

Questioning Contextualism

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There are currently a dizzying variety of theories on the market holding that whether an utterance of the form *S knows that p* is true depends on pragmatic or contextual factors. Even if we allow that pragmatics matters, there are two questions to be answered. First, *which* kind of pragmatic factors matter? Broadly speaking, the debate here is about whether practical interests (the stakes involved) or intellectual interests (which propositions are being considered) are most important. Second, *whose* interests matter? Here there are three options: the interests of *S* matter, the interests of the person making the knowledge ascription matter, or the interests of the person evaluating the ascription matter.

This paper is about the second question. I'm going to present some data from the behaviour of *questions* about who knows what that show it is not the interests of the person making the knowledge ascription that matter. This means the view normally known as *contextualism* about knowledge-ascriptions is false. Since that term is a little contested, and for some suggests merely the view that someone's context matters, I'll introduce three different terms for the three answers to the second question.

- **Environmentalism** – The interests of *S*, i.e. her environment, matter.
- **Indexicalism** – The interests of the person making the knowledge ascription matter, so 'know' behaves like an indexical term.
- **Relativism** – The interests of the person evaluating the knowledge ascription matter, so knowledge ascriptions are not true or false *simpliciter* but only relative to an evaluator.

Environmentalism is defended by Hawthorne (2004) and Stanley (forthcoming). Indexicalism is defended by Cohen (1988), DeRose (1994) and Lewis (1996). Relativism is defended by MacFarlane (forthcoming). The arguments of this paper do not favour either side of the debates between environmentalists and relativists, they just show that indexicalism is false.

I won't be addressing the first question here, but I'll assume (basically for ease of exposition) that the right answer here has more to do with *practical* than *intellectual* interests. (So a sceptical possibility becomes relevant not because anyone is actively considering it, but because it makes a difference to someone's actions.) In doing this I'm more or less taking the side of Cohen (1988) over Lewis (1996), though of course that's a massive simplification of both of their

positions. Everything I say here should be restatable given any answer to the first question, so little beyond exposition turns on this.

1. Basic Indexicals in Questions

As well as considering environmentalist, indexicalist and relativist theories of ‘know’, we can consider similar theories about other words. Consider the following three theories about ‘here’.

- **Environmentalism** – A token of ‘here’ denotes the location of the subject of the sentence in which it appears.
- **Indexicalism** – A token of ‘here’ denotes the location of the speaker.
- **Relativism** – A token of ‘here’ denotes the location of the person evaluating the sentence.

Obviously indexicalism is true about ‘here’, but what we’re interested in for now is not the truth of indexicalism, but the kind of evidence that can be adduced for it. One very simple way of separating out these three theories involves questions, as in the following example.

Watson is at a party in Liverpool, and he is worried that Moriarty is there as well. He calls Holmes, who is tracking Moriarty’s movements by satellite, and asks (1).

(1) Is Moriarty here?

This question has three properties that are distinctive of questions involving indexical terms.

- **SPEAKER** – How Holmes should answer the question depends on the speaker’s (i.e. Watson’s) environment, not his own and not Moriarty’s. It would be wrong to say “Yes” because Moriarty is where he is, or “No” because Moriarty is not in the lab with Holmes following the satellite movement.
- **CLARIFICATION** – It is permissible in certain contexts to ask the speaker for more information about their state before answering. If Holmes’s is unsure of Watson’s location, he can reply with “Where are you?” rather than answering directly.
- **DIFFERENT ANSWERS** – If two different people, in different locations, ask Holmes (1), he can answer differently. Assume that Moriarty is at the party, so Holmes says “Yes” in reply to Watson. Lestrade then calls from Scotland Yard, because he is worried

that Moriarty has broken in and asks Holmes (1). Holmes says “No”, and this is consistent with his previous answer.

