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The Limited Insights of Contextualism in the Internalism–Externalism Debate

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Abstract. Internalism and externalism disagree about what makes a belief justified, and contextualism is frequently offered as a way to dissolve that disagreement. This paper argues that contextualism cannot do that work. Its central claim is semantic: the standards expressed by "knows" can shift with the conversational context of an attribution. That claim is compatible with either side of the older dispute, so it cannot decide between them. Three limitations are developed. A semantic thesis about "knows" does not entail an epistemological thesis about justification, and the inference between them requires premises that contextualists rarely supply. Contextualism is silent on which standard ought to govern a given evaluation, so the normative question on which the dispute turns is left untouched. And once an assessor's context is held fixed, contextualism must still choose between access and reliability, because a single context cannot assign justification differently to two internally duplicate believers without taking a substantive stand. The third limitation is developed as an original argument, the fixed-context dilemma. The conclusion is that contextualism's contribution is diagnostic rather than constructive. It explains why rival intuitions feel compelling, and that is worth having, but the dispute about justification survives the explanation intact.

Keywords: internalism, externalism, contextualism, justification, knowledge attribution

1. Introduction

1.1. A dispute about where justification lives

Half a century of epistemology has been organised around a disagreement about the location of justification. Internalists hold that whatever confers justificatory status on a belief must be internal to the subject's perspective, where "internal" is standardly cashed out as accessible to the subject by reflection alone. Externalists deny this. On the canonical externalist account a belief is justified in virtue of the reliability of the process that produced it, and the subject need have no inkling that the process is reliable, or even that she is employing it [1].

None of this is verbal. It concerns what epistemic evaluation is for. If internalism is right, then to assess a believer is to assess her conduct from within the space of reasons she occupies, and a believer who has used that space well is not open to epistemic criticism. If externalism is right, assessment tracks the subject's relation to her environment, and a believer may be faulty in a respect

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she could not have detected from where she stands. Those are rival conceptions of a practice rather than rival descriptions of one practice.

Two features of the debate help to explain its durability. Each position protects an intuition that the other sacrifices: internalism protects the thought that epistemic blame tracks the agent's perspective, externalism the thought that knowledge is worldly achievement rather than well-ordered appearance. And the arguments on both sides take the form of cases whose verdicts the opposing camp refuses to grant. The demon worlds of the new evil demon literature and the counterexamples of Gettier are not neutral data [2, 3]. They are instruments, and their readings depend on the theory the reader already holds.

1.2. Contextualism as a proposed mediator

Contextualism entered this stalemate with a different kind of claim. Its thesis is semantic: the standards expressed by "knows" can shift with the conversational context in which an attribution is made [4, 5]. The claim has since been developed into a substantial research programme, and it has often been advertised as a way of doing justice to both sides of the older dispute [6]. The advertisement is easy to understand. If the threshold for a knowledge claim is set by context, then the internalist may be describing what is demanded when sceptical possibilities are salient, and the externalist what is demanded in ordinary life, and neither is simply wrong.

Something in this proposal is genuinely right, and section 4 will try to say what. The proposal also promises more than it can deliver, and the promise has shaped a good deal of recent work. Bradley argues that much of the internalism and externalism debate about justification can be dissolved by contextualism, on the grounds that normative terms carry hidden parameters fixed by context [7]. If that is so, the dispute dissolves. This paper argues that it does not.

1.3. Argument and structure

What follows defends a narrower claim: contextualism's contribution to the internalism-externalism debate is diagnostic rather than constructive. Contextualism can explain why the competing intuitions are compelling. It cannot decide which theory of justification is correct, and it does not become able to decide by being refined.

Three limitations support that claim. A semantic thesis about "knows" does not entail an epistemological thesis about justification, and the inference from one to the other needs premises that contextualists seldom supply. Contextualism is silent on which standard ought to govern a given evaluation, so the normative question on which the dispute turns is left where it was. And once an assessor's conversational context is held fixed, contextualism must still choose between access and reliability, because a single context cannot assign justification to internally duplicate believers in different ways without taking a substantive stand. The third limitation is developed here as an original argument, the fixed-context dilemma, in section 4.4.

