Factivity and contextualism[1]

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I recently argued (in my 2008) that there is a factivity problem for epistemic contextualism which suggests that contextualism is inconsistent (cf. also Brendel 2005 and Wright 2005). A similar problem arises for subject-sensitive invariantism (SSI) (cf. Hawthorne 2004; Stanley 2005) posing a similar threat of inconsistency (cf. Wright 2005: 243-44; Brueckner 2005: 317, Hawthorne 2004: 159-60). Recently, Anthony Brueckner and Christopher T. Buford have argued (2009) that in both cases the problem is only apparent. In this paper, I defend the view that they are wrong about this and that there is, indeed, a serious problem for contextualism. I will start with a presentation of the initial problem for contextualism and then discuss Brueckner's and Buford's reply. I will neither go into what I take to be the way out of the problem for contextualism (cf. my 2008: sec. IV-VI) nor will I discuss the parallel case of SSI (cf. Baumann, Ms.).

1. The Problem

Suppose Frank is in an ordinary and not very demanding context O and that Mary is in a much more demanding but not sceptical context D. According to contextualism it is possible that Frank's utterance of 'Mary knows that she has hands' is true while Mary's utterance of the same sentence is false; similarly, Mary's utterance of 'Mary doesn't know that she has hands' might be true while Frank's utterance of the same

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sentence is false. The context-sensitivity of 'know' explains how the same sentence can have different truth conditions in different contexts of utterance (cf. Cohen 1987; DeRose 1992; Lewis 1996; Sosa 1988).

Now, suppose that Mary is a contextualist, making judgements about the epistemic state of Frank and herself. According to her contextualist views it would then be true that

(1) 'Frank knows that Mary has hands' is true in O

and that

(2) 'Mary knows that she has hands' is not true in D.[2]

Assume further that Mary knows (1). We thus get:

(3) 'Mary knows that (1)' is true in D.

Principles of disquotation and of the factivity of knowledge combined tell us that the following scheme only has true instances:

(DF) 'A knows that *p*' (as uttered in some context) is true ⇨ *p*.

2 For the sake of simplicity and because nothing hinges on it, I follow Brueckner and Buford in ignoring the fact that it is utterances of sentences which are true, not sentences as such.

If we apply (DF) to (1) we get

(4) ‘Frank knows that Mary has hands’ is true in O ⇨ Mary has hands.

There is no reason why Mary, as a contextualist, should not be able to figure this out. In that case,

(5) ‘Mary knows that (4)’ is true in D.

Finally, we should assume closure:

(Clos) For all contexts C, speakers A and propositions *p*, *q*: [‘A knows that *p*’ (as uttered in C) is true and ‘A knows that (*p* ⇨ *q*)’ (as uttered in C) is true] ⇨ ‘A knows that *q*’ (as uttered in C) is true.

From (Clos), (3) and (5) we get:

(6) ‘Mary knows that she has hands’ is true in D.

It is obvious that (6) contradicts

(2) ‘Mary knows that she has hands’ is not true in D.

Contextualism seems committed to (2) as well as (1) and (3). One just has to add at least prima facie uncontroversial disquotation and factivity principles as well as a closure principle to derive a contradiction. Given that principles of disquotation, factivity and closure are hard to give up, all this suggests that we ought to give up contextualism. This is what several authors have called 'the factivity problem' for contextualism.[3]

2. The Apparent Dissolution of the Problem

By far the most promising way of attacking the view that there is such a factivity problem for contextualism is to deny that Mary can know that (1) is the case – that is, to deny that

(3) 'Mary knows that (1)' is true in D.[4]

Very roughly, the objection is that Mary does not know that Frank knows that Mary has hands. Here are Brueckner and Buford:

> … the theories in question … appear to allow that a speaker who lacks knowledge that ϕ can correctly attribute that knowledge to another speaker. The resolution of the factivity problems is as follows: the theories are not

3 Again, I won't go into the very much parallel problem for SSI here. What I am going to say about the contextualist case also holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for SSI's case.