The truth of indexicalism about ‘here’ explains, indeed predicts, that (1) has these properties. If a correct answer is a true answer, then indexicalism directly entails that (1) has SPEAKER. That assumption (that correctness is truth) plus the fact that you can speak to someone without knowing their location implies that (1) has CLARIFICATION, and adding the fact that different people can be in different locations implies that (1) has DIFFERENT ANSWERS. For these reasons it isn’t surprising that other terms that are agreed on all sides to be indexicals generate questions that have all three properties. For instance, because ‘me’ is an indexical, (2) has all three properties.

(2) Does Moriarty want to kill me?

This suggests a hypothesis, that all terms for which indexicalism is true generate questions with those three properties. By analogy to the arguments of the previous paragraph, we can provide theoretical reasons to support that claim. In the next section I’ll present some inductive evidence for the claim, by showing that many terms that philosophers have held to be unobvious indexicals generate questions with the three properties.

2. Philosophically Interesting Indexicals in Questions

Various philosophers have argued that a version of Indexicalism is true for each of the following four terms: ‘tall’, ‘empty’, ‘ready’ and ‘everyone’. Various defenders of indexicalism about ‘knows’ have argued that ‘knows’ is analogous to terms on this list. In this section I’ll argue that questions involving those four terms have the three properties. In the next section I’ll argue that questions involving ‘know’ do not have those three properties. These facts combine to form a powerful argument against the hypothesis that ‘knows’ is an indexical. (I’m not trying to argue here that all four of these terms *are* indexicals in any sense, though I think at least some of them are. It’s possible that questions involving non-indexicals have the three properties. All I want to argue is that questions that *do* involve indexicals have the properties.) The examples involving these four terms will be a little complicated, but the intuitions about them are clear.

Moriarty has hired a new lackey, a twelve year old jockey. She is tall for a twelve year old girl, and tall for a jockey, but not tall for a person. Moriarty is most interested in her abilities as a jockey, so he worries that she’s tall. Holmes is also most interested in her *qua* jockey.

Watson has noted that Moriarty never hires people who are tall for adults (he thinks this is because Moriarty likes lording over his lackeys) and is wondering whether the new hire fits this property. He asks Holmes (3).

(3) Is Moriarty's new lackey tall?

Holmes should say "No". What matters is whether she is tall *by the standards Watson cares about*, not whether she is tall by the standards Holmes cares about (i.e. jockeys) or the standards Moriarty cares about (i.e. also jockeys). So (3) has SPEAKER. Lestrade wants information from Holmes about the lackey so his men can pick her up. They have this conversation.

Lestrade: Is Moriarty's new lackey tall? My men are looking for her.

Holmes: Where are they looking?

Lestrade: At her school.

Holmes: Yes, she looks like she could be fourteen or fifteen.

Holmes quite properly asks for a clarification of the question, so (3) has CLARIFICATION. And he properly gives different answers to Watson and Lestrade, so it has DIFFERENT ANSWERS.

Next we'll consider 'empty'. Holmes and Watson are stalking Moriarty at a party. Watson is mixing poisons, and Holmes is trying to slip the poison into Moriarty's glass. Unfortunately Moriarty has just about finished his drink, and might be about to abandon it. Watson is absent-mindedly trying to concoct the next poison, but he seems to have run out of mixing dishes.

Watson: Is Moriarty's glass empty?

Holmes: Depends what you want to use it for.

Watson: I need something dry to mix this poison in.

Holmes: No, it's got a small bit of ice left in it.

(Lestrade arrives, and sees Holmes holding a vial.)

Lestrade: Why haven't you moved in? Is Moriarty's glass empty?

Holmes: Yes. He should get another soon.

Holmes behaves entirely appropriately here, and his three responses show that the question *Is Moriarty's glass empty?* has the CLARIFICATION, SPEAKER and DIFFERENT ANSWERS

properties respectively. Note in particular that the glass is empty by the standards that matter to Moriarty and Holmes (i.e. it's got not much more than ice left in it) doesn't matter to how Holmes should answer until someone with the same interests, Lestrade, asks about the glass.

