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CLOSURE AND CONTEXT

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Mark Heller [5] has recently put forward a spirited defence of the ‘relevant alternatives’ (RA) theory of knowledge which attempts to defuse two common contextualist objections.¹ In meeting these objections, however, Heller modifies the RA account along contextualist lines. It is argued here that by adapting the view in this way, Heller is thereby left with a theory that incorporates problematic aspects from *both* accounts.

As is well-known, the RA approach to knowledge entails the denial of the closure principle, and thus permits a rather elegant response to the sceptic. For our purposes, closure can be formulated as the claim that if one knows a proposition, p , and knows that p entails a second proposition, q , then one knows q .² The sceptic uses this principle by arguing that if I know an ‘everyday’ proposition (such as that I have two hands), and I know that this proposition entails a second ‘sceptical’ proposition (that, for instance, I am not a brain in a vat), then I must know that I am not a brain in a vat. And since it seems implausible, the sceptic continues, to think that I can know that I am not a brain in a vat (or the denial of *any* sceptical hypothesis for that matter), so I must lack knowledge of the everyday proposition in question. This argument can, of course, be repeated with just about any everyday belief I have, and thus the sceptic has, *prima facie* at least, offered us grounds for her sceptical conclusion that we lack knowledge of most of the every propositions which we believe. Given this feature of the sceptical dialectic, the attraction of denying such a principle ought to be obvious. One could then agree with the sceptic’s initial contention (that one cannot know the denial of a sceptical hypothesis), without thereby having to concede that this should impair one’s everyday knowledge.

The RA approach to knowledge effects the denial of the closure principle via its claim that the grounds for one’s belief in p (if they are to be strong enough to support knowledge) need only be strong enough to eliminate all the ‘alternatives’ (i.e., propositions incompatible with p) that are *relevant*—they need not be strong enough to eliminate *all* alternatives. Relevance here is usually defined in terms of one’s beliefs bearing some sort of counterfactual relationship to the facts. Fred Dretske [4], for instance, argues that one knows p if and only if in the nearest possible worlds in

¹ For the core themes of the RA theory, see Dretske [3,4]. An account which runs along similar lines and which also results in the denial of the closure principle is offered by Nozick [8]. The focus for Heller’s discussion of the contextualist defence of Closure is Stine [9]. For the main contextualist treatments of scepticism, see Cohen [1], DeRose [2], Lewis [7], and Williams [10].

² I do not intend this formulation to be regarded as a final characterisation, since there is clearly a great deal more that can be said about this principle in order to make it more precise. That said, however, this rough-and-ready definition should suffice here. (NB. Heller actually expresses closure in terms of justification, but since nothing in his argument turns on this, I have confined my attention to the simpler closure principle for knowledge).

which p is false, one does not believe p .³ On this criterion of relevance, an agent could know an everyday proposition such as that she has two hands (since in the nearest possible worlds in which she doesn't have two hands she doesn't believe that she does), and know that this proposition entails the denial of a sceptical hypothesis (e.g., that she is not a brain in a vat), whilst nevertheless failing to know that she is not a brain in a vat (because in the nearest possible worlds in which she is a brain in a vat she continues to believe that she isn't). In short, the RA account of knowledge entails non-closure through its allowance that the set of possible worlds relevant to the determination of an agent's knowledge need not be fixed, even if the propositions in question are related by an entailment which is known by the agent. This *modal* account of knowledge is meant to reflect our epistemic intuitions in this respect—that whereas our everyday beliefs have the epistemic virtue of being 'sensitive' to the facts (they will track the truth across a range of counterfactual situations) and so count as known, our beliefs in the denials of sceptical propositions lack this sensitivity and so fail to constitute knowledge.

The first contextualist objection to this denial of closure that Heller considers—due to Gail C. Stine [9]—argues that it rests upon an equivocation. Stine claims that it is this very variability in the range of relevant possible worlds as one shifts one's attention from the antecedent proposition to the consequent proposition that indicates that the two propositions are being evaluated with respect to *different* epistemic standards. Whereas the evaluation of an agent's knowledge of an everyday proposition only requires considering a range of 'near-by' possible worlds, assessing that agent's knowledge of the denial of a sceptical proposition involves considering 'far-off' worlds as well, and so imposes higher demands on knowledge possession. On the supposition that we remove this equivocation in epistemic standards—and thereby keep the range of possible worlds fixed—we would be unable to get a counterexample to closure.

