

Relevant Alternative Theories and Contextualism about knowledge

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Outline

Introduction to Relevant Alternatives Responses to Skepticism

The structure of Skepticism

Introduction to Contextualism

Objections to Contextualism

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Objections to Contextualism

The Structure of Skepticism

Here's a schematic version of some of the skeptical arguments we've been looking at so far:

The Structure of Skepticism

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4. So you don't know that p .

The “Relevant Alternatives” response to Skepticism

The **Relevant Alternatives Theorist** is someone who denies (3).

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4. So you don't know that p .

The “Relevant Alternatives” response to Skepticism

The **Relevant Alternatives Theorist** says you don't have to rule out all the alternatives to p , or even all the things you recognize to be alternatives. You just have to rule out the alternatives that are somehow “relevant.”

Dretske and Relevant Alternative Theory

1. Dretske (1932-2013)
was a fan of the
Relevant Alternatives
Theory.



Dretske and Relevant Alternative Theory

1. Dretske (1932-2013) was a fan of the Relevant Alternatives Theory.
2. He thought it does a good job of explaining his Gadwall duck/grebe case.



Gadwall duck/grebe case

1. Suppose you see a bird that has all the markings of a Gadwall duck—and in fact it is a Gadwall duck.



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1. Suppose you see a bird that has all the markings of a Gadwall duck—and in fact it is a Gadwall duck.
2. Do you know that it is?
3. According to Dretske, that depends on whether **there are relevant alternatives to its being a Gadwall duck.**



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2. If the grebe alternative is relevant, Dretske thinks, then you don't know that the bird you see is a Gadwall duck. But if it's not a relevant alternative, then you can know.

Zebra/striped mule case

1. Suppose you're at the zoo, and in the pen in front of you is a striped mule-like animal.



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2. The sign on the pen says "Zebra."
3. Do you know that the animal is a zebra?
(Assume that in fact it is a zebra.)



Zebra/striped mule case

1. Dretske says: Well, what about the possibility that it's just a mule painted to look like a zebra?

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2. Do you really know that the animal is not a cleverly-disguised mule?

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1. Dretske says: Well, what about the possibility that it's just a mule painted to look like a zebra?
2. Do you really know that the animal is not a cleverly-disguised mule?
3. You may have some reason to believe that it's not a cleverly-disguised mule.

Zebra/striped mule case

1. Dretske says: Well, what about the possibility that it's just a mule painted to look like a zebra?
2. Do you really know that the animal is not a cleverly-disguised mule?
3. You may have some reason to believe that it's not a cleverly-disguised mule.
4. (Zoos don't typically try to fool people like that.) But your evidence doesn't seem to be good enough to know that it's not a cleverly-disguised mule.

Zebra/striped horse case

1. You haven't made any special tests, or anything like that.
So Dretske thinks you don't know it.

Zebra/striped horse case

1. You haven't made any special tests, or anything like that. So Dretske thinks you don't know it.
2. But he still wants to say that, so long as the mule hypothesis is not a relevant alternative, you can know that the animal in the pen is a zebra.

Zebra/striped horse case

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1. Now the important question is: What determines when a possibility counts as **relevant**?
2. Does the subject have to know about the grebe possibility, or the painted-mule possibility, for them to be relevant?
3. Dretske doesn't think so.

Zebra/striped horse case

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Zebra/striped horse case

1. He thinks alternatives can be relevant for you, and can keep you from having knowledge, even when you haven't come across any evidence that they're true.
2. Perhaps it's enough if there's some suspicious ornithologist poking around in the neighborhood, who does have evidence there are grebes in the area.

Zebra/striped horse case

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Zebra/striped horse case

1. Is even that much necessary?
2. What if there is no ornithologist but some people think there is?
3. Or what if there really are look-alike grebes in the area but no one knows or even suspects that there are?
4. In which of these cases is the grebe possibility a relevant alternative?

What makes an alternative “relevant”?

1. We could say that relevance depends on **facts** about what the knower believes or has evidence for believing.

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1. We could say that relevance depends on **facts** about what the knower believes or has evidence for believing.
2. For instance, we could say that the grebe possibility is relevant just in case the knower believes there to be grebes around, or has evidence that there are grebes around.