Third, we'll look at 'ready'. Moriarty is planning four things: to rob the Bank of England, to invade Baker St and kill Holmes, to invade Scotland Yard to free his friends, and to leave for a meeting of criminals where they will plan for the three missions. Moriarty cares most about the first plan, Holmes about the second, and Lestrade about the third, but right now Watson cares most about the fourth because it's his job to track Moriarty to the meeting. Holmes is watching Moriarty through an installed spycam.

Watson: Is Moriarty ready?

Holmes: To leave? Yes. You should go now.

(Watson departs and Lestrade arrives)

Lestrade: Is Moriarty ready?

Holmes: For the Scotland Yard attack? No, he still has to plan it out.

Again, Holmes's answers show that the question *Is Moriarty ready?* has the CLARIFICATION, SPEAKER and DIFFERENT ANSWERS properties. Note that in this case the issue of whether Moriarty is ready for the thing he cares most about, and the issue of whether he is ready for the thing Holmes cares most about, are not relevant to Holmes's answers. It is the interests of the different speakers that matter, which suggests that if one of indexicalism, relativism and environmentalism is true about 'ready', it is indexicalism.

Finally we'll look at 'everyone'. Lewis (1996) suggests that 'know' is directly analogous to 'every', so how universal quantifiers behave should matter. Moriarty's gang just robbed a department store while the royal family, along with many police, were there. Holmes is most interested in how this affected the royals, Watson in how the public reacted, Lestrade in how his police reacted, and Moriarty merely in his men and his gold. The public, and the royals, were terrified by the raid on the store, but the police reacted bravely.

Watson: Did Moriarty's men terrify everyone?

Holmes: You mean the crowd? Yes, they were shocked.

(Lestrade enters.)

Lestrade: I just heard about the raid. How did they get through security. Did Moriarty's men terrify everyone?

Holmes: No, your men did their job, but they were outnumbered.

Again, Holmes's answers show that the question *Did Moriarty's men terrify everyone?* has the CLARIFICATION, SPEAKER and DIFFERENT ANSWERS properties. And again, what the quantifier domain would be if Holmes were to use the word 'everyone', namely all the royal family, is irrelevant to how he should answer a question involving 'everyone'. That's the distinctive feature of indexical expressions, and it suggests that in this respect at least 'everyone' behaves like an indexical.

3. *Questions about Knowledge*

We have two reasons for thinking that if indexicalism is true about 'knows', then questions about knowledge should have all the SPEAKER, CLARIFICATION and DIFFERENT ANSWERS properties. First, the assumption that correct answers are true answers plus trivial facts about the environment (namely that environments are not always fully known and differ between speakers) implies that the questions have these properties. Second, many words that are either uncontroversial or controversial examples of indexicals generate questions with these properties. So if 'knows' is meant to be analogous to these controversial examples, questions about knowledge should have these properties. I'll argue in this section that knowledge questions do not have these properties. Again we'll work through a long example to show this.

Last week Watson discovered where Moriarty was storing a large amount of gold, and retrieved it. Moriarty is now coming to Baker St to try to get the gold back, and Holmes is planning a trap for him. Moriarty has made educated guesses that it was Watson (rather than Holmes) who retrieved the gold, and that Holmes is planning a trap at Baker St Station. But he doesn't have a lot of evidence for either proposition. Neither Moriarty nor Holmes care much about who it was who got the gold, but this is very important to Watson, who plans to write a book about it. On the other hand, that Holmes is planning a trap at Baker St Station is very important to both Holmes and Moriarty, but surprisingly unimportant to Watson. (He would prefer that he was the hero of the week for recovering the gold, not Holmes for capturing Moriarty.) They have this conversation.

Watson: Does Moriarty know that you've got a trap set up at Baker St Station?

Holmes: No, he's just guessing. If I set up a diversion I'm sure I can get him to change his mind.

Watson: Does he know it was me who recovered the gold?