Section 2 sorts out what internalism and externalism are and separates three questions that the literature tends to run together. Section 3 reviews the central arguments and explains why the exchange stalls. Section 4 sets out semantic contextualism, states what it explains, and presents the fixed-context dilemma. Section 5 considers two apparent escape routes, virtue epistemology and experimental philosophy, and formulates a general conjecture about why semantic reframings do not terminate substantive disputes. Section 6 concludes.

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2. Two families of views about justification

2.1. Internalism: access and evidence

Internalism is not one doctrine but a family, and two members of it matter here. Access internalism requires that the subject be able to know, by reflection alone, what makes her belief justified. BonJour defended a demanding version of this view, arguing that a belief whose grounds the subject cannot survey is not genuinely hers, and that relaxing the access requirement would collapse internalism into a disguised externalism [8]. Mental-state internalism is weaker. It requires only that justificatory status supervene on the subject's non-factive mental states, without demanding that the subject be able to articulate them.

Evidentialism belongs to the weaker branch. Its core principle is compact: a belief is justified for a subject at a time to the extent that it fits the evidence the subject has at that time [9]. Nothing is said about the reliability of the process by which the belief was formed, and no higher-order reflection is required. Evidentialism therefore avoids a regress that presses on BonJour's account. If every justified belief required a further justified belief about its own grounds, the demand would either run back indefinitely or stop arbitrarily. Evidentialism stops the regress by refusing to generate it.

Its cost lies elsewhere. Evidentialism owes an account of what evidence is. If evidence consists of experiential states, then the fit between those states and a belief about the external world must itself be explained, and that explanation is exactly what externalists think internalists cannot supply. Conee and Feldman broaden the notion of evidence in response, but however the notion is drawn the justificatory base remains inside the subject's mental life [9].

2.2. Externalism: reliability and process individuation

Externalism is equally a family. Process reliabilism holds that a belief is justified if and only if it is produced by a cognitive process that yields a high ratio of true beliefs across relevant situations [1]. The attraction is immediate. Perception, memory and sound inference are reliable in this sense, and they are the processes on which nearly everything anyone knows depends. Reliabilism also extends knowledge to subjects who cannot reflect on their own cognition, including young children and non-human animals.

Reliabilism faces a problem of individuation. Beliefs are produced by processes at many levels of description, from vision as such to vision in dim light while tired, and reliability varies with the description chosen. Which level fixes the justificatory status of the belief? Conee and Feldman pressed this as the generality problem and argued that reliabilists lack a principled way to answer it [10].

2.3. Three questions the literature runs together

Once the families are separated, the shape of the dispute becomes clearer, and clearer in a way that matters for the argument to come. Internalism and externalism are not offering rival definitions of one thing. They are offering rival accounts of what confers epistemic status, and they disagree about whether that conferral can outrun the subject's own perspective.

Three questions can be distinguished, and much of the confusion in this area comes from running them together. The first concerns justification: what makes a belief justified? The second concerns knowledge: what must be added to justified true belief, if anything, to yield knowledge? The third

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concerns language: how does the truth of a knowledge attribution depend on the context in which it is made? The first two are substantive. The third is semantic.

Classic arguments do not distribute across these questions in the way usually assumed. Gettier's cases belong to the second question. They show that justification, truth and belief are not jointly sufficient for knowledge, and they do not by themselves refute internalism about justification, because an internalist is free to add an anti-luck condition [3]. The demon cases belong to the first question, since they concern justification directly and leave the analysis of knowledge aside [2]. Contextualism belongs to the third. That distribution is the hinge of this paper. If contextualism answers only the third question then it cannot settle the first, and the internalism-externalism dispute lives at the first.

3. The central arguments

3.1. The new evil demon problem

Internalism's most effective argument is the new evil demon problem, introduced in the early 1980s and developed by Cohen [2]. Take a subject whose experiences are systematically produced by a demon, so that nearly everything she believes about the external world is false. Now stipulate that her inner life is indistinguishable from that of an ordinary perceiver: the same experiences, the same dispositions to reason, the same reflective access to her own grounds. Intuitively she is as justified as her ordinary counterpart. She has done everything right from where she stands. Reliabilism cannot say this, because her processes are not reliable.

