

Contextualism, Contrastivism, Relevant Alternatives, and Closure

Contextualists claim two important virtues for their view. First, contextualism is a non-skeptical epistemology, given the plausible idea that not all contexts invoke the high standards for knowledge needed to generate the skeptical conclusion that we know little or nothing. Second, contextualism is able to preserve closure concerning knowledge—the idea that knowledge is extendable on the basis of competent deduction from known premises. As long as one keeps the context fixed, it is plausible to think that some closure principle can be articulated that will survive scrutiny.

Opponents of contextualism often try to gain an advantage over it by claiming that their view mimics these virtues of contextualism as well as having other virtues.¹ A recent example of the same is termed “contrastivism,” as presented by Jonathan Schaffer.² I will argue that the representation made is chimerical, that in fact contrastivism has no hope of mirroring these twin virtues of contextualism.

First, we need a bit of background material on how contrastivism is constructed to yield an anti-skeptical motif as well as to preserve closure. According to contrastivism, all locutions of the form “S knows that p” are illiptical, relative as they are to some implicit contrast (i.e., some logical contrary of p). Thus, for example, no one knows *simpliciter* that they have hands. Instead, they have knowledge of such a claim relative to an implied contrast, formulable in terms of a question such as “Hands or stumps?”, “Hands or artificial limbs?”, and even “Hands or envatted brain stimulated to take their to be hands when there are none?” By specifying the requisite contrast, the contrastivist claims to be able to preserve the virtue of avoiding skepticism,

for if the contrast is “Hands or stumps?”, the skeptical considerations that bar knowledge relative to other contrasts (such as “Hands or envatted and deceived brain?”) are not relevant.

Schaffer also claims that contrastivism can endorse certain closure principles, and it is important to note that the account in the last paragraph explaining how contrastivism can avoid skepticism plays an important role in determining the precise form of closure principle that a contrastivist must endorse. The simplest closure principle is this:

if p is known and p entails q , then q is known.

This inadequacy of this proposal is well-known: it implies that if we know anything at all, we are logically omniscient. Efforts to improve on this simple principle involve either strengthening the antecedent or weakening the consequent. One can strengthen the antecedent, for example, by requiring not only that p entails q , but that this entailment is known. One can weaken the consequent by replacing the claim that q is known with the claim that the person in question is in a position to know that q .

Neither of these proposals is adequate to avoid counterexample, nor is the conjunction of both sufficient to avoid counterexample. Nonetheless, it is still plausible to think that some closure principle is true. The approach I find most promising here is to strengthen the antecedent in the way suggested by Williamson and Hawthorne to include the idea that q comes to be believed on the basis of a competent deduction from p .³ Still more qualification will be needed—e.g., it will be important that additional defeating information regarding p and regarding q is not acquired in the process of deduction—but the prospects are good for a successful principle along these lines.

A successful refinement of a principle along these lines cannot be transplanted directly

into a contrastivist theory, since that view requires that well-formed knowledge attributions always contain a contrast proposition. The needed alterations are fairly obvious, however. The simplest such principles that encode the needed contrast claim are formulated by Schaffer as follows:

Closure Principle 1. If S knows p rather than q, and p entails r, then S knows r rather than q;

Closure Principle 2. If S knows p rather than q, and r entails q, then S knows p rather than r.⁴

Schaffer realizes that these principles are in need of refinement, but they nonetheless contain the key ideas for contrastive closure principles. In short, the proposal is that contrastive knowledge is closed under entailment either by weakening the proposition known or by strengthening the contrast claim.

One point is worth stressing about these closure principles and it is the importance of the second principle in sustaining the anti-skeptical motif. In order to mimic the success of contextualism in finding a golden mean between Moorean optimism and skeptical pessimism about knowledge, Schaffer insists that the contrast claim not be weakened. Suppose it is known that Jack is a brother rather than a sister of Jill. Being a sister entails not being an apparition produced by an evil genius, but contrastivism will not be able to mimic the anti-skeptical stance of contextualism if this entailment is allowed to play a role in some closure principle. First, one cannot supplant the contrast claim involving sisterhood with lack of apparitionhood, because being a brother does not contrast with lack of apparitionhood. If supplanting is to occur, it will have to be with the negation of the entailment, so that knowing that Jack is a brother rather than a

sister implies knowing that Jack is a brother rather than an apparition. Schaffer explicitly rejects expanding or replacing the contrast claim,⁵ and the reason is clear: one can only mirror the virtue of contextualism with respect to skepticism by keeping the contrast claim the same or strengthening it. So, knowing that Jack is a brother rather than a sister of Jill can imply knowing that Jack is a brother rather than an older sister of Jill, but it cannot imply knowing something about Jack in contrast either to experiencing some apparition or not experiencing such an apparition.