The Contextualist response to Skepticism

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1. Alternatively, we could say that whether some alternative counts as relevant doesn't depend so much on facts about the knower;
2. Rather it depends on facts about the **conversational setting** in which knowledge is being ascribed, or in which the knowledge-claim is being assessed.

The Contextualist response to Skepticism

1. For instance, if we're talking about whether Julius Caesar knew he had hands, in one context we might want to count hypotheses like BIVs and evil demons as irrelevant, and in another context we might want to count them as relevant.

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1. For instance, if we're talking about whether Julius Caesar knew he had hands, in one context we might want to count hypotheses like BIVs and evil demons as irrelevant, and in another context we might want to count them as relevant.
2. This depends upon us, and our interests and purposes, not upon facts about Caesar. This is the kind of story a **Contextualist** tells.

Outline

Introduction to Relevant Alternatives Responses to Skepticism

The structure of Skepticism

Introduction to Contextualism

Objections to Contextualism

What does “know” mean anyway?

Mary and John are chatting with each other about what time they should meet for a concert.

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Mary and John are chatting with each other about what time they should meet for a concert.

1. Mary says: “We probably could get away with getting at the concert right before it starts.”
2. John replies: “I *know* there will be many people at the concert. So it is safe to arrive earlier to secure our places.”

What does “know” mean anyway?

Descartes is wondering about whether he can come to know anything by perception.

1. “I want to establish my perceptual beliefs beyond any doubts whatsoever.”

What does “know” mean anyway?

Descartes is wondering about whether he can come to know anything by perception.

1. “I want to establish my perceptual beliefs beyond any doubts whatsoever.”
2. “How can anybody *know* anything by perceptual experience? Could not anything be exposed to skeptical doubts?”

What does “know” mean anyway?

Does the word “know” in John’s mouth mean the same as the word “know” in Descartes’ mouth?

Context sensitive words

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2. “I am Italian” in my mouth says something true. “I am Italian” in the mouth of my supervisor (born in Syracuse) is false.
3. “It is 3 o’clock now” says by somebody at 3pm is true. The same sentence pronounced at 4pm is false.

Context sensitive words

1. Similarly, one might argue that “big” is context-sensitive. If we look at Mighty Mouse scurrying about with a bunch of other mice, we might say “He sure is big.”

Context sensitive words

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2. If we look at Mighty Mouse scurrying around with a bunch of kangaroos, we’d probably say, “He sure is small.”

Context sensitive words

1. Perhaps we're saying something true in each case. In the first case, what we want to say is that Mighty Mouse is big for a mouse. In the second case, what we want to say is that Mighty Mouse is small for a land animal, or something like that.

Context sensitive words

1. Perhaps we're saying something true in each case. In the first case, what we want to say is that Mighty Mouse is big for a mouse. In the second case, what we want to say is that Mighty Mouse is small for a land animal, or something like that.
2. The comparison class is supplied by the speaker's intentions and the audience's expectations, and these vary from context to context.

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Context sensitive words

1. One could also give a Contextualist account of words like “flat” and “empty.”
2. One could say that what counts as flat varies from context to context.
3. When we want a flat surface to calibrate our machine tools, the Kansas highway doesn't count as flat.
4. When we want a flat surface to land our damaged airplane, the Kansas highway does count as flat. What “flat” means depends on the intentions and expectations of the people engaging in the conversation.

Context-sensitivity versus literality

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1. It is important to distinguish **context-sensitivity** from **non-literality**.
2. One may think that Kansas highway flat is never literally true.
3. And yet think that it might sometimes be appropriate or reasonable to call the highway flat, for instance, if you're looking for a place to land your damaged airplane. The highway is close enough to being flat for your practical purposes.

Context-sensitivity versus literality

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Context-sensitivity versus literality

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2. The Contextualist would say that in some contexts it really is **literally true** to call the Kansas highway flat. Just as in some contexts it really is literally true to call Mighty Mouse big.

