

Knowledge in Context: The Factivity Principle and Its Epistemological Consequences

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1. Introduction

The traditional analysis of the notion of knowledge seems to neglect that although we gather many of our beliefs under the flag of “knowledge” we do not always employ the same standards to bestow this title to them. The semantic thesis known as epistemic contextualism, instead, clearly vindicates and accounts for this phenomenon concerning our epistemic custom. Unfortunately, however, epistemic contextualism faces a severe objection – known in the philosophical literature as the factivity problem, – that seriously menaces its own survival. This objection, indeed, claims that the contextualist who endorses two well-known epistemological principles that he should not desire to give up (*i.e.* the

factivity principle, according to which knowledge implies truth, and the closure principle, that maintains that knowledge is closed under known logical implication) cannot coherently state his own theory. Here, after an analytical introduction of the contextualist's thesis, we propose an analysis of the factivity problem by a critical scrutiny of the main strategies proposed to solve the conundrum. We will show that some of these strategies make some interesting moves forward in the unravelling of the puzzle, but that these moves seem to be possible only at high costs for contextualism.

2. Contextualism and the Malleability of Knowledge

We human beings – says Aristotle in the first book of the *Metaphysics* –, naturally aim at knowledge, and every day we conform to this natural inclination by making efforts to acquire new information about ourselves and the world around us. It is a demanding and unceasing process, this one, that however rewards us with all sorts of knowledge. Take Tom, for instance. He knows

that yesterday his friend Charlotte was in her office at 5 p.m.
that the Normans invaded England in 1066
that there are infinitely many prime numbers
that Naples is the third-largest municipality in Italy
that there is a novel by Ernest Hemingway before him,

and the list could certainly continue indefinitely. What is especially interesting about the wide amount of propositions that we come to know during our lives, though, is that despite we label them all as “knowledge” it seems that we do not always employ the same criteria to bestow this title to them. Sometimes we confer it to our beliefs (and to the beliefs of other people) rather easily and sometimes we do not allow such a bestowal unless very high epistemic standards are satisfied. However, as Peter Baumann rightly points out, the traditional reflection about the notion of knowledge seems to neglect this aspect of our epistemic custom, assuming on the one hand that the notion of knowledge has certain fundamental and invariable characteristics, and on the other that when-

ever we use the word “knowledge” we always refer to the same thing.¹ In other words, says Baumann, this traditional approach takes for granted that “knowledge is orderly”.² However, the notion of knowledge seems to be more complex and disorderly, in a certain sense, than it might be expected. Consider the following scenarios:³

Case A It is Saturday afternoon. Susie is walking around in the city centre and after a while she ends up in front of a renowned pastry shop. She would like to go in to buy some pastries, but since the shop is too crowded she thinks that it is better if she comes back tomorrow morning. But then she says to herself out loud: “Perhaps the pastry shop won’t be open tomorrow morning, several pastry shops are closed on Sunday. Should I buy the pastries now?”. “Don’t worry” replies a passer-by, “I know that this pastry shop will be open tomorrow morning. I was there three weeks ago on Sunday. It’s open until noon”. Satisfied with the passer-by’s evidence, Susie decides to come back on Sunday morning.

Case B It is Saturday afternoon. Tom and Louis are in front of the renowned pastry shop, near Susie. They would like to go in to buy a cake for the birthday of their friend Charlotte, but they are dissuaded by the crowd in the pastry shop. While they are discussing whether to enter or not in the shop, they overhear the conversation between Susie and the passer-by. Then Tom says: “Did you hear that? It seems that the pastry shop will be open tomorrow, the passer-by was there three weeks ago on Sunday morning”. “Uhm” replies Louis, “the shop could have changed its opening days in these three weeks and Charlotte’s birthday is this Sunday evening: we need to buy the cake before then, and the cake she likes is sold only in this pastry shop. Does he really know that the pastry shop will be open tomorrow morn-

1 Baumann, 2016: 1.

2 *Ibid.*

3 These cases are clearly a variation of Keith DeRose’s Bank Cases. For the original formulation of the example see DeRose, 1992: 913.

ing?” Tom admits: “Well, no, you’re right. It’s better to go in and to buy the cake now”.

If we consider the case *A* by itself (*i.e.* without thinking to the latter scenario) we will probably say that the statement

- (1) The passer-by knows that the pastry shop will be open on Sunday morning

is true. However, if we consider the case *B*, again by itself, it seems that we will say the contrary, namely that (1) is false. Since the passer-by’s epistemic position with regard to the proposition “the pastry shop will be open on Sunday morning” looks to be the same in both cases, a question arises: does he know or not that the pastry shop will be open on Sunday morning? A too stiff theory about the notion of knowledge – a theory that perhaps might recognise itself in the assumptions of the above-mentioned traditional approach, – could incur some trouble in answering this question. Indeed, if there is one and only one standard for knowledge as the invariantist claims,⁴ or the (1) is true *simpliciter* or it is false *simpliciter*, a third possibility is not given. Yet, we have already seen that our intuitions concerning an example like the one involving case *A* and case *B* suggest that, in effect, we take (1) to be true in a certain circumstance and false in another, and that, depending upon the considered context, we tend to prefer one standard for knowledge instead of another. Therefore, it seems that what we might deem as “knowledge” in a certain context we might not judge as such in another, and that different standards for knowledge prove to be adequate in different circumstances.

Among the theories that have been proposed in contemporary epistemology both to solve the above-mentioned puzzle and to account for the malleability exhibited by our ordinary use of the term “knowledge”, the one that goes under the banner of “epistemic contextualism” or “attributor contextualism” (hereafter just “contextualism”) has become one of the most popular and discussed. Due to its popularity, contextualism has been proposed in many different versions, yet, although there are signif-

⁴ With the term “invariantism” is generally flagged the position of those who deny contextualism about the truth-conditions of a certain term. See Unger, 1984.

ificant differences between the positions advocated by the various proponents of the theory, their shared starting point is the semantic thesis that the truth-conditions of knowledge-ascribing and knowledge-denying sentences (as “*S* knows that *p*” and “*S* doesn’t know that *p*”) depend upon certain features of the context in which those expressions are uttered.⁵ So, accordingly, a sentence like (1) fails to express a complete proposition if closed off by its context of utterance. In fact, the contextualist claims that in order to fully understand the meaning of a knowledge ascription we should consider certain characteristics of the knowledge attributor’s context like, for instance, the practical interests, the expectations, the presuppositions, or the purposes of the knowledge attributor, as well as the goals of the conversation in which the attributor is involved.⁶ These features, indeed, are necessary to identify that set of conditions (*i.e.* the “epistemic standard”) that the epistemic position of a subject *S* must satisfy with regard to a given proposition *p* in order for a statement as “*S* knows that *p*” to be true in the context of the attributor.

