PHIL 440: Seminar in Epistemology: Contextualism

Course Meetings: Wednesdays, 10–1, Spring 2014, Buchanan D 319
Instructor: Dr. Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa — jonathan.ichikawa@ubc.ca
Office Hours: Fridays, 10–12, BUCH E361

Overview:
This is a fourth-year philosophy seminar in epistemology. This is an advanced seminar; prior familiarity with academic philosophical investigation into epistemology will be assumed. A previous course in epistemology (PHIL 240 at UBC or the equivalent) is a prerequisite.

The main topic for this course is epistemic contextualism. Contextualism developed gradually in the late twentieth century in Anglophone philosophy, largely in response to skeptical arguments. The course lies at the intersection between epistemology and the philosophy of language. Students will achieve familiarity with this significant philosophical idea, engaging critically with very recent published work.

Background:
It is intuitively plausible that, as I write this course description, I know that I am scheduled to teach PHIL 440 in the spring. (I don’t know what all of my colleagues are teaching—I haven’t studied the list—but I know what I myself am teaching.) But it is also intuitively plausible that I don’t know—maybe I can’t know—that I’m not a brain in a vat. As you have seen in your previous epistemology coursework, navigating the tension between these intuitive claims comprises a significant topic in epistemology. A contextualist is someone who thinks that the answer to the puzzle lies in significant part in the study of the words we use to talk about knowledge. In particular, the contextualist thinks that the English word ‘knows’ is context-sensitive—like words like ‘you’ and ‘now’, it can be used in different contexts to express different ideas.

Contextualism is a thesis about a particular English word—the word ‘knows’. As such, it is answerable to semantic considerations. What linguistic evidence is there for or against contextualism? What implications might contextualism have on traditional epistemological questions about the nature and extent of human knowledge? How does contextualism compare with other recent views that attempt to capture similar data? What empirical work is relevant to identifying folk intuitions about knowledge, and what is the significance of the latter for contextualism? These are among the questions we will consider in this course.

Prior familiarity with contextualism is not a prerequisite, but students who would like a head start might read either of these entries:

- plato.stanford.edu/entries/contextualism-epistemology
- www.iep.utm.edu/contextu/

Course Expectations:
This seminar should be in significant part a student-driven discussion; high levels of participation are expected. Attendance is mandatory. All students should come prepared to discuss the week’s readings every week; there will also be regular presentations and brief written reactions to readings. Students may choose between a term paper OR a final exam. See assessment details below.
Assessment: Students may choose between these options:

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<th>Option 1</th>
<th>Option 2</th>
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<td>30% Weekly written responses</td>
<td>40% Weekly written responses</td>
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<tr>
<td>10% Participation</td>
<td>10% Participation</td>
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<td>15% Presentation</td>
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<td>10% Term paper draft material</td>
<td>30% Final exam</td>
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<td>10% Peer feedback assignment</td>
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<td>25% Final term paper</td>
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There are also two course requirements that supersede this weighting scheme—see the 'Comprehension Exam' and 'Participation' sections below. Failure to meet either requirement will result in a failing grade for the course.

Comprehension Exam: All students will be required to pass a brief written examination assessing comprehension of certain of the 'basics' of contextualism. The exam will be offered in class in Week 3. Students who fail the first time will be permitted to schedule additional attempts. To receive a passing grade in the course, students must pass this exam.

Weekly written responses: Each week, all students should prepare a brief written response to the required readings, prior to the class in which it is discussed. These will be submitted online via Connect; the deadline is noon each Tuesday. These assignments are opportunities for you to engage with the required readings individually, prior to the course meeting. Appropriate topics include:

- Summarizing the main point of a reading
- Clarifying a particularly interesting argument in the reading
- Raising an objection to a reading
- Drawing connections between the ideas in the reading to broader themes

There is no minimum or maximum length for these responses; a paragraph or two will typically be appropriate.

Participation: Students are expected to contribute positively and regularly to seminar discussion. 10% of the total grade will be based on positive contribution to the seminars; participation in Connect forums will also be considered for the participation score. *Attendance at all seminars is mandatory: any unexcused absences will result in a 0 participation score; two unexcused absences may be considered grounds for failing the course.*

Presentation: All students will make an oral presentation. There are three choices for the format of the presentation: (1) a reaction to the week’s reading, perhaps based on the weekly written response, intended to introduce the general discussion; (2) a ‘book report’ style presentation about a supplemental reading for the course, intended to introduce further related ideas and help students decide what additional texts might be worth reading; or (3) a presentation of the student’s own ideas, perhaps in preparation for the term paper. Use of handouts, slides, etc. is encouraged but not required. Students should plan to speak for roughly 15 minutes, then answer questions from classmates and myself.

Term Paper, Draft Material, Peer Review: Students who elect to write a term paper will participate in a peer review procedure based on draft material prepared in advance (deadline: April 4). Term papers should advance original ideas, engaging with major themes of the course. Students are encouraged to discuss ideas for paper topics well in advance, either with me directly, or in the Connect forums. The deadline for the term paper is April
18. There is no particular required length for the term paper; it should be as long as it needs to be to make your case, and no more. Look to the published papers we’re reading for guides to scope and size. Most papers will fall between 5,000–10,000 words.