Care is needed here, since the force of the argument is easy to overstate. It does not show that internalism is true. Externalists have several replies available. They may distinguish justification from knowledge and hold that the deceived subject has a justification analogue falling short of the external condition knowledge requires. They may bite the bullet and deny the intuition, arguing that sympathy for the victim is really a judgement about blame rather than about justification, a move that gains force if epistemic evaluation separates justification from excuse. Or they may relativise reliability to normal conditions and claim that the victim's processes are reliable relative to the environment for which they were designed.

What the argument does establish is an explanatory burden. Any account of justification must say why the subject's perspective matters epistemically at all, if it maintains that her perspective does not determine justificatory status. That burden is still being discharged rather than dismissed.

3.2. Gettier cases and the anti-luck intuition

Gettier's counterexamples target a different claim [3]. They show that a belief can be true and justified, on any plausible account of justification, and yet be true by luck in a way that disqualifies it from being knowledge. The stopped clock is the familiar illustration. A subject glances at a clock that stopped exactly twenty-four hours earlier, forms the belief that it is three o'clock, and is right. Her evidence is what it would have been had the clock been working. The belief is true. It is not knowledge.

Externalists have often claimed this ground. The thought is that internalism is structurally unable to exclude such luck, since the internal facts are held fixed across the good and bad cases, and that only a condition sensitive to the subject's relation to the world can do the work. Reliabilism supplies such a condition [1].

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That claim overreaches. Gettier cases are cases about knowledge, and an internalist about justification may add an anti-luck condition without abandoning internalism about what justifies. Whether the resulting hybrid is stable is a fair question, but Gettier's argument does not decide the internalism-externalism dispute. It decides something narrower. Presenting it as a refutation of internalism, as much of the literature does, obscures which question is being answered.

3.3. The scope objection

A further externalist charge concerns the reach of internalism. Ordinary knowledge attributions are made without reflection. Someone who says that she knows she has hands has not surveyed a set of reasons, and an infant who recognises her mother has certainly not done so. If reflective access were necessary for justification, a great deal of what everyone calls knowledge would fall outside the category.

Internalists have two standard replies. They may weaken the access requirement, holding that access means availability rather than actual exercise, so that a subject who could reflect has what is needed. Or they may accept the conclusion for some cases and restrict the domain, treating children and animals as having something short of full-blooded knowledge. Neither reply is obviously fatal, and the choice between them is a substantive internalist decision rather than a surrender.

3.4. The normativity objection

Internalists object on normative grounds. On the internalist picture, epistemic evaluation is a form of assessment addressed to a cognitive agent, and assessment of that kind presupposes that the agent could in principle have guided herself by the considerations that make her belief good or bad. Reliability does not meet that presupposition. A reliably produced belief may be a fortunate causal event rather than an exercise of the agent's capacities.

Internalists must be careful not to argue in a circle here. The claim that assessment must be addressable to the agent is not neutral between the two views; it is close to a restatement of internalism. A better formulation appeals to the practice of criticism. When a belief is criticised as unreasonable, the criticism is normally addressed to the believer as someone who could have done otherwise, and it is normally something the believer could take up. Externalist evaluation, conducted from an observer's standpoint, does not have that shape. Whether epistemic evaluation must have that shape is the open question, and it is not settled by describing the practice alone.

3.5. Why the exchange stalls

Across these arguments the pattern is consistent, and it explains the persistence of the debate. Each side's central case is designed to elicit a verdict that the other side has independent reasons to reject, and each side's reply is available at the cost of a concession it is unwilling to make. The demon case costs the reliabilist the intuition about blamelessness. The Gettier case costs the internalist the sufficiency of her conditions for knowledge. The scope objection costs the internalist ordinary attributions. The normativity objection costs the externalist the addressability of evaluation.