For a better understanding of the theory, consider again our previous example of the pastry shop: since the epistemic standard is different in the two scenarios (quite low in the first, more demanding in the latter) we have that, in the two cases, the sentence (1) expresses two different meanings. In the context of the case *A* it means that “The passer-by knows that the pastry shop will be open on Sunday morning according to a quite low epistemic standard”, while in the context of case *B* it means that “The passer-by knows that the pastry shop will be open on Sunday morning according to a much more demanding epistemic standard”. Therefore, since (1) expresses two different propositions in the two contexts, according to contextualism the speakers involved in each case (Susie in Case *A* and Tom and Louis in Case *B*) can simultaneously claim, respectively, that “The passer-by knows that the pastry shop will be open on Sunday morning” and that “The passer-by doesn’t know that the pastry shop will be open on Sunday morning” without contradiction: due to the different epistemic standards in place, they are both speaking truly.

5 Cohen, 1987, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2004, 2005; DeRose, 1995, 2009; Lewis, 1996.

6 DeRose, 1992: 915; Lewis, 1996: 559; Kompa, 2014; Baumann, 2016: 20–31.

If contextualism has the remarkable merit of being able to solve puzzles as the one involving case *A* and case *B*, it should be noted that it is also able to offer original and effective solutions to well-known epistemological questions. Consider the sceptical hypothesis that we do not know that we have hands for we cannot rule out the possibility that we are just handless brains in a vat. Despite this hypothesis having a certain appeal (how could we ever rule out such a possibility?) it is also true that it contradicts our strong intuition that, after all, we possess a lot of ordinary knowledge. Contextualism nicely harmonizes these two epistemic intuitions.⁷ Indeed, it maintains that sceptical hypotheses gain their appeal from the fact that, when they are mentioned, they put in place sceptical standards; thus, because in these contexts when we use the term “know” we mean something like “knowing by extremely high standards,” we are then compelled to deny to ourselves knowledge of many ordinary propositions that we would ordinarily claim to know. However, points out the contextualist, this conclusion (which is sceptical, indeed) cannot threaten our ordinary knowledge; the sceptic is able just to show that we do not know according to her extremely demanding standard, but she cannot prove that we do not know according to the ordinary standards that are in place in every day contexts. So, our intuition that we in effect know many things seems to be vindicated.

As we have seen, contextualism obtains highly interesting results from an epistemological point of view. However, one could wonder how the truth-conditions of knowledge ascriptions might change from context to context. Usually contextualists explain their thesis by making use of analogies. A first one involves gradable predicates – like “flat”, “tall”, “rich” or “strong”.⁸ The truth-conditions of gradable predicates, indeed, are believed to change depending upon the context; it is the context, in fact, that defines the parameter that determines how a gradable predicate applies in that scenario. The context of a conversation about basketball players, for example, will presumably establish a minimum height in order for a person to be “tall” that is significantly higher than the one

7 For the contextualist anti-sceptical argument see Cohen, 1986; 1988; 1999; DeRose, 1995; and Lewis, 1996.

8 Cohen, 1986: 580; 1999: 60; DeRose, 2009: 166.

that could be adopted in the context of a conversation about eight years old children. Now, since knowledge ascriptions seem to vary in degree of “strength” or “goodness”, gradable predicates appear to provide an adequate semantic model to the contextualist. Another analogy often employed by contextualist resorts instead to the notions introduced by David Kaplan⁹ of “character” (the rule associated by convention to an expression that sets the contextual parameters to locate the reference of the occurrences of the expression in contexts) and “content” (the semantic value of the expression), and compares “know” to indexicals as “I”, “here” or “now”.¹⁰ According to this analogy, with a knowledge ascription like “S knows that *p*” we can associate a character of the form “S has a true belief and is in a strong or good enough epistemic position with respect to *p*”.¹¹

3. The Factivity Problem

Unfortunately, the promising contextualist project of accounting for the malleability of “knowledge” faces a serious obstacle in the so-called factivity problem.¹² According to the proponents of this telling objection, contextualism would be incompatible with two undoubted epistemological principles: the closure principle (according to which knowledge is closed under known logical entailment) and the factivity principle (that poses that knowledge implies truth). The argument of the factivity problem is indeed believed to show that if the contextualist endorses the two principles he will inexorably drift into a contradiction that would determine a sort of “self-defeat with respect to the contextualist’s commitment to contextualism”.¹³ According to some authors,¹⁴ the factivity problem has serious and undesirable consequences for the contextualist’s stance, so serious and so undesirable that it is maintained that

9 Kaplan, 1989.

10 Cohen, 1999: 61; DeRose, 1992: 925.

11 DeRose, 2009: 3.

12 Williamson, 2001; Brendel, 2005; 2009; 2014; Wright, 2005; Kallestrup, 2005; Ste-up, 2005; Baumann, 2008; Buford, 2009.

13 Ichikawa, 2017: 187.

14 See for example Brendel, 2005; and Wright, 2005.

the contextualist should refute at least one of the two epistemological principle involved in the argument of the conundrum in order to avoid the contradiction. However, since this move would also entail really high costs for the theory (as we have said, both the principles are held to be extremely plausible) the contextualist seems to be forced into a blind alley. Thus, for contextualism cannot survive as an inconsistent theory, and yet it should also not give up closure and factivity, such an impasse seems to suggest that the only move left to the contextualist is to refute his inadequate or too theoretically expensive theory.