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Contextualism versus non-literalism

1. In some contexts the little irregularities in the highway surface don't count; they're just too small.
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Contextualism versus non-literalism

1. In some contexts the little irregularities in the highway surface don't count; they're just too small.
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3. When we want a flat surface to land our damaged airplane, the Kansas highway does count as flat.
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Other examples: “tall”

1. John to Mary (talking about 3 years old Georgie) “She is so tall!” (Georgie is 3.7)

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2. Mark to George (discussing the height of Denver Nuggets’ basketball players): “Nate Robinson is not tall!” (Nate Robinson is 5.9)

“tall”

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1. Both John and Mark may be speaking truly. But if that is the case, they cannot mean the same by “tall.”
2. The meaning of “tall” plausibly varies from context of use to context of use.
3. “tall” may sometimes mean “tall for a basketball player”, other times “tall for a 3 years old child”.

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2. As DeRose puts it, in some contexts, for one to count as knowing that something is the case, one needs to satisfy **higher epistemic standards** than in other contexts.
3. In those contexts, it is more difficult to count as knowing that something is the case.
4. In particular, in epistemology classes for example, the standards for knowledge are **higher than** in ordinary contexts.

Outline

Introduction to Contextualism

Contextualists about Knowledge

Contextualism and skepticism

Contextualism and the Lottery Paradox

Casts of Characters

1. Keith DeRose (1962-) is a philosopher at Yale.



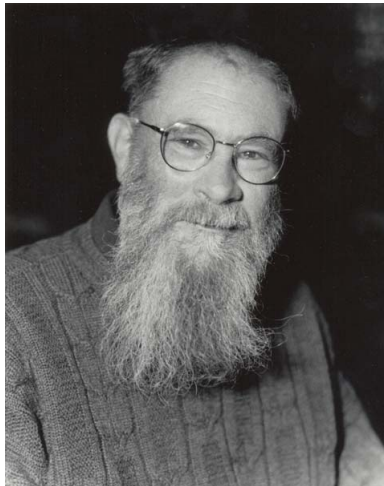
Casts of Characters

1. Keith DeRose (1962-) is a philosopher at Yale.
2. Most of his career spent to defend contextualism about knowledge.



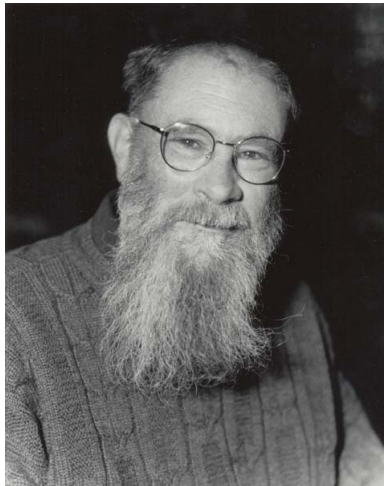
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1. David Lewis
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Casts of Characters

1. David Lewis (1941-2001) was a philosopher at Princeton.
2. Considered the best philosophers of the 20th century. Some think of him as the best philosophers of **all times**.



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Introduction to Contextualism

Contextualists about Knowledge

Contextualism and skepticism

Contextualism and the Lottery Paradox

DeRose on Contextualism and skepticism

according to contextualists, the skeptic, in presenting her argument, manipulates the semantic standards for knowledge, thereby creating a context in which she can truthfully say that we know nothing or very little. Once the standards have been so raised, we correctly sense that we could only falsely claim to know such things as that we have hands. . . .

DeRose on Contextualism and skepticism

... Why don't we simply accept the skeptic's conclusion and henceforth refrain from ascribing such knowledge to ourselves or others? Because, the contextualist continues, we also realize this: As soon as we find ourselves in more ordinary conversational contexts, it will not only be true for us to claim to know the very things that the skeptic now denies we know, but it will also be wrong for us to deny that we know these things.

Contextualism and relevant alternatives

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2. One way to do so is by ruling out alternatives that are contextually irrelevant.
3. The general story is: “ S knows that p ” means that S believes that p , p is true and S has evidence that’s good enough to rule out all the relevant alternatives—

Contextualism and relevant alternatives

1. A Contextualist about knowledge says that what “know” means varies from context to context, just like “big” and “flat” and “empty.”
2. One way to do so is by ruling out alternatives that are contextually irrelevant.
3. The general story is: “ S knows that p ” means that S believes that p , p is true and S has evidence that’s good enough to rule out all the relevant alternatives—
4. But in different conversational settings, the Contextualist thinks, different alternatives count as **relevant**.