Nothing in this pattern is a knockdown argument on either side. What the pattern shows is that the disagreement is not about the cases. It is about which theoretical cost one is willing to pay, and that in turn depends on what one thinks epistemic evaluation is for. This is the point at which contextualism is usually invoked, on the ground that the opponents may be answering different questions in different contexts. The next section examines that invocation.

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4. Contextualism and its explanatory scope

4.1. Semantic contextualism

Semantic contextualism about knowledge holds that the truth conditions of a knowledge attribution vary with the context in which it is uttered. DeRose gave the view its canonical defence, arguing that the epistemic standards expressed by "knows" rise and fall with conversational factors [4]. He later turned that machinery on scepticism, holding that the sceptic raises the standard in play rather than exposing an error in ordinary claims [11]. Lewis supplied a detailed semantics built on relevant alternatives: to say that a subject knows is to say that her evidence eliminates every alternative relevant in the context, where relevance is governed by a set of rules [5].

Bank cases illustrate the view. A subject who drives past a bank on Friday and sees it busy may say truly that he knows it will be open on Saturday. The same subject, told that a loan will fail unless the deposit is made before Monday, may say truly that he does not know, although his evidence has not changed [4]. What has changed is the standard his utterance is being held to.

Precision matters about what this thesis is. It concerns the semantics of an expression. It does not, without further argument, concern the conditions under which beliefs are justified, and it does not concern whether knowledge itself is relative to a context as opposed to whether attributions of knowledge are. Contextualists are not relativists [6].

4.2. What contextualism explains

Contextualism's diagnostic value is real, and it should be stated plainly before its limits are pressed. The view explains a pattern of judgements that invariantist accounts struggle with. Speakers who would readily assert a knowledge claim in an ordinary conversation withdraw the very same claim when a sceptical possibility is raised, and they do so without acquiring new evidence about the subject. If "knows" expresses a single fixed standard, one of these judgements is simply mistaken, and it is not obvious which. If "knows" expresses a standard that the conversation sets, both judgements can be correct as reports of different standards [6].

It also explains part of the internalism-externalism impasse. When a philosopher presses the sceptical scenario she raises the standard, and at a high standard the demand for reflectively accessible grounds becomes vivid. When an epistemologist generalises from ordinary attributions the standard is low, and a demand that infants articulate their grounds looks absurd. Each camp is describing a genuine feature of the practice at a different setting. To that extent contextualism dissolves an appearance of straightforward contradiction.

A further point deserves emphasis, because it is often missed. Both internalists and externalists can accept semantic contextualism. Nothing in evidentialism commits its defender to the claim that "knows" is context-insensitive, and nothing in reliabilism commits its defender to the opposite [6]. Contextualism therefore cuts across the dispute rather than mediating it. A view that either side can adopt without cost is not a view that decides between them.

4.3. Why it does not settle the dispute

The first limitation is the gap between semantics and epistemology. Suppose the full contextualist semantics is granted, so that the truth conditions of "S knows that p" vary with the assessor's context. It does not follow that the conditions under which a belief is justified vary with context, and it does not follow that justification consists in meeting whatever standard a conversation happens to

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set. Feldman's objection goes deeper: recognising that the criteria for applying "knowledge" shift leaves untouched the substantive epistemological issue that scepticism raises, which concerns how good our evidence is rather than which standards happen to be in play [12]. Moving from the semantic claim to an epistemological one requires a bridge premise connecting the content of a word to the nature of the state it names, and contextualists rarely supply one.

The second limitation is normative. Even if contexts set standards, a further question remains about which standard should govern a given evaluation. Suppose a tribunal must decide whether a physician's belief was epistemically adequate, and suppose the conversational setting could be arranged to make the standard lenient or severe. Contextualism describes how the standard moves with the arrangement. It does not say which arrangement is appropriate, and it cannot, because appropriateness is precisely the question the internalism-externalism dispute asks. To answer that question by pointing to the context is to answer it by pointing to a fact that either side can reinterpret.

4.4. The fixed-context dilemma

A third limitation is less often noticed, and it is the one on which this paper places most weight. The argument is original to this paper rather than drawn from the literature.