So, let's come to the argument of the factivity problem. In order to properly illustrate the conundrum we will resort to an example: it is Saturday morning and Tom, a contextualist, and Louis have just moored their sailboat in the port of Naples. In the afternoon they move to the hinterland, far from the coast, and settle in a hotel. In the evening Tom goes to visit his aunt, who tells him that an unexpected terrible gale is storming the coast. The aunt asks Tom whether he knows where his sailboat is, and Tom, who is perfectly aware that the gale could have broken the moorings of the sailboat, is compelled to admit that he does not know where the sailboat is.

Thus, in this context C_H , the sentence “Tom knows that the sailboat is moored in the port of Naples” is false, or, more formally, if we denote with “know_H” the property of being in a strong enough epistemic position with respect to a proposition according to the epistemic standard at stake in C_H and with q we denote the proposition “The sailboat is moored in the port of Naples” we have that:

(a). Tom does not know_H that q .

While Tom is with his aunt, Louis is resting at the hotel’s bar where no one is aware of the terrible gale that is storming the seaboard. In the bar a customer asks Louis, who was speaking about his sailboat, whether he knows where the sailboat actually is, and Louis immediately replies that he knows that the sailboat is moored in the port of Naples.

So, in this context C_L the sentence “Louis knows that the sailboat is moored in the port of Naples” is true, or, again, if we denote with “know_L”

the property of being in a strong enough epistemic position with respect to a proposition according to the standard at stake in C_L we can say that:

(b). Louis knows_L that q .

Now, Tom, as a contextualist, should certainly recognise that the proposition (a) holds – *i.e.* that his own epistemic position is not strong enough in order to make the sentence “Tom knows that the sailboat is moored in the port of Naples” true in C_H . Furthermore, it seems that Tom should also recognize that (b) holds; indeed, as a contextualist he should be perfectly aware that in the context C_L the term “know” has different truth-conditions and that the sentence “Louis knows that the sailboat is moored in the port of Naples” expresses different propositions in C_H and in C_L . Thus, if we assume that someone has apprised Tom that Louis’ epistemic position is strong enough in order to satisfy the standard that is operative in C_L , as a contextualist Tom should acknowledge that (b) holds in his own context:

(c) Tom knows_H that (b)

(b), after all, expresses a true proposition that, from a contextualist point of view, is what Brendel calls an “eternal truth”:¹⁵ indeed, that Louis knows that the sailboat is moored in the port of Naples according to the standard in place in C_L is true in every context, not only in C_L .¹⁶

However, unfortunately for contextualism, from (c) we can derive a contradiction if we combine this proposition with the two aforementioned epistemological principles that the contextualist endorses. The first is

15 Brendel, 2014: 107. Jonathan Ichikawa seems to agree with Elke Brendel on this point when he endorses Christopher Buford’s remark according to which “it is *not* an implication of contextualism that one stops knowing things when the conversation standards raise”. See Ichikawa, 2017: 187.

16 The analogy between the semantic behaviour of gradable predicates and the one that, according to the contextualists, is exhibited by the word “know” is useful to clarify this point. Consider the context of a conversation about basketball players: in such a context the criterion that determines whether a person is tall or not will be probably one such that Tim, an five years old boy 1.80 meters tall, does not count as tall. Yet, even in such a context, a proposition like “As an eight years old boy Tim is pretty tall” will be presumably believed to be true.

the principle of the factivity of knowledge, which maintains that the verb “know” (likewise other expressions as “learn” or “discover”) implies truth:

$$(F). \quad ((S \text{ knows that } p) \rightarrow p).$$

The classic principle of factivity should be however restated in order to account for the context-sensitivity of “know”, so we have:

$$(F_C). \quad ((S \text{ knows}_x \text{ that } p) \rightarrow p).$$

The second epistemological principle involved in the argument of the factivity problem is the widely-accepted principle of epistemic closure, according to which knowledge is closed under known logical implication:

$$(C). \quad (((S \text{ knows that } p) \wedge (S \text{ knows that } (p \rightarrow q))) \rightarrow (S \text{ knows that } q)).$$

Again, the principle should be restated according to the contextualist view: (C_C) .

$$(((S \text{ knows}_x \text{ that } p) \wedge (S \text{ knows}_x \text{ that } (p \rightarrow q))) \rightarrow (S \text{ knows}_x \text{ that } q)).$$

Now, by virtue of F_C we can conclude that (b) implies q :

$$((\text{Louis knows}_L \text{ that } q) \rightarrow q).$$

Moreover, we can imagine that a contextualist like Tom knows the closure principle in his more demanding context – *i.e.* he knows_H the closure principle. Thus, because he both knows_H that (b) and that (b) implies q , for C_C he should also know_H that q :

$$((\text{Tom knows}_H \text{ that } (b) \wedge \text{Tom knows}_H \text{ that } ((b) \rightarrow q)) \rightarrow (\text{Tom knows}_H \text{ that } q))$$

So, we have that:

$$(d). \quad \text{Tom knows}_H \text{ that } q$$

but (d) contradicts (a) , thus contextualism entails a contradiction.

The argument of the factivity problem seems to suggest that a contextualist who is in a context in which a rigorous epistemic standard is operative and who does not count as knowing a certain proposition p

according to that standard cannot coherently know that another subject S – who is in a strong enough epistemic position relatively to the same proposition p , – counts as knowing that p according to the standard at stake in a less demanding context. Thus, the contextualist seems to be committed to a sort of “semantic inconsistency”.¹⁷ However, as Brendel rightly points out, the factivity problem also implies a much more undesirable consequence: indeed, the contextualist seems to be unable to know (independently of the context where they are) what Brendel calls “the main thesis” of the theory:¹⁸

(C_{MT}) . S knows _{L} that $p \wedge S$ doesn't know _{H} that p .

Notoriously, the contextualist maintains that the same knowledge ascriptions can be true in a context, but false in another; therefore, according to the advocate of the view C_{MT} holds. Yet, when the contextualist ponders about C_{MT} according to Brendel he should be in the more demanding context C_H ; indeed, thinking about the error possibilities entailed by that context – *i.e.* the context C_H – should be enough in order to make those error possibilities salient for him. Thus, the contextualist would be in a high-standard context C_H pondering about a conjunction of the form:

$(a) \wedge (b)$

and we have just seen that this conjunction cannot be coherently known _{H} .

