**What is epistemic contextualism? Should we be epistemic contextualists?**

I believe epistemic contextualism is a very favourable view of the boundaries of knowledge, and that we should be epistemic contextualists over epistemic invariantists. In this essay I will explain what epistemic contextualism is, why I favour the view and why we should be epistemic contextualists by contrasting it to the flaws of being epistemic invariantists, and will then defend the view by responding to some concerns of epistemic contextualism.

To begin, I will explain what epistemic contextualism is. Epistemic contextualism is acknowledgement that our boundaries of knowledge changes from context to context, with respect to knowledge being a belief that is true and justified. Epistemic contextualists believe the standards of knowledge can be defined by different factors such as stakes or salience, and the truth of propositions in contextualism is relative to the context where it is made. This is opposed by epistemic invariantism, which sets fixed, objective standards of knowledge, and subsequently truth does not vary from context to context. Stake-sensitive epistemic contextualism argues we have lower boundaries of knowledge depending on the stakes from context-to-context, such as the immediate requirement of knowledge in use of emergencies rather than in casual conversation. Salience-sensitive contextualism argues that knowledge depends on an action being possible, such that if it is invoked as possible then it cannot be ruled out.

Next I will explain why I favour epistemic contextualism. My reason for favouring epistemic contextualism is due to a paradox of knowledge and my response to it. Let us assume there are two people who wish to know the time the sun leaves the horizon. One observes the sun from ground level, and the other observes the sun from the top of a skyscraper. The two people will know when the sun leaves the horizon, however, the person from the top of the skyscraper will observe the sun leaving the horizon later than the person on ground level, thus the knowledge between the two people, while in isolation are true and justified for each observer, nevertheless differ. This creates a paradox where each individual may be true to their own perspective, but seemingly false towards the other. My answer to this paradox is that both beliefs are true and justified, and both people have knowledge of when the sun leaves the horizon, however the differentiation is due to context. Neither belief is necessarily false, as should a person be in a different environment, the standards of knowledge and our observation of when the leaves the horizon will differ. This is the basis of how I justify epistemic contextualism, due to how environment, culture, or variations of observation can create varied justified true beliefs. Through this view, there is a subjectivity to the standards of knowledge, and whether knowledge is true under certain circumstances or not, which argues against fixed standards of knowledge in the external world.

Now I will argue why we should be epistemic contextualists through this perspective. One reason why I believe we should be epistemic contextualists is that it acknowledges diversity in background or context in a scenario may lead to disagreements on epistemic matters. As established in the paradox, two parties may have individually justified and true beliefs on the same subject matter yet arrive at vastly different conclusions. The issue with invariantism is that it assumes there is a fixed, definitive barrier of knowledge where if the two parties disagree, only one or neither can be correct. In regards to when the sun leaves the horizon, an epistemic invariantist may argue that there is a fixed truth of when the sun leaves the horizon, and the barrier of knowledge is too high and thus neither party is correct. However, I find this to be an unsatisfying conclusion. It is apparent that in isolation either party is not incorrect in their belief, as their observation is truthful and justified assuming their observation is untampered. Despite this, invariantism implies there is no way to resolve this disagreement because of the boundaries of knowledge being too high, which implies some differences in our knowledge and reasoning are unresolvable. This inability to reconcile apparent differences in beliefs acts against our ability to reason to one-another and share beliefs, which I believe is too high of a standards to put on knowledge, as our ability to reason and challenge each other and subsequently convince one-another of our perspectives, or change our perspective from oppositional beliefs, is crucial to human conversation. Epistemic contextualism acknowledges how people have different boundaries of belief based on context or background, which allows us to understand our differences better and reconcile on why we may believe what we believe is true and justified. This enables us to resolve disagreement, and to change our beliefs or perspectives, allowing for a fluidity in the sharing of knowledge. This enables us to be critical and open to critique, as each person may present rational grounds for us to follow their belief, rather than knowledge being unattainable and thus conversation on what is true to be fruitless if the boundaries of knowledge is too high.

Another reason to believe in epistemic contextualism is that it acknowledges that we have biases correspondent to our environment. Take the paradox for example; the man on the building may have knowledge of when the sun disappears from the horizon under his context-specific situation, however may also acknowledge that if he were at a different place his knowledge would be false, thus he wouldn’t be immediate to shut down or disagree with someone who claims to have true justified knowledge that differs from them. If we are epistemic contextualists, we can accept that differences of knowledge come from a diverse range of factors contingent to culture, perspective, and or moment-by-moment stakes. This allows for a more nuanced discussion of knowledge, recognising subjectivity and bias not only with others but also within ourselves. Subsequently, when sharing knowledge with one-another, we can attempt to reason our perspective, or attempt to break down our biases in attempt to rationalise our knowledge. This allows us to have open and honest dialogues on biases through our recognition of them, while also encouraging us to seek empirical investigation to justify our claims, be open to evidence that refutes our perspective, and encourage us to be critically reflective of ourselves and the underlying reasons we believe what we do. One may argue how with epistemic invariantism, we can still be reflective of our internal biases, and that it can coexist with high boundaries of knowledge and knowledge being non-context specific, however, in invariantism biases would be seen as nothing but unproductive, as it would always defer us from the fixed, external standards of knowledge. Biases in epistemic contextualism are not inherently good or bad, rather just a facet of human thought. Epistemic contextualism acknowledges how everyone is fallible to biases based on culture or case-by-case situations, and this allows us to evaluate the impact of our biases more effectively and critically in our moment-to-moment lives. This can lead biases to act as heuristics to help us make quick decisions or to make immediate sense of complex information, such as a bias to certain patterns of information or availability biases. While some biases can be viewed as inherently negative, such as prejudiced bias which can lead to misinformation, others act as aspects to human cognition which allow us to perceive and digest the external world and the flexible barriers of knowledge depending on context, rather than a detriment to our understanding of it.