Heller has a very persuasive response to this line of attack (pp. 198-203).⁴ Essentially, he argues that the fact that a modal theory of knowledge entails non-closure should come as no surprise given that many other logical rules are also invalid in subjunctive contexts. He focuses upon the principle of strengthening the antecedent in this respect, and highlights how this rule fails in modal contexts for the same reason as the closure principle—because different sets of possible worlds can be at issue as one shifts one's attention from one proposition to another. And since it would be no objection to the counterexamples presented to these rules in subjunctive contexts to say that they rest upon an equivocation, so, by parity of reasoning, the contextualist has yet to supply sufficient grounds for thinking that the case for non-closure rests upon such a fallacy. Accordingly, Heller supports the standard RA theorist's claim that denying closure is a legitimate response to the sceptical challenge.

Although this first contextualist attack is disarmed, the second, and more substantive, threat posed by the contextualist account is not dismissed by Heller in the same direct way. This critique

³ For the sake of brevity, I have simplified Dretske's account a great deal. Nothing in my argument hangs on this simplification.

⁴ All page references given in the text are to Heller [5].

pivots upon the contextualist claim that a subject's possession of knowledge varies not just in line with changes in her epistemic position (the relevant actual and counterfactual circumstances discussed by the RA theorist), but also with respect to features of the agent's *conversational* context. The idea is that by simply raising a sceptical possibility an agent can enforce an increase in the standard required for knowledge and thus undermine the epistemic status of the everyday beliefs held by the participants of that context. Indeed, one of the principal motivations for this view is meant to be our reluctance to ascribe hardly *any* knowledge to agents in situations in which a sceptical scenario is in play, even though the only thing that appears to have altered about their epistemic position is the conversational topic. Accordingly, one will never get a counterexample to closure on this view, since in moving from the consideration of the agent's putative knowledge of the everyday antecedent proposition to the sceptical consequent proposition, one thereby changes the context and thus destroys that agent's everyday knowledge. Properly understood, then, the contextualist claim is that the RA theorist's argument for non-closure is invalid because it fails to recognise the influence that this variety of context-change has for knowledge possession.⁵

One might expect Heller to straightforwardly reject this claim. After all, the denial of closure has been, according to Heller at least, sufficiently motivated, and thus there ought to be no residual worry remaining about the acceptability of both having knowledge of everyday propositions and lacking knowledge of the sceptical propositions which are entailed by the everyday propositions. Moreover, although denying closure might, initially at least, be considered counterintuitive, it is surely a lot less counterintuitive than the contextualist line. The intuition that our epistemic situation cannot be affected by *mere* pragmatic factors is surely very strong. Indeed, given that one can answer the sceptic by denying closure, the natural response to the contextualist's argument would appear to be to simply accuse it of confusing assertibility conditions with truth conditions.⁶ It would seem, then, that with a defence of closure in the bank, Heller should have no problem resisting the contextualist's argument. Nevertheless, instead of adopting this direct style of response, Heller goes on to concede the contextualist's basic point.

In line with the contextualist account, Heller argues that what determines relevance in each particular case—and thus the possible worlds which are at issue in the determination of knowledge—is relative to *contexts of attribution* (p. 203), where this is understood in terms of a sensitivity to conversational contexts in the manner outlined above. He puts the point as follows:

One thing we have learned in recent years about the context sensitivity of vague terms, and 'knowledge' in particular, is that the contextually selected values for such terms are susceptible to change within the course of a conversation. The conversational 'score' changes in order to accommodate the utterances of conversational participants. In particular, as one participant makes an utterance that requires higher standards in order to be felicitous,

⁵ The focus for contextualist approaches of this sort was provided by Lewis [6, 7], but see also DeRose [2].

⁶ Heller only seems to recognise this possibility at the end of his paper (p. 206), but by then the concession to the contextualist has already been made.

the other participants tend to raise their standards to accommodate the utterance in question. [...] Thus, scepticism gains plausibility by its appeal to the evil genius possibility, because such an appeal thereby makes that possibility a relevant alternative. (p. 203).

Accordingly, by the lights of Heller's modified version of the RA account, one *does* lack knowledge of everyday propositions in 'sceptical' conversational contexts. We need not worry, though, counsels Heller, because the scepticism that results here is only "temporary" (p. 206), it soon passes once the conversational 'score' returns to normal.

The problem is, of course, that the principal advantage of denying closure—that it enables one to resist both scepticism *and* contextualism—is now lost. By denying closure the RA theorist was able to both block the sceptical argument and account for the 'stability' of knowledge: the fact that the possession of knowledge does not vary with respect to factors which have no influence on the truth-sensitivity of an agent's beliefs. In 'contextualizing' the RA theory, however, Heller is forced to give-up this intuition, and therefore argue for the 'instability' of knowledge: that the possession of knowledge ebbs and flows with respect to factors which have, intuitively at least, no bearing on an agent's ability to track the truth. He is thus left with an account which, mysteriously, both denies closure *and* argues that the "application conditions [*for knowledge*] are context relative" (p. 206).