4. Four Strategies to Solve the Factivity Problem

4.1 Refusing (a) and (b)

In his article “Epistemic Contextualism and the Knowability Problem,”¹⁹ Wolfgang Freitag outlines a general definition of the conundrum seen above. In his own words: “a theory c is said to have the *knowability problem* if and only if c implies that it cannot be known, *i.e.* that knowing the

17 Brendel, 2009: 408.

18 Brendel, 2005: 49–51.

19 Freitag, 2011. For a similar argument see Dinges, 2014.

consistent theory c leads to inconsistency".²⁰ According to Freitag, the necessary and sufficient condition for the occurrence of the knowability problem would be the existence of a proposition p such that there is a theory c which implies that: *i*) p is true and *ii*) p cannot be known by a subject S at a moment t in a certain context C_x . Since the contextualist seems to be committed both to propositions like (*b*) – which maintains that q is true – and (*a*) – that instead argues that q cannot be known by a subject in the context C_H – the condition of the knowability problem appears to be fully satisfied. However, according to Freitag this conclusion relies on a misunderstanding of the premises of contextualism, which, in truth, would not properly entail neither propositions like (*a*) nor propositions like (*b*).

It might be thought that contextualism entails propositions like (*a*) because of the existence of sceptical contexts that seem to be conceded by the advocates of the view. However, Freitag claims that contextualism does not, in effect, entail scepticism, since it is silent about both the epistemic standards at stake in different contexts and whether those standards can be satisfied by epistemic subjects. The commitment to proposition (*b*) is instead usually deduced from the contextualist's anti-sceptical claim that our ordinary knowledge-attributions are generally true.²¹ However, as Alexander Dinges nicely points out, the contextualist does not maintain that a specific empirical proposition p is true, but only that our ordinary knowledge-attributions are, in general, true; as we can "know that the tickets of a yet to be drawn lottery will generally lose even if [we] don't know of any particular ticket that it will lose", we can also know that the majority of our ordinary knowledge-attributions are true without committing ourselves to the truth of any particular proposition.²² Therefore, contextualism seems to be not committed neither to a proposition like (*a*) nor to a proposition like (*b*). The condition identified by Freitag appears to be disarmed, and with that also the knowability problem.

20 Freitag, 2011: 279. Notice that in his paper Freitag prefers the expression "knowability problem" to the more common "factivity problem" to denote the conundrum.

21 Dinges, 2014: 3347.

22 *Ibid.*

This solution to the factivity problem seems to fall prey of two main remarks that concern the contextualist's commitment to propositions like (a) and (b). Consider first the case of ordinary knowledge claims as (b)-like propositions: previously we have seen that Dinges refutes the commitment towards this kind of propositions resorting to the *prima facie* very compelling argument of the lottery, an argument that establishes an analogy between the following statements:

- (2). *S* knows that many lottery tickets will lose
- (3). *S* knows that many knowledge ascriptions are true.

Now, it should be noted that the truth of the (2) relies on the assumption that there is, in fact, one winning ticket. Dinges notices this point, and he is aware that it could be objected that (3), the contextualist's anti-sceptical claim, relies on the assumption that many knowledge ascriptions are in fact true. In order to block this objection, Dinges maintains that it is possible to justify the plausibility of (3) without any commitment to any ordinary knowledge ascription. According to Dinges, such a possibility would be granted by appealing to 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"".²³ However, it is by no means certain that such a principle can justify the plausibility of (3) without committing the contextualist to the truth of any ordinary knowledge attributions. Indeed, the principle invoked by Dinges seems to assume that ordinary speakers are, in effect, competent speakers of their language and thus that they correctly use the common terms of natural language. The principle of charity, therefore, seems to claim that a theory about a common term of the natural language like, for example, "dog" would be extremely implausible if it entailed that ordinary speakers are systematically wrong when they use the word "dog" since the correct reference of this word were cats; in this particular case, the principle seems to assume that ordinary speakers use "dog" correctly for the correct reference of this word are indeed dogs. So, what about knowledge ascriptions? In this case, in order to apply the principle of charity,

23 Dinges, 2014: 3547.

we should claim that, in the end, ordinary speakers use the term “know” properly, that is, that they generally attribute knowledge of a proposition to someone when this person, in effect, counts as knowing that proposition. However, this line of reasoning is an induction, and notably inductions are justified by means of collections of evidences. Thus, even the contextualist who resorts solely to the principle of charity to support his anti-sceptical claim (3) seems to be compelled to assume the moorean fact that, indeed, many knowledge ascriptions are in fact true. Yet, if this conclusion holds, the argument that Dinges proposes to illustrate that (3) does not entail the truth of any knowledge ascription fails; thus, the contextualist seems to be committed, in the end, to propositions like (b).

Let's now consider the commitment to “sceptical” (*a*)-like propositions. Freitag rejects such a commitment claiming that scepticism would not be part of contextualism. Yet, it's by no means certain that it is so. Indeed, the traditional anti-sceptical argument deployed by contextualists seems to perfectly legitimate sceptical hypotheses in all of those contexts in which such hypotheses are uttered; David Lewis' rule of attention,²⁴ for example, prescribes that when an error possibility is put in place it cannot be properly ignored and that the epistemic standards must rise automatically in the context. Freitag, though, cleverly observes that these considerations depend, for their effectiveness, upon the kind of contextualism that we are considering, and according to him, the right formulation of the theory that a contextualist should adopt is the following – which he labels “compatibilism”:

$$(\text{Compatibilism}) \sim \forall X, Y: \square [K_X(S, p) \leftrightarrow K_Y(S, p)].$$

Compatibilism, as Freitag takes it, simply establishes that it's possible that a knowledge ascription of the form “*S* knows that *p*” is true if uttered in a context *X*, but false if uttered in a context *Y*²⁵ and certainly is not committed neither to propositions like (*a*) nor to propositions like (*b*). Furthermore, compatibilism, along with the additional assumption that there is at least one ordinary context *C_L* in which satisfying the operative

24 Lewis, 1996: 559.

25 Freitag, 2011: 278.

epistemic standard is possible, clearly blocks the sceptical argument, for the sceptical claim that we do not know that p in the sceptical context C_s does not overturn the legitimacy of our knowledge ascriptions in the context C_L .