Consider an assessor, Cal, whose conversational context is held fixed throughout. Two subjects are presented to Cal. Ada inhabits an ordinary environment and her perceptual processes are reliable. Bo is Ada's internal duplicate in a demon world: his experiences, dispositions and reflective access are identical to hers, and his processes are systematically misleading. Neither is in a position to tell which situation obtains. Cal is asked, in the same context and on the same occasion, whether Ada's perceptual belief is justified and whether Bo's is.

Because Ada and Bo are internal duplicates, any criterion whose inputs are internal gives them the same verdict. Because they differ in reliability, any criterion sensitive to reliability gives them different verdicts. The standard in force in Cal's context must do one or the other. If it gives the same verdict it is insensitive to reliability, and it is an internalist standard for that context; whether the shared verdict is favourable or unfavourable fixes only how demanding the standard is. If it gives different verdicts it is sensitive to reliability, and it is an externalist standard for that context. There is no third option, because there is no third pattern of verdicts available for a pair that is internally identical and externally different.

This dilemma generalises. For every context, the standard in force is either internalist or externalist. Contextualism is therefore not an alternative to the two positions. It is a family of local endorsements of one or the other, indexed to contexts. And it provides no principle for deciding, for any given context, which endorsement holds. The dispute is not dissolved but replicated once per context.

A contextualist reply is available and should be faced. The standards in a context, it may be said, are set by conversational facts such as which alternatives are salient and what turns on the attribution, and those facts belong neither to internalism nor to externalism. The reply confuses the level of a standard with its kind. Salience and stakes determine how much is required. They do not determine whether what is required is the subject's ability to rule alternatives out by reflection or her process's tendency to rule them out in fact.

Lewis's own semantics illustrates the point, and illustrates it against the neutrality claim. Among the rules Lewis gives for deciding which alternatives are relevant is a rule of reliability, which licenses ignoring possibilities in which some process on which the belief depends, whether perception, memory or inference, malfunctions, and a rule of method, which licenses ignoring

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possibilities in which the subject uses some method other than the one she in fact used [5]. Both rules make relevance depend on how the subject's cognitive machinery actually operates rather than on what she can survey from where she stands. The most developed contextualist semantics on the market is therefore not neutral between the two camps. It imports externalist machinery into the fixing of context, and the imported machinery does substantive work.

This yields a sharper statement of the first limitation. Contextualism does not merely fail to resolve the internalism-externalism dispute. In its most worked-out form it takes a side, and it takes it silently, by building reliability conditions into an account of conversational relevance that is presented as purely semantic.

5. Beyond mediation

5.1. Virtue epistemology and the relocation worry

If contextualism cannot mediate, a natural thought is that a different framework can. Virtue epistemology is the most developed candidate. The framework has taken several forms. Its most explicit statement defines knowledge as true belief attributable to the agent's cognitive ability, on the ground that this captures the sense in which knowledge is an achievement rather than an accident [13].

Virtue epistemology is attractive because it appears to refuse the choice. Competence is a disposition of the agent, so it is internal in the sense of belonging to her. It is individuated by success across situations, so it is external in the sense of depending on how things go in the world.

That appearance is partly illusory. A virtue-theoretic account must still say what makes a trait an intellectual virtue, and the two natural answers reproduce the old division. If a trait is a virtue in virtue of the reliability it manifests in the agent's actual environment, the account is externalist and inherits the generality problem, since the environment must be specified before reliability can be measured [10]. If a trait is a virtue in virtue of the agent's capacity to deploy it responsibly, the account is internalist and inherits the scope objection, since infants and animals deploy little responsibly. The dispute is relocated to the question of what individuates a virtue, and it is not obvious that the relocated question is easier.

5.2. Empirical checks on contextualist assumptions

A second route is empirical. If contextualism is a thesis about the semantics of ordinary language, then ordinary speakers' judgements should display the predicted sensitivity, and the thesis is open to experimental test.