4 - given that the contextualist will be reluctant to give up closure, factivity or disquotation principles and that (1) and (2) are non-negotiable for contextualists.

committed to the possibility of such asymmetrical knowledge attribution. (434).

A bit later, Brueckner and Buford explain why contextualists do not have to admit that Mary can know (1). Their wording of the factivity argument differs slightly from mine. Here is my 'adapted quote' of what Mary ought to say according to them (no substantial changes at all):

> However, to know that 'Frank knows that Mary has hands' is true in O, I must know whether 'Mary has hands' is the case – I must know whether I have hands. But I do <u>not</u> know that I have hands; I've told you that 'Mary knows that she has hands' is <u>not</u> true in our context D. (cf. 435)

And:

> I do not see how to justify step (3). … I continue to fail to know that I have hands and hence whether one of the conditions for the truth of 'Frank knows that Mary has hands' is true in O. (cf. 435)

3. Why the Problem Remains

In other words, Mary cannot know that Frank knows that she has hands because the truth of

> (3*) B knows that A knows that *p*

requires the truth of

(6*) B knows that *p*.

More precisely and adapted to the contextualist case: Brueckner's and Buford's point is that the truth of

(3) 'Mary knows that "Frank knows that Mary has hands" is true in O' is true in D.

requires the truth of

(6) 'Mary knows that she has hands' is true in D.

Call this the Requirement Thesis:

(Req) (3) ⇨ (6).

Since (6) (or (6*)) is false, (3) (of (3*) is false, too. Hence, the factivity problem collapses.

But why should we believe all that? It would be a very bad idea to argue from the truth of

(2) ‘Mary knows that she has hands’ is not true in D

to the falsity of

(6) ‘Mary knows that she has hands’ is true in D

and then use the negation of (6) and modus tollens (given the argument (1-6)) to show that (3) must be false. This would simply be a case of ignoring the problem of inconsistency from the start; to resolve a contraction like the one above *(p and not-p),* one certainly cannot reject *p* on the basis of *not-p*.

I don’t think that Brueckner and Buford argue like this and thus make this mistake. However, they also don’t really tell us what exactly their argument is. The quotes above essentially capture all of what they are saying in their paper against the view that there is a factivity problem for contextualism. But, again, the argument cannot simply be that (3) ⇨ (6). If we then look at the quotes above, again, and use some charity, then, I think, it becomes very plausible to assume that Brueckner and Buford are implicitly relying on another principle which is stronger than (Req), namely a Priority Principle:

(Prior) If B knows that A knows that *p*, then B has antecedent knowledge that *p* independently from and prior to the knowledge that A knows that *p*.

The contextualist version would be a bit more complicated:

(Prior^{C}) If ‘B knows that “A knows that *p*” is true in context C-A’ is true in C-B , then ‘B has knowledge that *p*’ is (antecedently) true in C-B independently from and prior to the truth in C-B of ‘B knows that “A knows that *p*” is true in context C-A’.

It is such priority principles which promise to sufficiently strengthen Brueckner’s and Buford’s case (and I cannot think of any other promising alternative). For the sake of simplicity and because nothing substantial depends on it, I will discuss Brueckner’s and Budord’s argument in terms of (Prior) rather than (Prior^{C}).

I think (Prior) is clearly false. Here is a counter-example. Many people have read in the papers that Wiles proved that Fermat’s conjecture is true. By reading the papers, they came to know that Wiles knows that Fermat’s conjecture is true. Many will have inferred from this that Fermat’s conjecture is true; they might, in a sense, even have come to know themselves that Fermat’s conjecture is true. What matters here is simply that newspaper reader Paul’s knowledge that Wiles knows that Fermat’s conjecture is true does not require at all that Paul had antecendent knowledge that Fermat’s conjecture is true. It that were the case, then neither Paul nor anyone except very few people could have come to know by reading the newspaper that Wiles has proven Fermat right. In other words, (Prior) is false.