Could we then consider the factivity problem solved by Freitag's reformulation of contextualism? The answer to this question seems to be, unfortunately, negative. Indeed, even though compatibilism does not entail propositions like (a) or (b), it could be the case that an advocate of this view finds himself in an ordinary context C_L and, consequently, claims to know an ordinary proposition p . Being a contextualist – or, better, a “compatibilist contextualist” – he will presumably also maintain that, according to the sceptical standard at stake in the sceptical context C_s he does not know that p . As Montminy and Skolits rightly point out, compatibilism does not force its supporters to make this concession,²⁶ however, as Freitag also notices, it will be extremely odd for an advocate of the view to put aside scepticism since it is “a vital part of the interest of contextualism”.²⁷ Therefore, it seems that the compatibilist will find himself in the situation depicted by the argument of the factivity problem, since he will have to maintain both that he knows_L that p and that he doesn't know_s this proposition. The compatibilist, then, with regard to a result of its theory seems to be committed to a sort of “pragmatic inconsistency”.²⁸ In order to block this conclusion, though, one might observe that this argument relies upon the assumption that the compatibilist is committed to the existence of a sceptical context. Now, we have already said that giving up scepticism would be extremely odd for a contextualist (or a compatibilist) but suppose that, nevertheless, one wants to insist that scepticism is not a proper part of these theories: would this be enough to neutralize the pragmatic inconsistency? Again, the answer to this question seems to be negative. In order to summon the contradiction of the factivity problem, indeed, is sufficient to appeal to a high-standard context, not to a sceptical one. Consider our example of § 3: Tom, the contextualist, is not in a sceptical context, but simply

26 Montminy and Skolits, 2014: 323.

27 Freitag, 2011: 281.

28 Montminy and Skolits, 2014: 323.

in a context where he does not know whether his sailboat is still moored in the port of Naples or not. As Brendel rightly points out, the factivity problem can be reiterated for each couple of contexts $C_x C_y$ such that the epistemic standard of C_x is more demanding than that of C_y .²⁹ the conundrum, therefore, is not tied to the existence of a sceptical context where, for instance, the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis is in place, but simply to the existence of contexts that slightly differ in their epistemic standards. And since the acknowledgement of such a varying in the epistemic standards from context to context seems to be one of the main motivations for contextualism (or compatibilism), it looks that the compatibilist cannot deny his commitment to the abovementioned pragmatic inconsistency. Refusing the commitment to propositions like (a) and (b), thus, does not seem a promising way to solve the conundrum.

4.2 Refusing (c)

The most controversial step of the argument of the factivity problem seems to be the contextualist's acknowledgement that another subject (in our case, Louis) knows (according to another standard) a certain proposition that the contextualist does not count as knowing. Anthony Brueckner and Christopher Buford label this kind of knowledge ascriptions "asymmetrical" and in order to solve the conundrum they propose to drop them.³⁰ The contextualist, indeed, according to the two authors would not be committed to asymmetrical knowledge ascriptions like (c). Yet, if a contextualist as Tom cannot acknowledge anymore that a subject like Louis knows_L that q , what should he say about Louis' epistemic position regarding q ? According to Brueckner and Buford, a contextualist like Tom should say something as:

“Well, it sounds as [Louis] is in a position to be saying something true via uttering his “knowledge”-sentence, given his wimpy context [C_L] and ordinary evidence. So I know that the conditions for the truth of [“Louis knows_L that q ”] are satisfied up to the “truth condition”, i.e. the condition that [q] is the case. However, to know that [“Louis knows_L

29 Brendel, 2005: 50.

30 Brueckner and Buford, 2009.

that q " is true in C_L], I must know whether [q] is the case

But I have just told you that I do not know [q]; . . . ["Louis knows_L that q "] is not true in our context [C_H]"³¹.

By assumption, indeed, Tom does not know_H that q , and therefore he is not in the position to know_H that (b) – i.e. that Louis knows_L that q . According to the classical tripartite analysis of propositional knowledge,³² in fact, we could say that Tom knows_H that (b) if and only if: he believes that (b), his belief that (b) is properly justified, and (b) is true. Yet, since the truth of (b) presupposes the truth of q and Tom lacks this knowledge, he cannot acknowledge that Louis knows_L that q .

By erasing the contextualist's commitment towards asymmetrical knowledge ascriptions like (c), Brueckner and Buford clearly manage to block the rise of the contradiction of the factivity problem. However, it seems that this move can seriously weaken the contextualist's theory.³³ Brueckner and Buford themselves acknowledge that their solution saddles contextualism with a "stability problem": the contextualist thesis that in a low-standard context a proposition like (b) is true cannot be known anymore in a more demanding context.³⁴ Brueckner and Buford maintain that the consequences of the stability problem are less dangerous, for contextualism, than that of the factivity problem.³⁵ However, if one might think that the contradiction of the factivity problem condemns contextualism to an outright refutation, it seems also that the stability problem entails serious limitations for the theory.

A first limitation seems to undermine the best argument to which the contextualist can resort to argue in favour of his own theory. Contextualists in fact usually resort to examples like the one we have seen in § 2 to show that it is true that the same knowledge ascription can be simultaneously true in a context and false in another. Yet, if the contextualist

31 Brueckner and Buford, 2009: 434–35. The quote has been slightly edited in order to conform to our description of the factivity problem.

32 See for example: Armstrong, 1973: 137; Feldman, 2003: 8–23; and Ichikawa and Steup, 2017.

33 See Baumann, 2010: 87–88; and Ichikawa, 2017: 187 (footnote 8).

34 Brueckner and Buford, 2009: 436.

35 Brueckner and Buford, 2009: 337.

is forbidden to make asymmetrical knowledge ascriptions it seems that he cannot employ these examples anymore. So, suppose that Tom, the contextualist, claims to know an ordinary proposition p as "The kettle is boiling". In order to argue in favour of his theory, he should say that, if a certain error possibility was in place, he would not know that p . However, by mentioning this error possibility he makes it salient and, consequently, the standard in the context rises.³⁶ So, he seems to be unable to utter the (b)-like asymmetrical proposition " $I \text{ know}_H \text{ that } I \text{ know}_L \text{ that the kettle is boiling}$ " that is necessary to articulate the example that backs the contextualist's stance.