**Final Exam**: Students who elect to take a final exam will do so during the university exam period; the exam will assess familiarity with required readings and central course topics.

**Readings and Schedule (subject to change)**: Following are topics for each week and required readings. I have also prepared a list of suggestions for supplementary readings. It is not by any means an expectation that students will read all supplementary readings; these are suggestions to guide you in your further research. Students are not required to buy any books; however, it might be helpful to have DeRose’s *The Case for Contextualism*, Stanley’s *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, and/or Hawthorne’s *Knowledge and Lotteries*, all of which are appealed to multiple times below, and which will reward careful study.

**Week 1: January 8: Introduction, Theoretical Background to Contextualism**
Required Reading: David Kaplan, “Demonstratives”

**Week 2: January 15. Lewis’s Infallibilist Contextualism**
Required Reading: David Lewis, “Elusive Knowledge”
Supplemental Readings:
- Michael Blome-Tillmann: “Knowledge and Presuppositions”
- Jonathan Ichikawa: “Ignorance and Presuppositions”
- Grover & Herry: “Here and There”

**Week 3: January 22. Against Motivations for Contextualism: Warranted Assertability**
Required Reading: Jessica Brown, “Contextualism and warranted assertibility manoeuvres”
Supplemental Readings:
- Patrick Ryssiew: “The Context-Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions”
- Keith DeRose: “Assertion, Knowledge, and Context”
- Tim Black: “A Warranted Assertability Defense of a Moorean Response to Skepticism”

**Week 4: January 29. Contextualism, Skepticism, Sensitivity, Closure**
Required Reading: Keith DeRose, “Solving the Skeptical Problem”
Supplemental Readings:
- Ernest Sosa: “How to Defeat Opposition to Moore”

**Week 5: February 5. Linguistic Arguments against Contextualism**
Required Reading: Jason Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, ch. 3
Supplemental Readings:
- Jason Stanley: “On the Linguistic Basis for Contextualism”
- Barbara Partee: “Comments on Jason Stanley’s ‘On the Linguistic Basis for Contextualism’”
- Jonathan Ichikawa: “Quantifiers and Epistemic Contextualism”
- Stephen Schiffer: “Contextualist Solutions to Scepticism”
- Keith DeRose: “Bamboozled by our Own Words”

**Week 6: February 12. Interest-Relative Invariantism**
Required Reading: Jason Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, ch. 5
Supplemental Readings:
- Gillian Russell and John Doris: “Knowledge by Indifference”
- Jonathan Schaffer: “The Irrelevance of the Subject”
- John Hawthorne: *Knowledge and Lotteries*, ch. 4
- Jeremy Fantl & Matt McGrath: *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*
Week 7: Feb 26: Explaining Away Contextualist-Friendly Intuitions
Required Reading: Jennifer Nagel, “Epistemic Anxiety and Adaptive Invariantism”
Supplemental Readings:
  • John Hawthorne: Knowledge and Lotteries, ch. 2
  • Brian Weatherson: “Can We Do Without Pragmatic Encroachment?”
  • Mikkel Gerken: “Epistemic Focal Bias”

Week 8: Mar 5: An Explanationist Theory of Knowledge (Attributions)
Required Reading: Carrie Jenkins, Grounding Concepts, ch. 3.
Supplemental Reading:
  • Joshua Schechter: Review of Grounding Concepts

Week 9: Mar 12: Closure
Required Reading: Krista Lawlor: “Living without Closure”
Supplemental Readings:
  • Maria Lasonen-Aarnio: “Single premise deduction and risk”
  • Jonathan Vogel: “The New Relevant Alternatives Theory”

Week 10: Mar 19: Closure and Sensitivity
Required Reading: Sherilyn Rous, “Sensitivity and Closure”
Supplemental Readings:
  • Gail Stein: “Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives, and Deductive Closure”
  • Rachel McKinnon: “Lotteries, Knowledge, and Irrelevant Alternatives”

Week 11: Mar 26: Closure, Sensitivity, and Contextualism
Required Reading: Jonathan Ichikawa, “Quantifiers, Knowledge, and Counterfactuals”
Supplemental Readings:
  • Al Hajek: “Most Counterfactuals are False”
  • Keith DeRose: “Can it Be that it Would Have Been Even Though It Might Not Have Been?”

Week 12: Apr 2: Ethics
Required Reading: Berit Brogaard: “Epistemological Contextualism and the Problem of Moral Luck”
Supplemental Readings:
  • Carrie Jenkins and Daniel Nolan: “Maximising, Satisficing and Context”

Other topics:
These didn’t make it into the schedule, but they’re good, closely related topics:

Relativism
  • John MacFarlane: “Nonindexical Contextualism”
  • Berit Brogaard: “In Defense of a Perspectival Semantics for ‘Know’”
  • Krista Lawlor: “Enough is Enough: Pretense and Invariance in the Semantics of ‘knows that’”

Can Contextualism be Relevant to Epistemology?
  • Ernest Sosa, “Skepticism and Contextualism”
  • Hilary Kornblith, “The Contextualist Evasion of Epistemology”
  • Timothy Williamson, “Knowledge, Context, and the Agent’s Point of View”