One final reason I propose that we should believe epistemic contextualism over invariantism is that I believe invariantism depicts a very simplified perspective on knowledge that is not reflective to real-world complexity. In human discussion, not all knowledge has the same standards. Informal discussion and knowledge shared with friends is very different to a formal discussion, and to hold them both to the same regard on knowledge would be insensitive to cultural tradition, social norms, power dynamics, or even the case-by-case people you interact with. Human dialogue is deeply multifaceted, and invariantism attempts to apply a singular standard in every case, and through this lens it makes much of human dialogue appear unproductive or meaningless. Epistemic contextualism embraces this diversity however, taking into account that not all conversations have the same standards of knowledge, and that we are not required to have the same standards of knowledge for every interaction, hence allowing us to live our lives as is, rather than struggling to adhere to the strictness of fixed knowledge standards.

While I have explained why I believe epistemic contextualism is a more favourable perspective than invariantism, in this section I will respond and answer counterarguments to epistemic contextualism. One concern regarding epistemic contextualism is that it does not provide a satisfactory response to scepticism, and that epistemic contextualism may lead to radical scepticism. The cause of this concern is that the radical scepticist argues we have no knowledge of the external world, and invariantism can provide a response to this that there are fixed standards of knowledge that mean knowledge of the external world is real and constant. However, contextualism, through arguing that these standards of knowledge are context-specific, can be seen as a middle ground between radical scepticism and invariantism, and may fuel speculation that there are no standards of knowledge and thus may lead one to adopt radical scepticism to explain the variations in standards of knowledge. However, while I agree that contextualism is a middle ground between invariantism and radical scepticism, I believe this isn’t a negative and it allows for a broader and nuanced interpretation of knowledge that depicts how we perceive knowledge as not being of only two extremes. Through this, contextualism provides a basis for making reasonable, knowledgeable claims in our day-to-day lives which doesn’t immediately fall back on unattainable standards of knowledge nor that we have no knowledge of anything in the external world, which subsequently can make knowledge more digestible and straightforward to a typical bystander with little appetite for the more strict and extreme beliefs on knowledge. In response to the idea that contextualism is a gateway of sorts to radical scepticism, I do not believe this is an issue to contextualism itself, rather one to the scepticist. While one may argue that epistemic contextualism makes the standards of knowledge too low and may lead to scepticism, one can also argue that contextualism lowers the boundaries of knowledge so that they are not too strict in order to appeal to a possible sceptic who cannot adhere to invariantism. I would also argue invariantism has as much possibility to lead to scepticism as contextualism, if we argue that the boundaries of knowledge are so high that one may find themselves becoming a sceptic and argue we do not know anything of the external world. Hence, I do not find this gateway hypothesis to be a flaw of contextualism, and, even without it, contextualism offers a more palatable interpretation of knowledge that may appease those who are sceptical of the boundaries proposed by invariantism.

A second counterargument to contextualism I want to respond to is the concern that contextualism makes establishing boundaries of knowledge too vague and imprecise, meaning it is difficult to establish guidelines on evaluating knowledgeable claims. This concern comes from the idea that if knowledge is truly adherent to stakes, salience, culture, background, and beliefs, then attempting to accommodate for all variations of seemingly true, seemingly justified beliefs would be extremely difficult, and we may find ourselves having too loose precisions of knowledge in an attempt to be all-encompassing. My response to this is that epistemic contextualism does not mean complete subjectivity in the standards of knowledge, and we can still evaluate knowledgeable claims based on certain factors such as empirical evidence, biases, discrepancies in interpretation, and the goals and intentions of this knowledge. We can acknowledge both that different parties may hold different justified beliefs depending on context of culture or the stakes of knowledge or salience at that specific moment while also being critical of their belief and evaluating it on certain metrics, such as whether that belief is replicable, what external factors may have contributed to that interpretation, and the contextual intention of that knowledge, such as whether it was prejudiced or cherry-picked, or used in scientific inquiry or research, or simply knowledge that was required for a specific moment at a specific time. One may argue that these interpretations mean weakens the justification metric, and that we cannot hold each apparent ‘justified’ belief to the same metric. I agree with this, as epistemic contextualism recognises the boundaries of what makes knowledge justified varies in context. For example, the boundaries of justification in colloquial conversation are not the same as those in court proceedings, meaning there are higher boundaries of justification in context-specific scenarios. Ultimately, what this means is that while epistemic contextualism does attempt to provide an all-encompassing response to knowledge, this does not mean that precision isn’t available where needed. Rather, the boundaries of precision and justification can also vary by context, and thus we can evaluate knowledge on a case-by-case basis depending on how, where, and when it is used.

In conclusion, I believe we should be epistemic contextualists because the belief promotes diversity and understanding between each other and why we have variations in beliefs while also being palatable to our day-to-day lives. Epistemic contextualism provides an outlook on knowledge that won’t require the boundaries to be too high all the time, while also allowing nuanced discussion of our beliefs and encouraging deeper internal reflection of our subjectivity. The belief allows precision where necessary, and acknowledges how the barriers of justification are not the same in every scenario. Thus, I believe epistemic contextualism is an appealing view as it depict knowledge as a multifaceted and complex structure, but does not alienate the boundaries of knowledge to be too high for our daily lives.