A second limitation concerns unstatable truths. Consider the proposition (b): from a contextualist point of view it seems that it is true that Louis knows_L that q since he believes that q is the case, he has adequate evidence for q (according to the standard in place in the context C_L) and q is the case. As we have seen, the truth of a proposition like (b) is, for the contextualist, an eternal truth for notwithstanding Louis' epistemic position does not satisfy the standards at stake in other contexts, it is still true (even in these other contexts) that his epistemic position satisfies the standard in place in the context C_L . A truth of this kind, however, according to Brueckner and Buford's reading of contextualism cannot be known in certain contexts – e.g. it cannot be known_H. So, Brueckner and Buford's solution implies that contextualism entails that some propositions that would be true in every context – and expected to be so by the contextualists, – cannot be known and uttered in certain contexts. Now, if on the one hand it might sound odd that in certain contexts the contextualists cannot know certain propositions despite they expect them to be true, on the other one could observe that everyone should be prone to admit that certain true propositions cannot be known and uttered in certain contexts.³⁷ In addition, one might also point out that, although the contextualists expect certain propositions to be true, they *do not know* that them are true. *Prima facie*, therefore, the contextu-

36 It should be noted, indeed, that Brueckner and Buford do not refute the view according to which the mere mention of an error possibility makes it salient in the context. Montminy and Skolits, 2014: 326.

37 Thanks to an anonymous referee for stressing this point.

alists can be perfectly fine with the conclusion that their view implies unstatable and unknowable propositions. However, it is worth noticing that the above-mentioned conclusion might threaten the contextualist anti-sceptical argument. Indeed, the Brueckner and Buford's contextualist who is in a sceptical context (a context where the brain-in-a-vat sceptical hypothesis is in place) is not able anymore to acknowledge, in that sceptical context, that according to a less demanding standard he knows that he has hands. Furthermore, since according to Lewis' rule of attention the mere mention of an error possibility (as, for instance, a sceptical hypothesis) is sufficient to make it relevant in the context (and thus to install a more demanding standard in the context), the contextualist's anti-sceptical argument turns out to be unknowable and unstatable; indeed, if the contextualist claims that despite scepticism he knows that he has hands according to ordinary standards, the mere mention of the sceptical hypothesis will install in the context a more demanding standard according to which he does not know such thing.³⁸ And this one seems to be a really undesirable conclusion for those contextualists who want to preserve the effectiveness of their anti-sceptical argument.

On this point Jonathan J. Ichikawa observes that the anti-sceptical argument is a relatively important part of the contextualist theory.³⁹ So, one might be led to believe that giving up the anti-sceptical argument is not a serious issue for the contextualists. However, it should be considered that albeit the anti-sceptical argument is not "a mandatory feature" of contextualism,⁴⁰ it is one of its most important applications as well as one of its main motivations. Now, notoriously the other pivotal motivation for contextualism is provided by the so-called argument from the ordinary language – according to which contextualism would account for our ordinary use of knowledge ascriptions.⁴¹ Yet, if some of our semantic intuitions are perfectly explained by contextualism (think, for instance, to the pairs of cases as the one of § 2), other seem to contra-

38 Buford, 2009: 116.

39 Ichikawa, 2017: 191.

40 *Ibid.*

41 DeRose, 2009: 47-79.

dict the predictions of the theory.⁴² This is so true, that the contextualists came to acknowledge that, sometimes, we suffer of a “semantic blindness” with regard to the context-sensitivity of knowledge ascriptions.⁴³ The argument from the ordinary language, therefore, does not seem to straightforwardly support contextualism. In addition, if some experimental studies on the linguistic behaviour of ordinary speakers have found evidence that is consistent with contextualism,⁴⁴ many other seem to come to the opposite verdict.⁴⁵ So, although the contextualists do not lack of arguments to oppose their invariantist critics,⁴⁶ it seems that it would be a good idea for them to support their view not only with semantic considerations, but also with other arguments. In this sense, renouncing to the anti-sceptical argument – probably the most important motivation for the view together with the argument from the ordinary language, – is probably a dangerous move.

Ichikawa, however, moves another consideration that directly addresses our line of reasoning: he proposes to get rid of the rule of attention.⁴⁷ Without this rule, indeed, the contextualist can easily articulate his anti-sceptical argument without entering automatically in a sceptical context.⁴⁸ Many contextualists, indeed, believe that the rule of attention is implausible, and that mentioning or considering a certain error possibility is not enough to make the possibility salient in the context.⁴⁹ As

42 See for example Hawthorne, 2004.

43 DeRose, 2009: 159–160.

44 See for example Hansen and Chemla, 2013; and Pinillos, 2012 (Notice that, even if the results of Pinillos’ study may support a contextualist approach – *i.e.* that ordinary people’s attributions of knowledge are in fact sensitive to practical interests, – Pinillos claims that interest relative invariantism, and not contextualism, can offer a better explanation of the data).

45 See for example Buckwalter, 2010; 2014; 2017; Feltz and Zarpentine, 2010; Buckwalter and Schaffer, 2015; Turri, 2017.

46 For a contextualist reply to some linguistic objections see DeRose, 2009: 153–184.

47 Ichikawa, 2017: 192. Notice that Michael Ashfield proposes a very similar move. See Ashfield, 2013.

48 Notice that the refusal of the rule of attention allows the contextualist to resort to pairs of cases in order to justify his own theory since he can ponder about propositions like (b) without entering automatically in a more demanding context.

49 Cohen, 2001: 93. 2. Barke, 2004. On this point see also Leardi and Vassallo, 2017: 61–63.

Michael Blome-Tillman rightly points out, one thing is to simply consider an error possibility, another is to take it seriously in an “epistemologically relevant sense”.⁵⁰ However, one might wonder whether a contextualist, while discussing scepticism, can avoid considering a sceptical possibility seriously. Indeed, one could claim that assessing an anti-sceptical argument which acknowledges the intuitive force of scepticism compels to take scepticism – when it is discussed, – seriously – and so its epistemic standards. Yet, the contextualists could reject this conclusion – as Ichikawa does, – by saying that the contextualist should be happy to be able to articulate his anti-sceptical argument in ordinary contexts. Evaluating the appeal of such an anti-sceptical argument goes beyond the aims of this paper, yet it is worth noticing here that such an anti-sceptical argument seems to be weaker than its counterpart that allows the contextualist to acknowledge that he knows many things according to ordinary standards even in the more demanding context of the sceptic.

