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## 1. The initial problem/situation

An agent happens to go to a zoo, and while wandering around for a while, ends up at the zebra exhibit. At the zebra exhibit, agent S sees what appears to be an actual zebra. A philosopher (who aspires to be like Aristotle) comes up to agent S and asks her whether or not she knows that the animal in the exhibit is a zebra. When agent S replies in the affirmative, the philosopher asks her whether or not she knows that it is not the case that the animal in the zebra exhibit is a cleverly disguised mule. Agent S thinks about it, and she replies that she does not know that it's not the case that what she sees is a cleverly disguised mule. Agent S, remembering her only epistemology class as an undergrad, suggests that she knows that she sees a zebra only if she knows that she does not see a cleverly disguised mule (knowledge is closed under entailment). The philosopher smiles and says "Well, *now* it seems like you have a problem!" and leaves agent S to ponder the condition she now finds herself while he heads off to 'enlighten' the person he sees at the bear exhibit.

## 2. So what's going on here?

We've got an agent that seems to be stuck in the following way:

(P1) S knows that they see a zebra

(P2) S does not know that they do not see a cleverly disguised mule

(P3) S knows that they see a zebra only if they do not see a cleverly disguised mule

If this is the case, then there needs to be a bit of explaining, due to the intuition that not all three of these can be true. This problem brings us to our current discussion – does epistemic contextualism help to make sense of what is going on here?

## 3. Conee's take

Epistemic contextualism (EC) is the view that holds that the truth conditions for tokens of sentences vary with the attributer's context.<sup>1</sup> The variant part of EC is the strength of the epistemic position the agent finds themselves in when they use a cognate sentence (in our example the sentence "knows that *p* is a zebra") in order to assert something truthful. Mundane examples include that ordinary people seem to know if they had a cup of coffee this morning; what the area under the curve is of the function  $x^2$  from 0 to 2; which team won the super bowl; and what time *Jeopardy!* comes on television.

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<sup>1</sup> Conee, pg. 51

Contextualism works in a way to allow for people to respond in an appropriate manner by shifting conditions for evaluation of correct attributions of “knowledge”. For everyday life, the truth conditions for knowledge attributions are much weaker.<sup>2</sup> When more is at stake (say, with philosophical propositions), the truth conditions for knowledge are increased. Skeptical propositions, especially of the type discussed in the zebra scenario, are such that (according to Conee) the knowledge conditions for them are so strict that real-world evidence does not meet them.

So what does Conee believe is happening as far as EC is concerned? It seems as if he thinks that the EC explanation of this scenario is misleading in two different ways:

#### Way #1 – Loose talk

What EC-ists are describing is actually loose talk regarding the zebra scenario (or other scenarios which seem to involve variants of truth-conditions. There’s actually a way to test this claim (or, at the very least, a way in which Conee takes as testing this out). How so? Through the *really and truly* condition.<sup>3</sup> This is when the agent is asked whether or now they *really and truly* know a certain proposition. Consider when an agent is asked to ponder whether they are “really and truly happy with themselves”. The point is that agents, when asked this sort of question, put their prior thoughts into doubt without shifting the landscape.

#### Way #2 – Strict truth

If EC is actually correct, then the context in which philosophical debates occur gives us nothing new. For instance, when we discuss Gettier-style problems, *perhaps* there is a standard which philosophers use in order to assess the truth-conditions of statements within philosophical contexts. If this is the case, then the big question is *what does this add?* If philosophers have been using a specific method to assessing the truth conditions of philosophical claims, then *apparently* we’ve been talking about the same thing *all along*. However, on *prima facie* grounds, that doesn’t seem to be the case. There seems to be genuine disagreement about what philosophers have talked about. In short, the EC appears to leave important discussions of epistemology unresolved, due to the fact that if correct, then it would just be accurate in fixing the context of truth-condition assessment in which philosophical disputes take place.

## **4. Cohen’s take**

Cohen sees this zebra scenario as a type of paradox. The three propositions of the zebra scenario placed above are viewed as being initially (independently) plausible. Taken together, however, they form an inconsistent set. Cohen does not believe that there is a way to simply deny one of the members of the inconsistent set, due to their independent plausibility. If one takes Cohen’s view seriously, then there better be a way to explain

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<sup>2</sup> Think of the different conditions that would help to evaluate the mundane or everyday knowledge claims listed above.

<sup>3</sup> The conjunction here implies that one could ask either of the conjuncts – “is it *really* the case that you know *x*?” or “is it *truly* the case that you know *y*?” The conjunction is supposed to be a stronger condition than either of the conjuncts alone, and not just a trivial reiteration.

this so that skepticism doesn't creep in. EC is the way to go in order to accomplish this goal.

The resolution of the zebra paradox (as Cohen takes the scenario to be) proposes the following things:

- (1) Take intuitions regarding the independent plausibility of the propositions at face value.
- (2) Use EC to explain away the apparent inconsistency of those intuitions by positing that the intuitions reflect contextually varying truth-conditions for knowledge ascriptions
  - a. The phrase "S knows that  $x$ " should be evaluated in contextually sensitive ways depending on the strength of an agent's epistemic position with regard to  $x$ .