The same things can be said about (Prior^{C}). Mary can learn something from Ann who (as Mary knows) shares context D with her, namely that

(1) ‘Frank knows that Mary has hands’ is true in O.

We could even assume that it is true to say of Ann in D that she knows that (1) is true. Ann might have much better evidence than Mary, - evidence which makes it true to say that 'Ann knows that Mary has hands' is true in D. Mary can thus gain testimonial knowledge about Frank's epistemic state concerning the proposition that she, Mary, has hands. In this case, it would be true that

(3) 'Mary knows that (1)' is true in D.

And nothing implies that (3) requires that Mary has antecendent knowledge that she has hands. More precisely, (3) does not require that 'Mary knows that she has hands' is (antecedently) true in D independently from and prior to the truth in D of 'Mary knows that "Frank knows that she has hands" is true in context O'. (Prior ^{C}) is false for the same kinds of reasons why (Prior) is false. Hence, no such priority thesis can support Brueckner's and Buford's view that there is no Factivity Problem for contextualism. Since no other promising objection is in sight – and certainly none has been proposed by Brueckner and Buford – we can lay their objections to rest and stick with our problem for contextualism.[5]

4. Some Further Problems with Brueckner's and Buford's View

In the last section of their paper, Brueckner and Buford briefly discuss a major cost of denying that there is a Factivity Problem for contextualism: The contextualist has to accept that a knowledge attributor A who finds herself in a demanding (though

5 Again, I think there is a way out for the contextualist (cf. my 2008). But this is not our topic here.

not sceptical) context D can often not know that some subject B who finds herself in a less demanding context knows some proposition *p*. I (2008: 583) argue that this is a significant drawback and blind-spot for any theory of knowledge. Brueckner and Buford quote me:

> This strikes me as a reluctance to take one's contextualism seriously and apply it to concrete cases. What is the attraction of contextualism if one cannot (at least as a contextualist) coherently say (or think) that knowledge attributions made in a lower context are in fact true? (Baumann 2008: 583)

I continue (not quoted by Brueckner and Buford):

> Only that that might be possible? The kind of contextualism that results would be a very much weakened one and not very attractive. (583)

Brueckner and Buford offer four replies to this charge:

> First, even if the statability limitations just discussed are thought to be problematic for our two theories, the resolution of the Factivity Problem provided here nevertheless saves the theories from outright refutation by the *reductios* we have considered. (437)

This, if true, would only show that inconsistency is worse than statability limitations. It does not show that statability limitations would not still be bad

enough. I think they would still be bad enough for contextualism to not deserve acceptance.

Since Brueckner and Buford do not offer any further argument here we can move on to their second and third point (cf. 437): One can still state contextualism in a general (2. reply) and conditional (3. reply) way and do so from a demanding context while having less demanding contexts in mind. The contextualist can say without any problems or lurking inconsistency that

> No utterance of s is true in our context D but it might be true in a less demanding context O

or that

> If 'p' is true, then 'A knows that *p*' is true in O.

But again, this move does not help much. It does not show that the specific statability limitations above are not bad enough for contextualism to not deserve acceptance.

Finally, the fourth point:

> S can correctly say in O, 'I know h now (at t), but S* in D cannot truly utter "K_t (S, h)".' (15; 'K_t (S, h)' means 'S knows that h (at t)'). (437)

Sure, there is no reverse problem of making knowledge attributions when the attributor finds herself in a less demanding context and the subject in a more demanding context. But nobody thought there was such a reverse problem. And, again, all this does not show that the above statability limitation for the original case is not bad enough. I think it is.

5. Conclusion

I don't think the contextualist can live with the above mentioned statability limitations. Much more importantly, Brueckner and Buford have not shown that there is no Factivity Problem for contextualism. We have to live with it: continue to take it seriously and try to solve it if we want to adhere to contextualism.

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