully answering this question would require a more complete discussion of what lottery propositions are (one that goes beyond merely citing examples). This is a topic for another occasion.

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