Holmes: Yes, dear Watson, he figured that out.

These answers sound to me like the answers Holmes *should* give. Because the trap is practically important to both him and Moriarty, it seems he should say no to the first question unless Moriarty has very strong evidence. But because it is unimportant to Holmes and Moriarty just what *Watson* did, the fact that Moriarty has a true belief that's based on the right evidence that Watson recovered the gold is sufficient for Holmes to answer the second question "Yes". This shows that questions involving 'knows' do not have the SPEAKER property.

Some might dispute the intuitions involved here, but note that many indexicalists about knowledge will say that Holmes should assent to (4) and (5).

- (4) Moriarty does not know that I've got a trap set up for him at Baker St Station.
- (5) Moriarty does know that Watson recovered the gold.

And it is *very* intuitive that if he should assent to (4) and (5), then he should answer "No" to Watson's first question, and "Yes" to the second.

This case also suggests that questions involving 'knows' also lack the CLARIFICATION and DIFFERENT ANSWERS property. It would be odd of Holmes to reply to one of Watson's questions with "How much does it matter to you?". And it's hard to imagine circumstances where he would offer a different answer if Lestrade rather than Watson asked the questions. Since we have reasons to think that if indexicalism were true, knowledge questions would have these three properties, it follows that indexicalism about 'knows' is false.

4. Objections and Replies

Objection: The argument that indexicalism implies that knowledge questions should have the three properties assumes that correct answers are true answers. But there are good Gricean reasons to think that there are other standards for correctness.

Reply: It is true that one of the arguments for thinking that indexicalism has this implication uses this assumption. But the other argument, the argument from analogy with other plausibly indexical terms, does not. Whatever one thinks of the theory, there is an impressive amount of data here showing that 'knows' does not behave in questions like other context-sensitive terms for which indexicalism is the most plausible view.

Moreover, indexicalists have to be very careful wielding this objection. If there is a substantial gap between correct answers to knowledge questions and true answers, then it is likely that there is a substantial gap between correct knowledge ascriptions and true knowledge

ascriptions. As a general (though not universal) rule, truth and correctness are more tightly connected for questions than for simple statements. For example, some utterances do not generate all the scalar implicatures as answers to questions that they typically generate when asserted unprompted. But the primary ‘ordinary language’ argument for indexicalism about knowledge ascriptions assumes that correct knowledge ascriptions are, by and large, true.

We can put this in more theoretical terms. If we are to use these considerations to generate a *rebutting* defeater for indexicalism, we would need an argument that Holmes’s answers are correct iff they are true. And while that step of the argument is plausible, it is not beyond contention. But that isn’t the only use of the examples. We can also use them to *undercut* the argument from ordinary language to indexicalism. If we have a wide range of cases where ordinary usage is as if indexicalism is false, as we do, and these cases are central to ordinary usage, as answering questions is central to ordinary usage, then ordinary usage doesn’t provide an all things considered reason to believe indexicalism. If ordinary usage is (or at least was) the best reason to believe indexicalism, it follows that there is no good reason to believe indexicalism.

Objection: Sometimes when we ask *Does S know that p?* all we want to know is whether *S* has the information that *p*. In this mood, questions of justification are not relevant. But indexicalism is a theory about the interaction between the subject’s *justification* and knowledge ascriptions. So these questions are irrelevant to evaluating indexicalism.

Reply: It is plausible that there is this use of knowledge questions. It seems to me that this is a usage that needs to be explained, and isn’t easily explained on current theories of knowledge. But I’ll leave discussion of that use of knowledge questions for another day. For now I’ll just note that even if this can be an explanation of why we sometimes *assent* to knowledge questions, it can’t be an explanation of why Holmes *denies* that Moriarty knows about the planned trap at Baker St Station. Holmes agrees that Moriarty *believes* there is a trap planned, but insists that because Moriarty is ‘just guessing’ that this belief does not amount to knowledge. What really needs explaining is the difference between Holmes’s two answers, and this other use of knowledge questions doesn’t seem sufficient to generate that explanation.