Contextualism and relevant alternatives

1. For example, when you're talking to your butcher, things like BIVs and the Matrix and perfect dreams aren't relevant.

Contextualism and relevant alternatives

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Contextualism and relevant alternatives

1. For example, when you're talking to your butcher, things like BIVs and the Matrix and perfect dreams aren't relevant.
2. So in contexts like that, you can truly say that you know you have hands.
3. When you're talking to the skeptic, on the other hand, the set of relevant alternatives is different.
4. In a context like that, things like BIVs and evil demons may become relevant alternatives, and since you can't rule those alternatives out, in those contexts it would be false to say that you know.

Outline

Introduction to Contextualism

Contextualists about Knowledge

Contextualism and skepticism

Contextualism and the Lottery Paradox

Lottery and closure

Let us go back to our Lottery Paradox:

1. Recall the Closure Principles about knowledge that we discussed earlier.

The Principles of Closure

Closure Proper

If S knows that p , believe q because p entails q , then S knows that q .

Closure Proper Revised

If S knows that p , believe q because p entails q , then if S has preserved knowledge of p throughout, S must know that q .

Example

Ordinary proposition You know that the animal in the zoo pen
is a zebra.

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Instance of closure If you know that the animal in the pen is a zebra., then *if* you also believe that the animal is not a disguised mule because if it is a zebra it cannot be a disguised mule, then you must know that the animal in the zoo pen is not a cleverly disguised mule.

Example

Ordinary proposition You know that the animal in the zoo pen is a zebra.

Instance of closure If you know that the animal in the pen is a zebra., then *if* you also believe that the animal is not a disguised mule because if it is a zebra it cannot be a disguised mule, then you must know that the animal in the zoo pen is not a cleverly disguised mule.

Lottery proposition So you must know that the animal in the zoo pen is not a cleverly disguised mule.

Relevant Alternatives and Closure

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2. Traditional versions of the Relevant Alternative Theory reject closure.
3. For example, Dretske claims that you can know that the animal in the pen is a zebra on the basis of evidence which does not enable you to know that the animal isn't a cleverly-disguised mule.

Relevant Alternatives and Closure

1. So here we have a counter-example to Closure:

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1. So here we have a counter-example to Closure:
 - 1.1 You know that the animal is a zebra.
 - 1.2 The claim that the animal is a zebra is incompatible with its being a cleverly-disguised mule. (And you know this.)

Relevant Alternatives and Closure

1. So here we have a counter-example to Closure:
 - 1.1 You know that the animal is a zebra.
 - 1.2 The claim that the animal is a zebra is incompatible with its being a cleverly-disguised mule. (And you know this.)
 - 1.3 Yet you don't know the claim that the animal is not a cleverly-disguised mule.

Relevant Alternatives and Closure

1. Dretske thinks that knowledge is closed under *some* known entailments.

Relevant Alternatives and Closure

1. Dretske thinks that knowledge is closed under *some* known entailments.
2. For example, he thinks that if you know that P&Q, then you know that P. (P&Q logically entails that P.)

Relevant Alternatives and Closure

1. He just thinks that Closure fails when it's a matter of knowing P , and knowing that P entails not- Q , but Q is not at the moment a relevant alternative to P .

Relevant Alternatives and Closure

1. He just thinks that Closure fails when it's a matter of knowing P , and knowing that P entails not- Q , but Q is not at the moment a relevant alternative to P .
2. In such a case, Dretske thinks, you can know P even if you're not in a position to know not- Q .

Relevant Alternatives and Closure

1. For example, you can know it's a zebra in the pen even if you're not in a position to know it's not a cleverly-disguised mule.

Relevant Alternatives and Closure

1. For example, you can know it's a zebra in the pen even if you're not in a position to know it's not a cleverly-disguised mule.
2. But if the possibility of its being a cleverly-disguised mule were to become relevant, then—since you can't rule it out—you would no longer count as knowing that it's a zebra in the pen.