So think about it this way – in an everyday context, where agent S is asked about if they do not know that the zebra is not a cleverly disguised mule, then (P2) above is false. If we are in a context where the standards are more strict (like this seminar), then (P1) can be false. Closure, however holds – that is, there is no scenario in which (P3) is false. What does this get us? Well, it appears that under *some* contexts, skepticism has some shred of truth. However, these contexts are atypical.

An alternative way of thinking about EC is to view the following:

- (A) Ascriptions of knowledge are context sensitive
- (B) The context sensitivity of knowledge ascriptions provides the basis for resolving the skeptical paradox<sup>4</sup>

## 5. Challenges To Cohen

With EC viewed in the aforementioned alternative way, Conee attempts to raise challenges to Cohen's theses in the following ways:

### Challenge to (A)

The main challenge is that there are different ways to account for the intuitions that get us into that kind of paradox – namely, that it could be loose talk, and that there is nothing in the intuitive data to support EC over Conee's account.

### Challenge to (B)

The two ways that Conee challenges thesis (B), even if it is granted that ascriptions of knowledge *are* context-dependent. The first is that skeptics might be mistaken in their belief that strict-skeptical standards are unsatisfiable. The second is that philosophical discussions are carried out in a manner that doesn't contribute anything to settling the philosophical problems.

### Further Challenges to Cohen

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<sup>4</sup> Cohen, pg. 57

To take another step against EC, Conee posits a potential counter example regarding a disputed Jackson Pollock painting. To recapitulate, consider the following:  
A woman purchases a painting for a nominal price, and eventually contacts her friend (who happens to be a professor of contemporary art history and theory at the local university). This professorial friend happens to be an expert on Jackson Pollock paintings, and after careful examination, finds Jackson Pollock's fingerprint in the painting. This leads her (the professor) to declare that the painting is authentic. Later on, an art institute happens to also check the painting, and after careful examination, declare that the painting is not authentic.

Conee states that considering this case, the woman vacillates between the following conclusions:

(C1): The painting *is* by Jackson Pollock

(C2): The painting *is not* by Jackson Pollock

According to Conee, this doesn't seem to be a paradox. This just seems to be a case in which we have strong evidence for both conclusions without having the evidence be undermining in a way that defeats one of the two conclusions. In these cases, it appears that we are merely in a position to withhold judgment regarding either conclusion and *not* in the situation where there is a paradox.

## 6. Rebuttals to Conee

Cohen also offers a number of ways to stave off the challenges brought forth by Conee. They can be classified in the following ways:

(R1): What EC offers is a *non-skeptical* way to resolve this zebra paradox. Is there a knock-down argument that EC is true? While there might not be one, the main issue is that it has explanatory power that is superior to accounts that do not go in for EC – it accounts for intuitions regarding the independent plausibility of P1-P3.

(R2): With respect to a single context that is always in effect for philosophical disputes and discussions, the point is that EC retains a way to account for our everyday knowledge about things while still explaining the intuitive appeal of skepticism. Consider Gettier-style examples *within* the philosophical context and compare that to examining those examples *within* the day-to-day context that *most* non-philosophers find themselves.

(R3): Also consider the worry about “flatness”.<sup>5</sup> Competent speakers have thoughts of flat surfaces, but when the context changes for truth-ascriptions (one may bring to attention that there are microscopic ridges on every surface; or that physical objects are made up of molecules, and molecules by our best scientific theories to date are mostly empty space), it seems that these competent speakers also accept the truth of the claim

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<sup>5</sup> This is highly appropriate since the presenter is currently in Lubbock, TX while everyone else is in Berkeley. If you've never been to Lubbock, TX, then take this as reliable expert testimony when I say that Lubbock is FLAT.

that *nothing* is completely flat. While this might be different than contextualist theories of justification or knowledge, EC is a deflationary theory. This means that most of the utterances of the phrase “S knows P” are true *even though* the standards of truth-ascription are nowhere as strict as the standards that philosophers have. In short, EC is a way to show that we know things, and that knowledge is not all that it was cracked up to be.

(R4): Contextualism *may* cave in to skepticism, but only to a certain amount. EC does allow for skeptical conclusions to be true but *only* when evaluated in skeptical contexts. In another way, EC holds that those skeptical conclusions are false when evaluated in *everyday* contexts.

## 7. So where do we go from here?

It seems as if we have (at least) five options to choose when dealing with or trying to explain what is happening in the zebra scenario:

- Dretske response: Well, here’s what we have to do. Intuitively, (P1) is true, and (P2) is true. Therefore, we should just get rid of (P3)
- Hawthorne response: Well, intuitively we know that (P1) is true, and we know through logical entailment that knowledge is closed – (P3) is true – so we can infer that (P2) must be false.
- Conee response: Well, intuitively, we feel the pull of considerations in favor of all of (P1) – (P3). However, this *isn’t* a paradox – this is just a position where the evidence we have for each of (P1) – (P3) is strong but we have no overriding evidence (and, presumably, what we ought to do is to reserve judgment?).
- Cohen response: Well, intuitively, we feel the independent plausibility of (P1) through (P3). Do we have to deny any of these, since they are intuitively strong? We don’t, actually, if we show that the truth-conditions for (P1) and (P2) can vary depending on the context (which *shifts* in mid-zoo-dialogue).
- Fifth response: Skepticism! **Deny (P1)!** This leads us nicely into next week’s topic...