Objection: The argument that indexicalists are committed to the view that knowledge questions should have the SPEAKER property assumes that only one person’s interests or standards are relevant to a particular usage. On the ‘single scoreboard’ view (DeRose 2004) it is the standards of all parties to the conversation that matter.

Reply: At times in the conversation I have used what DeRose calls the ‘multiple scoreboards’ view in setting out the position. But moving to the ‘single scoreboard’ view doesn’t help matters. On that view it is the interests of all parties to the conversation that determine the content of any token of ‘knows’. It is not entirely clear what predictions this theory makes about how Holmes should answer the questions. (On DeRose’s official view, in each case it is indeterminate what the true answer is to Watson’s question. So Holmes should give the same of kind of answer as one should give when asked whether a particular person who is a borderline case of knowing that *p* knows that *p*. I’m not at all sure how one should answer such a question in ordinary English.)

However this is resolved, the single scoreboard view doesn’t help for two reasons.

First, the governing intuition about the cases is that Watson’s interests are basically irrelevant to how Holmes should answer. On DeRose’s theory Watson’s interests are just as important as Holmes’s to determining the correct answer, and this isn’t what’s intuitively the case. A case could be made that intuitively Moriarty’s interests matter when answering the question, as environmentalism implies. And a case (I think a stronger case) could be made that intuitively Holmes’s interests matter to how he should answer the question, as relativism implies. But it’s very hard to see the intuitive force behind the claim that *Watson’s* interests should matter to how Holmes should answer these questions.

Second, on the single scoreboard view Holmes should give the same kind of answer to the two questions. But intuitively he should do what he actually did, namely answer “No” to the first and “Yes” to the second. Again, what’s needed is an explanation of the difference between the questions, and the single scoreboard view doesn’t have the resources to offer such an explanation, whereas both relativism and environmentalism do have the needed resources.

Objection: There is no explanation offered here for the data, and we shouldn’t give up an explanatory theory without an explanation of why it fails.

Reply: I’ll just go over the difference between ‘knows’ and ‘ready’, the point I’m making easily generalises to the other cases. Different people may be concerned with different bits of preparation, so they may (speaker) mean different things by *X is ready*. But neither will regard the other as making a *mistake* when they focus on a particular bit of preparing to talk about by saying *X is ready*. Knowledge cases are not like that. Different people may have different standards for knowledge, so perhaps they may (speaker) mean different things by *S knows that p*, because they will communicate that *S* has met their preferred standards for knowledge. But in these cases, each will regard the other as making a *mistake*. Standards for knowledge aren’t the kind of thing we let each person set for themselves, in the way we do (within reason) let people set their own

immediate goals for themselves. That explains why we don't just adopt our questioners standards for knowledge when answering their knowledge questions.

Objection: At most this shows that indexicalism is not actually true of English. But there might still be good epistemological reasons to adopt it as a philosophically motivated revision, even if the data from questions shows it isn't true. So even if hermeneutic indexicalism is false, revolutionary indexicalism might be well motivated.

Reply: It's true that the philosophically most interesting concepts may not map exactly on to the meanings of words in natural language. (Though I think we should be careful before abandoning the concepts that have proven useful enough to get simple representation in the language.) And it's true that there are reasons for having epistemological concepts that are sensitive to pragmatic factors. But what is hard to see is what interest we could have in having epistemological terms whose application is sensitive to the interests of the person using them. Hawthorne (2004) provides many reasons for thinking that terms whose applications are sensitive to the interests of the person to whom they are being applied are philosophically and epistemologically valuable. Such terms provide ways of expressing unified judgements about the person's intellectual and practical reasoning. There is little equivalent to be gained by *adopting* indexicalism if the language is not already indexicalist. If there needs to be a revolution around here, it should be towards environmentalism, not indexicalism.

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Ithaca

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