This point is brought out rather neatly in the text by Heller's discussion of Keith DeRose's [2] "abominable conjunction":

S knows that there is a tree before her, even though she does not know that she is not being deceived by an evil genius about the tree's existence. (p. 203).

Plausibly, such a conjunction is unassertable even though, on the standard RA account, it may well be true because, since closure is denied, one can know an everyday proposition whilst failing to have knowledge of the denial of a sceptical proposition. The contextualist, on the other hand, argues that what explains the unassertability of this conjunction is simply the fact that by asserting this conjunction—and thereby making the evil genius scenario relevant to the determination of knowledge—one makes it false. Rather than taking the standard RA line, however, and thereby claiming that such a conjunction could quite consistently be both true and unassertable, Heller instead yields to the contextualist account. It is true, he argues, that whenever this conjunction is asserted it is false, because asserting this conjunction changes the standard of relevance in the sceptic's favour and thereby destroys much of our everyday knowledge (including the knowledge at issue in the first conjunct).

As a result, and despite his initial claims to the contrary, the dominant anti-sceptical component of Heller's theory is not the denial of closure after all, but rather a contextualist account of the variability of knowledge possession. As a consequence, the motivation for Heller's broader

project now starts to look somewhat shaky. Recall that his original defence of the argument for non-closure went through on the basis that the contextualist had failed to offer sufficient grounds to support their opposing interpretation of the RA theorist's counterexamples to closure. The difficulty is, however, that given one endorses the core contextualist thesis it is then unclear exactly what a counterexample to closure could consist in.

In order to see this, consider what a possible counterexample to closure would be for Heller. Since, as Heller admits, closure only fails on a modal account of epistemology in instances where there is a greater 'breadth' of possible worlds at issue as regards the evaluation of an agent's knowledge of the consequent proposition than is involved in evaluating that agent's knowledge of the antecedent proposition, so any putative counterexample to closure will *necessarily* incorporate, as far as the contextualist is concerned at any rate, an *increase* in the epistemic standards. And since Heller agrees with the contextualist account of how increasing the standards changes the conversational context and thereby (in the relevant cases) destroys the agent's erstwhile knowledge of the antecedent proposition, what possible motivation could remain for thinking that it would be possible for an agent to both know the antecedent proposition, know that it entails the consequent proposition, and yet nevertheless fail to know the consequent proposition? In short, what motivation remains for denying closure? It would thus appear that Heller's position is in danger of overkill.

Of course, Heller could argue that although there are no *conversational* contexts in which closure fails, still, there are *non-conversational* contexts in which it does not hold. That is, there are counterexamples to closure, it is just that such examples can never be stated without thereby changing the conversational context mid-way and undermining their status as counterexamples. Heller cannot, however, have it both ways. He cannot, on the one hand, argue that knowledge is a context-sensitive term as the contextualist contends, whilst on the other helping himself to a reading of the knowledge operator which is independent of any conversational context. After all, if knowledge really is context-sensitive in the way that Heller supposes, then outside of a conversational context there will be *no* fact of the matter as to whether the agent knows the propositions in question because there won't be any *standard* set for that knowledge. By the lights of the contextualist account that Heller endorses, then, the very idea of an *unstated* counterexample to closure is incoherent.

In any case, it is at the very least incumbent upon Heller to further motivate his quick dismissal of the contextualist critique in this respect. Furthermore, unlike the contextualists who can promote their theory on the grounds that it can retain closure, Heller is now forced to fight his battles on two fronts—against those who oppose contextualism *and* those who endorse closure. A simple theory with only one potentially unpalatable consequence is thus replaced by a more complex theory that has *two* controversial consequences.

To re-cap, then, my opposition to Heller's account is based on three points. First, that insofar as his defence of non-closure goes through then he does not need to yield to the 'conversational' contextualist's critique. Second, that insofar as he does concede this much to the

contextualist, then he jeopardises his original defence of the argument for non-closure (and with it his version of RA). And, third, that by endorsing a ‘hybrid’ account of knowledge which incorporates both an RA approach and elements of contextualism, Heller is left with an epistemological theory which is even less attractive than either of these theories taken individually. If Heller’s account is anything to go by, then the prospects for such a ‘hybrid’ view are dim indeed.^{7,8}

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⁷ My own feeling is that the choice between contextualism and non-closure is an illusory one—we can keep closure and deny contextualism whilst still meeting the sceptical threat. This, however, is a topic for another day.

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