Thus, if Brueckner and Buford’s solution seems to efficaciously solve the factivity problem, it saddles contextualism with certain statability limitations that seem to be serious issues for the contextualist’s doctrine. These issues seem to be resolvable by refusing the rule of attention, but from this move follows a weakened contextualist anti-sceptical argument. It is questionable, therefore, whether Brueckner and Buford’s proposal can be considered as proper resolution of the factivity problem.

4.3 Weak Assertions

According to Montminy and Skolits the right strategy to solve the factivity problem would consist in denying that, when the contextualist utters the content of his theory, he is *asserting* it.⁵¹ The two philosophers propose to understand (*c*) not as a proper assertion, but as a *weak assertion*, which is a peculiar kind of illocutionary act that includes conjectures, guesses and hypothesis. According to Montminy and Skolits, this would be the typical way that philosophers adopt when they propose or defend

50 Blome-Tillmann, 2009: 247.

51 Montminy and Skolits, 2014: 327.

their views,⁵² thus it would not be weird for contextualists to present their own theory in this manner.

Contrary to outright assertions, their weak counterparts are not governed by the knowledge norm of assertion:⁵³ a weak assertion that p is in fact epistemically appropriate if the speaker have some evidence that p – with the precise amount of evidence required that depends upon the strength of the assertion.⁵⁴ Therefore, when Tom the contextualist acknowledges that Louis knows_L that q he won't claim to know_H this proposition, but he will say something as "I think" or "I guess" that Louis knows_L that q . So, since the contextualist will not claim to know_H that (b) he won't either activate the machinery of the factivity problem's argument that leads to a contradiction.

Now, what is interesting about this approach is that although it is similar to the one advanced by Brueckner and Buford – since it refuses the commitment to asymmetrical knowledge ascriptions like (c), – it tries to allow to the contextualists more than a sharp refutation of (c). Unfortunately, however, Montminy and Skolits' solution seems to face some issues. Indeed, if on the one hand one could wonder whether it entails the same limitations that Brueckner and Buford's proposal involves, on the other it seems that the main issue of this solution concerns the evidence to which the contextualist can resort to utter the "weak assertion" version of (c), namely:

(c*). I (the contextualist) have some evidence to think that Louis knows_L that q .

If Tom the contextualist could say that Louis believes that q and could perhaps acknowledge that Louis has enough good reasons to believe that q according to the standard in place in his context, it seems also that Tom lacks the evidence that could justify a claim like (c*). Tom, in fact, does not know, according to the standard in place in his own context, that q ; furthermore, although he is a contextualist, this does not mean that he

52 *Ibid.*

53 The knowledge norm of assertion posits that we can assert a certain proposition if only if we know the proposition in question.

54 Montminy and Skolits, 2014: 327.

should assume that whenever a subject claims that he knows a certain proposition it is true that he knows that proposition. Indeed, it could be the case that the proposition at issue is false. Perhaps, the contextualist might say that when someone claims to know a proposition he generally knows that proposition, and thus on this ground he could justify his utterance of (*c**), yet this one seems to be a too weak and questionable basis. Therefore, it seems that, when the contextualist lacks knowledge of a certain proposition *p* (*i.e.* he does not know_{*H*} that *p*) he can refuse to acknowledge that another subject *S* knows that *p* according to a milder standard (*i.e.* that *S* knows_{*L*} that *p*) as Brueckner and Buford propose, but he is not in the position to make a weak assertion as “I (the contextualist) have some evidence to think that *S* knows_{*L*} that *p*”.

4.4 A New Principle for the Transmission of Warrant

Perhaps the issue doesn't rest upon the adequacy of single propositions like (*a*), (*b*) or (*c*), but concerns the different epistemic principles employed in the argument of the factivity problem. Bauman notably follows this road,⁵⁵ suggesting that to solve the conundrum we should draw our attention to the phenomenon of the transmission of warrant.⁵⁶ Baumann, in fact, posits that a subject *S₁* in a demanding context *C_H* can know_{*H*} that another subject *S₂* knows_{*L*} a proposition *p* (*i.e.* that: “*S₂* knows that *p*” is true in *C_L*) by knowing_{*H*} just some conditions for the truth of “*S₂* knows_{*L*} that *p*”. *S₁*, indeed, despite the fact that he is in *C_H*, can, according to Baumann, know_{*L*} the other necessary conditions for the truth of “*S₂* knows_{*L*} that *p*”.⁵⁷ For a better understanding of this point consider the following example. According to Baumann, Tom can know_{*H*} certain conditions for the truth of

- (d). Louis knows_{*L*} that the sea is rough

and can know_{*L*} other conditions necessary for the truth of this proposition. Tom, for example, might have a really sophisticated knowledge (say, knowledge_{*H*}) of Louis' knowledge about the condition of the sea, and yet he could not have sophisticated knowledge (but just knowledge_{*L*}) about

55 Baumann, 2008; 2016.

56 Baumann, 2008: 590.

57 Baumann, 2008: 591.

the condition of the sea: Tom could count on a lot of reliable information about Louis' epistemic situation (*e.g.* he could know_H that Louis studied at the Naval Military School, that he is a skilled sailor, that he always read the harbourmaster's bulletin, and so on) and yet he could have few and not so reliable information about the fact that the sea is rough (*i.e.* he could just know_L that the sea is rough). Of course, Tom cannot know_H that Louis knows_L that the sea is rough without knowing himself (according to some epistemic standard) that the sea is rough, yet it is important to notice, claims Baumann, that the factors that define whether the knowledge of Tom about Louis' epistemic situation is "knowledge_H" or "knowledge_L" are different from that which define whether the knowledge of Tom about the fact that the sea is rough is "knowledge_H" or "knowledge_L".⁵⁸ Consequently, according to this view, the fact that Tom knows_H that Louis knows_L a certain proposition does not guarantee that Tom knows_H that very proposition; what we can infer from this fact, though, is that Tom knows "at a certain level" the proposition at issue. Indeed, as Baumann notices, when Tom is evaluating Louis' epistemic situation with respect to the proposition "The sea is rough" he is dealing with two questions: *i*) Is the sea rough? *ii*) Does Louis know that the sea is rough? And, according to Baumann, Tom can know_H the answer to the latter question and know_L the answer to the former. Due to this difference in warrant needed in order to count the answers to the former and the latter question, when Tom applies the principle of factivity to the proposition (*b*)