Relevant Alternatives and Closure

1. However, matters are not so straightforward. After all, it's somewhat odd to deny Closure.

Relevant Alternatives and Closure

1. However, matters are not so straightforward. After all, it's somewhat odd to deny Closure.
2. It's odd to say that you could know that P, and know that P entails not-Q, but not be able to put these together and draw the conclusion that not-Q.

Two Questions for discussion

Question 1 : Can Contextualism help with the Lottery Paradox? If so, how?

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- Question I** : Can Contextualism help with the Lottery Paradox? If so, how?
- Question II** : Can Contextualism avoid skepticism and at the same time preserve closure?

Contextualism and Closure

1. If you hold a Contextualist version of the Relevant Alternatives Theory, then you might be able to retain some kind of Closure Principle.

Contextualism and Closure

1. If you hold a Contextualist version of the Relevant Alternatives Theory, then you might be able to retain some kind of Closure Principle.
2. According to the Contextualist, Norm can say “Caesar knew he had hands” and Skepty can say “Caesar did not know he had hands,” and they need not be disagreeing.

Contextualism and Closure

1. They might both be right. It's just that what they mean by "X knew he had hands" is different, since the sets of relevant alternatives are different.

Contextualism and Closure

1. They might both be right. It's just that what they mean by "X knew he had hands" is different, since the sets of relevant alternatives are different.
2. Similarly, when you say "I know I have hands" and the skeptic says "You don't know you're not dreaming," the Contextualist can say you're speaking in different contexts, with different sets of relevant alternatives.

Contextualism and Closure

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Contextualism and Closure

1. It's as if Tom were to say "I'm Tom" and Jerry were to say "I'm not Tom." There's no conflict there, just a difference in context.
2. With this in mind, the Contextualist can go on to insist that Closure holds within any single context.

Contextualism and Closure

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Contextualism and Closure

1. In any **given single context**, you either know that you have hands and that you're not dreaming, or you don't know that you're not dreaming and you don't know that you have hands, either.
2. If dreaming is a relevant alternative, then you don't know either of these things.
3. But if dreaming is not relevant, then you can know that you have hands, and you can also know that you're not merely dreaming.

Contextualism and Closure

1. So it looks like one can be a Contextualist and still accept the Closure Principle, after all.

Outline

Introduction to Relevant Alternatives Responses to Skepticism

The structure of Skepticism

Introduction to Contextualism

Objections to Contextualism

Issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

1. Here's another issue to think about.

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2. Suppose you're walking down the street talking to your friend on your cell phone and your friend says "Do you know whether it's raining on Main Street?"

Issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

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3. Since you're walking on Main Street you say "Yes."

Issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

1. Here's another issue to think about.
2. Suppose you're walking down the street talking to your friend on your cell phone and your friend says "Do you know whether it's raining on Main Street?"
3. Since you're walking on Main Street you say "Yes."
4. Now a skeptic has overheard your conversation, he butts in and says, "Hey remember the Matrix and so on. Now do you know whether it's raining in on Main Street?"

Other issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

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Question

How should a Contextualist reply to this sort of objection?

Other issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

1. Compare: Yesterday you're in Maine and you say "It's cold here."

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Other issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

1. Compare: Yesterday you're in Maine and you say "It's cold here."
2. Today you go to Tennessee where they're having a heat wave.
3. You say "It's hot here today, and it was hot here yesterday too."

Other issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

1. Compare: Yesterday you're in Maine and you say "It's cold here."
2. Today you go to Tennessee where they're having a heat wave.
3. You say "It's hot here today, and it was hot here yesterday too."
4. Now yesterday you said "It's cold here" but today you're saying "It was hot here yesterday."

Other issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

1. Have you changed your mind?

Other issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

1. Have you changed your mind?
2. No, of course not.

Other issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

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2. No, of course not.
3. “Here” means different things in the two contexts.

Other issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

1. Have you changed your mind?
2. No, of course not.
3. “Here” means different things in the two contexts.
4. It doesn't matter that yesterday you were in Maine. You still interpret “here” according to what it means in today's context. That's Tennessee.

Other issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

1. Similarly, the Contextualist will say, “know” means different things in non-skeptical contexts than it means in skeptical contexts.

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1. Similarly, the Contextualist will say, “know” means different things in non-skeptical contexts than it means in skeptical contexts.
2. It means different things because the set of relevant alternatives is different in the two contexts.