My contention is that retaining this virtue of contextualism undermines any possible contrastivist closure principle, and thus that contrastivism must choose between mimicking the anti-skeptical virtue of contextualism and the preservation of closure. The argument I will give depends only on these assumptions:

1. A contrast proposition is a logical contrary.
2. No closure principle can allow a weakening of the contrast claim.
3. Any closure principle will allow weakening of the knowledge claim.

These assumptions yield the following simple contrastive closure principle:

Contrastivist Closure: If S knows p rather than q, p entails r and t entails q, then S knows r rather than t.

It is this principle that I will argue is incompatible with any preservation of the anti-skeptical feature enjoyed by contextualism. My argument depends on the simple fact that not all contraries to a claim are contraries to claims implied by the original claim. We can use a simple example to illustrate this fact. Suppose you know:

Jack's pet is a dog rather than a cat.

Being a dog implies being an animal, so if closure can be honored by contrastivism, there should be some contrastive knowledge claim expressing what you would know if you competently deduced that Bill is an unmarried male from the claim that Bill is a bachelor. Notice that the contrastive knowledge claim cannot be:

Jack's pet is an animal rather than a cat.

The problem is that being an animal does not contrast with being a cat. Thus, the Contrastivist Closure principle is false, as well as alternatives to it that replace the notion of entailment with the notion of competent deduction.

Notice, further, that no tinkering with this principle can save it. The only tinkering that might work is to insist that the contrast claim be changed, but no strengthening of the contrast claim can help. For every concept stronger than being a cat will also entail being an animal (a Persian cat, for example, is still an animal), and hence will not provide an appropriate contrast to being an animal. The only hope, then, would be to allow weakening the contrast claim or replacing it with something logically unrelated. Such a maneuver undermines the claim that contrastivism can mimic the anti-skeptical virtues of contextualism, since it is the insistence that the contrast claim can only be strengthened that sustains the claim that contrastivism has this virtue as well.

A similar problem affects relevant alternatives theories, when the theory is restricted as Gail Stine suggests so as to preserve closure.⁶ To preserve closure and avoid skepticism, the relevant alternatives theorist (affectionately termed 'the RAT') needs to maintain that one needs evidence to rule out relevant alternatives, but that one can know that an irrelevant alternative is false without evidence, solely on the basis of the fact that it is irrelevant. The closure principle

adopted by Stine, for example, claims that closure is preserved when we hold fixed the set of relevant alternatives.⁷

The cat/dog example shows, however, that one cannot hold fixed the set of relevant alternatives, precisely because, just as not all contrasts to a claim contrast also with what is implied by that claim, so also not all alternatives to p are alternatives to claims implied by p . There are obvious cases of this point to note from the fact that all claims entail necessary truths, and knowing a contingent truth doesn't entail that one knows every necessary truth. The theory, recall, says that a person knows a claim to be true if and only if that person has evidence sufficient for ruling out relevant alternatives to that claim. To freeze the alternatives when applying a closure principle will result in needing evidence sufficient for ruling out more than relevant alternatives, thereby undermining the claim that knowledge consists in evidence sufficient for ruling out relevant alternatives.

Such an example can be used against the contrastive theory as well. Knowing that one contingent truth is true rather than another doesn't imply that you know that $2+2=4$ rather than the latter contingent truth.⁸

Fair enough, say both the RAT and the contrastivist, but minor emendations can be made to save our theories. Take the contrastivist case first. The contrastivist may claim that the closure principle should be restricted so that the contrast is preserved. Such a restriction would imply that strengthening the contrast claim is allowed only when the derived claim still contrasts with the known claim, and weakening the known claim is only allowed when the derived claim still contrasts with the contrast claim.⁹

The problem with such a move is that the resulting closure principle simply does not do

the work that a closure principle ought to do. When we know that Jack's pet is a dog, we can come to know that Jack's pet is an animal by competent deduction. If contrastivists claim that our knowledge in both cases is illiptical, they shoulder the burden of explaining this closure fact about knowledge. So they must account for the contrast claim in such a way that, even if illiptical, we can come to know that the pet is an animal by competent deduction from knowing that it's a dog. The suggested revision of the principle simply does not do that, since it is obvious that the relevant contrast could be between having a dog and a cat as a pet. The suggested revision thus emaciates the principle so that contrastivists no longer have a closure principle that can explain the way in which competent deduction enlarges our body of knowledge.