(F_C^*). ((S knows_L that p) → p)

it might be the case that Tom knows_H the antecedent of (F_C^*) and that he knows according to another, less demanding epistemic standard, the consequent.⁵⁹ Therefore, the following principle of the transmission of warrant would be incorrect:

(T). S_1 has warrant for knowledge_H that S_2 knows_L that $p \rightarrow S_1$ has warrant for knowledge_H that p

58 *Ibid.*

59 Baumann, 2008: 592.

and the right principle of the transmission of warrant, coherent with the contextualist assumptions, would have this form:

- (T_C). S_1 has warrant for knowledge _{H} that S_2 knows _{L} that $p \rightarrow S_1$ has warrant for knowledge (at some level, but not necessarily for knowledge _{H}) that p .

Finally, the new principle (T_C) entitles us to reformulate also the principle of epistemic closure. Baumann suggests a principle of “downwards closure”⁶⁰ according to which:

- (C_C). If S_1 knows _{X} that S_2 knows _{Y} that p , and if S_1 knows _{Z} that (if S_2 knows _{Y} that p , then p), then there is a knowledge relation know _{W} (not necessarily more demanding than the knowledge relation know _{Y}) such that S_1 knows _{W} that p .

At this point it seems that we have all the necessary elements to solve the factivity problem. Recall the argument of the conundrum: ex hypothesi, Tom, the contextualist, doesn’t know _{H} that q ; Louis instead knows _{L} this proposition and Tom, as a contextualist, is expected to know _{H} that Louis knows _{L} that q . Now, since Tom can know _{L} that q , he is in the condition to know _{H} that Louis knows _{L} that proposition without producing any contradiction. The factivity problem, therefore, is solved. Or, at least, this is the conclusion drawn by Baumann.

Yet, it should be noted that his solution entails a really odd consequence that may justify its refusal. Consider again the argument of the factivity problem. If it is true that, according to Baumann, Louis can know _{H} that Tom knows _{L} that q without producing any contradiction since he can know _{L} that q , it is also true that Louis can apply the factivity principle (a principle that Baumann does not refute) to this last proposition. Therefore, since Louis knows _{L} that q he can conclude, via factivity, that q is true *simpliciter*. So, he can infer that

60 Baumann, 2016: 132.

- (e). It is true *simpliciter* that the sailboat is moored in the port of Naples, and I (Tom) know_L this proposition but I do not know_H it

and (e) is undoubtedly a really odd proposition. Baumann, however, maintains that after all (e) is not so odd, since it can be the case that sometimes in ordinary conversations we use sentences that are almost like (e).⁶¹ Consider this example proposed by Baumann: since you are planning a picnic for tomorrow, you ask to your friend Jackie, the meteorologist, whether tomorrow will rain; according to Baumann she might reply saying that

- (f) No, don't worry, it won't rain tomorrow; I'm not talking as a meteorologist here, but anyway, let's go ahead with the picnic!¹

If we can agree with Baumann that Jackie's answer does not sound particularly strange, it is by no means certain that (f) captures the oddity that characterizes those propositions that Baumann's solution entails. Indeed, Baumann's proposal seems to allow Jackie to say something as

- (g). It is a plain fact that it won't rain tomorrow, I know this fact as an ordinary person, but I don't know it as a meteorologist.

and (g) does not only sound odd, but it is also rather hard to understand. Jackie (as well as Baumann's contextualist) would be committed to say that she recognizes as true simpliciter a certain proposition, that she knows that proposition according to a certain standard and that, despite she recognizes as a plain fact the truth of the proposition at issue, she doesn't know it according to another, more demanding standard. Perhaps, as Baumann claims, the proposition (g) is not properly Moore-paradoxical;⁶² yet as Montminy and Skolits point out, a proposition like (g) dangerously resembles to that highly undesirable propositions – as, for instance, “Even though I do not know that these are not cleverly disguised

61 Baumann, 2008: 596.

62 Baumann, 2008: 596–97.

mules, I know that these are zebras” – that have been labelled by DeRose “abominable conjunctions”.⁶³

So, since the contextualist should avoid to endorse abominable conjunctions and even more odd propositions as (*g*) it seems that he, in order to solve the factivity problem, shouldn’t opt for the solution proposed by Baumann.

Concluding Remarks

In his “Contextualism and the Factivity Problem,” Baumann wonders about what could be the attraction of contextualism “if one cannot (at least as a contextualists) coherently say or think that knowledge-attributions made in lower contexts are in fact true”.⁶⁴ Apparently, since Baumann’s solution to the conundrum turns out to be ineffective, granting this possibility to contextualism seems to entail that the advocates of the view have to abandon the factivity principle, the closure principle or both of them. The price of this manoeuvre then seems to be very high, and on who wants to follow this path rests the burden of balancing this difficult choice.

On the other hand, the contextualist who does not agree with Baumann about the virtues of contextualism could perhaps endorse the solution proposed by Brueckner and Buford. However, even in this case there are some difficulties; in particular, it seems that the contextualist who endorses this kind of solution will find himself with a weakened version of his anti-sceptical argument.⁶⁵

Those ways of answering to the factivity problem, however, shouldn’t be considered the only ones at stake, and the inquiry should continue; and not only because contextualism needs to offer a proper response to this issue, but also because defining a solution for the factivity problem represents a remarkable way for shaping the right perimeter of a proper contextualist theory about knowledge-attributions. Indeed, as Baumann observes, “whatever response the contextualist has to offer [to the fac-

63 Montminy and Skolits, 2014: 324–25.

64 Baumann, 2008.

65 Freitag, 2011: 279.

tivity problem], it will have far-reaching implications for the kind of contextualism he will be able to defend".⁶⁶

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66 Baumann, 2008: 580.

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