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1. Similarly, the Contextualist will say, “know” means different things in non-skeptical contexts than it means in skeptical contexts.
2. It means different things because the set of relevant alternatives is different in the two contexts.
3. It doesn't matter if yesterday you were in a non-skeptical context.
4. You still interpret “know” according to what it means in today's context.

Other issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

1. Hence, in a skeptical context, “Yesterday I knew that I have hands” comes out false; no matter what kind of context you were in yesterday.

Other issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

1. Hence, in a skeptical context, “Yesterday I knew that I have hands” comes out false; no matter what kind of context you were in yesterday.
2. It would be OK to say this in the skeptic’s context:
“What the sentence ‘I know that I have hands’ said in yesterday’s non-skeptical context—that was true, because it had to do with an ordinary set of alternatives.”

Casts of Characters

1. Timothy Williamson (1956-) is a philosopher at Oxford.



Casts of Characters

1. Timothy Williamson (1956-) is a philosopher at Oxford.
2. Tim Williamson has an objection to the Contextualist that uses examples of this sort, where you're talking in one context about what's true in another



Williamson's objection to Contextualism

1. Suppose you're in a skeptical context.

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1. Suppose you're in a skeptical context.
2. So in that context "I know the animal in the pen is a zebra" is false. You can agree, though, that in the non-skeptical contexts, "I know the animal in the pen is a zebra" says something true.

Williamson's objection to Contextualism

1. Suppose you're in a skeptical context.
2. So in that context "I know the animal in the pen is a zebra" is false. You can agree, though, that in the non-skeptical contexts, "I know the animal in the pen is a zebra" says something true.
3. But now knowledge is factive; if there are any contexts in which "I know that P" says something true, then "P" has to be true in those contexts as well.

Williamson's objection to Contextualism

1. So you should agree that in the non-skeptical contexts, "the animal in the pen is a zebra" also says something true.

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1. So you should agree that in the non-skeptical contexts, “the animal in the pen is a zebra” also says something true.
2. Now compare the non-skeptical context to your own present skeptical context.
3. Is there anything that could make “the animal in the pen is a zebra” mean something different in the one context than it does in the other?

Williamson's objection to Contextualism

1. So you should agree that in the non-skeptical contexts, “the animal in the pen is a zebra” also says something true.
2. Now compare the non-skeptical context to your own present skeptical context.
3. Is there anything that could make “the animal in the pen is a zebra” mean something different in the one context than it does in the other?
4. No, it doesn't seem like there is.

Other issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

1. The Contextualist's view is that sentences involving the word "know" mean different things in different contexts, because the set of relevant alternatives can be different in different contexts.

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2. The Contextualist doesn't also say that any sentence involving words like "animal" or "zebra" has to mean different things in different contexts.

Other issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

1. The Contextualist's view is that sentences involving the word "know" mean different things in different contexts, because the set of relevant alternatives can be different in different contexts.
2. The Contextualist doesn't also say that any sentence involving words like "animal" or "zebra" has to mean different things in different contexts.
3. So it looks like "the animal in the pen is a zebra" means the same thing in your skeptical context as it does in the non-skeptical context.

Other issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

1. So if it's true in the non-skeptical context, it has to be true in your context as well.

Other issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

1. So if it's true in the non-skeptical context, it has to be true in your context as well.
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Other issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

1. So if it's true in the non-skeptical context, it has to be true in your context as well.
2. Hence, you should agree that in your context, "the animal in the pen is a zebra" is true.
3. Yet as we said at the beginning, you say that "I know that the animal in the pen is a zebra" is false in your context.

Other issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

1. So in your context, you should be able to say truly “The animal in the pen is a zebra, but I do not know that”.

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1. So in your context, you should be able to say truly “The animal in the pen is a zebra, but I do not know that”.
2. That seems like a funny thing to say. How can that be true in any context?

Other issues with a Contextualist solution to skepticism

1. So in your context, you should be able to say truly “The animal in the pen is a zebra, but I do not know that”.
2. That seems like a funny thing to say. How can that be true in any context?
3. Williamson takes this to be a point against Contextualism.