Results have not been kind. Turri argued directly against contextualism on experimental grounds, contending that the view is an idle hypothesis because the data do not require context-sensitivity of the kind contextualists posit [14].

More recent work bears on a related question. Wu reported three studies using pairs of classic knowledge-attribution cases with Chinese participants and found that folk judgements are more compatible with purism, on which practical factors do not bear on the standard for knowledge, than with pragmatic encroachment, on which they do [15]. Purism and encroachment are not the same pair as contextualism and invariantism, but the two debates are closely related, and a consistent purist tendency among ordinary speakers weakens the claim that practical context drives the standard.

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What follows from this is modest. Experimental results are contested, and their interpretation depends on assumptions about what a competent speaker's judgement reveals about semantics. What the results establish is that contextualism is not a framework standing above the empirical fray. It makes predictions, and those predictions can fail.

5.3. The displacement hypothesis

Semantic reframing, virtue-theoretic reframing and empirical reframing, the three escape routes examined above, share a failure mode, and naming it makes the pattern available for testing. This paper formulates the following conjecture, which is original to it.

Displacement hypothesis. When a substantive epistemological dispute is reframed at a metatheoretic level, the dispute is not resolved but displaced: it reappears as a dispute about what fixes the parameters of the reframing.

Three instances are already on the record. Contextualism reframes the dispute as a question about conversational standards, and the question of what fixes those standards turns out to require reliability conditions, as section 4.4 showed in Lewis's rules of reliability and method. Virtue epistemology reframes the dispute as a question about cognitive traits, and the question of what individuates a trait reproduces the internal and external options, as section 5.1 argued. Pragmatic encroachment reframes the dispute as a question about the bearing of stakes on the standard, and the data reported by Wu suggest that ordinary speakers do not treat stakes as bearing on the standard at all [15].

It also makes a prediction. Any further reframing that does not specify, independently of the reframing itself, what fixes its parameters will leave the original dispute intact. If a proposal is offered that dissolves the internalism-externalism debate, the test is to ask what determines the values of the new parameters, and whether answering that question requires taking a stand on access or reliability. If it does, the displacement has occurred again.

Its scope is modest. It does not say that reframing is worthless. On the contrary, the diagnosis it licenses is the main positive result of this paper. Reframing is valuable when it identifies a real ambiguity, and the ambiguity between the semantic and the substantive questions, isolated in section 2.3, is real and worth having identified. What reframing does not do is settle a substantive dispute by changing the subject.

6. Conclusion

What is at stake between internalism and externalism is what confers justificatory status on a belief, and whether that conferral can outrun the subject's own perspective. Contextualism concerns the semantics of knowledge attributions. The two questions are distinct, and an answer to the second is not an answer to the first.

Contextualism has a genuine contribution. It explains why speakers withdraw knowledge claims when sceptical possibilities are raised without acquiring new evidence, and it explains why the internalist and externalist intuitions are each compelling at different conversational settings. That explanation is worth having, and this paper has tried to state it as strongly as it can be stated.

That contribution is diagnostic. Three limitations confine it. The semantic thesis does not entail the epistemological one, and the bridge between them requires premises that contextualists do not supply. The view is silent on which standard ought to govern a given evaluation, which is the question the dispute turns on. And the fixed-context dilemma shows that once a context is held constant, contextualism must endorse either an internalist or an externalist standard for that context,

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so it replicates the dispute rather than dissolving it. In its most developed form, the semantics of Lewis, it silently endorses an externalist one.

Displacement generalises the result. Reframings terminate disputes only when their parameters are fixed independently of the reframing, and the parameter-fixing questions in this debate are the substantive questions with which it began. Further work should test the hypothesis against other proposed dissolutions, and should pursue the normative question directly, asking what epistemic evaluation is for rather than what the word "knows" means.

Limitations of this study should be noted. The argument is confined to the analytic tradition and to justification-centred formulations of the dispute. Social epistemology, which raises distinct questions about testimony and the distribution of epistemic labour, is not treated. And the fixed-context dilemma, while it appears decisive against the neutrality claim, is new, and it awaits the objections that a new argument attracts.

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