A similar problem affects any attempt by RATs to avoid the problem in question by no longer requiring that the class of relevant alternatives remain fixed. The RAT can insist that the class of relevant alternatives either stays the same or is restricted to a proper subclass of the original class, dropping from the class any proposition that is not an alternative to the inferred proposition.

The dog/cat case reveals the possibility, however, that such a restriction may yield the empty set. For another example, nearly every proposition entails that something exists, and the claim that something exists is compatible with nearly any alternative of any such proposition. Of course, it is not compatible with the claim that nothing exists and claims that entail that nothing exists, but it will not very often be true that the claim that nothing exists and claims that entail it are *relevant* alternatives to ordinary claims such as "I have hands," or "That's a zebra." So if we begin with a set of relevant alternatives to such claims, we can often find an entailed claim (such

as *something exists*) that is compatible with every relevant alternative of the original claim.

Hence, it will be relatively simple to show that, for the entailed proposition, the class of relevant alternatives is empty.

If the class of relevant alternatives is sometimes empty in this way, it becomes clear that the closure principle will be at odds with the theory in question. For the theory requires ruling out relevant alternatives in order to know, but the closure principle will allow one to know a proposition without requiring evidence sufficient for ruling out anything. That is, if p entails some q that shares no relevant contrary with p , then the closure principle will constrict the class of relevant alternatives to the empty set. So the implication of the closure principle that such a q is known is at odds with the theory that knowledge requires ruling out relevant alternatives to q .

A RAT might simply insist here that sometimes the set of relevant alternatives is simply the null set, and hence that the result just shown presents no problem for the theory. We can grant this much to the RAT: there is a legitimate way for the set of relevant alternatives to be unproblematically empty. First, define an alternative as a logical contrary. Then define the notion of relevance—for simplicity, just assume for the moment that the definition is in terms of a certain threshold of probability.¹⁰ Now apply these defined concepts to the proposition in question, and you might find a proposition with no relevant alternatives.

In the present case, however, no such procedure yields the null set for the set of relevant alternatives. Instead, the application of the closure principle forces it to become null. The notion of relevance is not applied to the alternatives to the inferred proposition, for the only alternatives that can be considered are the alternatives to the proposition that is the basis of the inference. In such a case, the RAT would be defending a theory that requires evidence sufficient for ruling out

all relevant alternatives in order to have knowledge, while at the same time embracing a closure principle that grants knowledge in cases of competent deduction without insisting that one's evidence be sufficient to rule out all relevant alternatives.

The only way out of the contradiction is to gerrymander the account of relevance: say, for example, that r is a relevant alternative to p if and only if it is an alternative to p and has the definitional feature X (such as some threshold of probability as assumed above) except when it is not also a logical contrary of a proposition q from which p was legitimately deduced, in which case the set of relevant alternatives to p is that subset of those of q that are also alternatives to p . (Similar gerrymandering could have been used to keep Stine's original theory, never allowing the set of relevant alternatives to become empty in the process of competent deduction: just say (in suitable recursive language) that r is a relevant alternative to p if and only if it is an alternative to p and has feature X except when it is legitimately deduced from q , in which case, the relevant alternatives are the same as those for q .)

That's cheating. If closure is to be preserved by a theory, we should be able to characterize the theory independently of the closure principle and then demonstrate that some closure principle is preserved by the theory.

There is another way to put this point. The RAT who wishes to preserve closure develops a theory that gains plausibility by recourse to the language originally used by Dretske and Goldman¹¹ of alternatives and the subset of these that are relevant on a particular occasion to buy credibility for the theory. In response to the above problem, however, the RAT replaces the intuitive notion of a relevant alternative with a stipulated replacement, hoping that the credibility lent to the theory by the intuitive notion will remain. The honest approach would be simply to

deny that knowledge requires ruling out relevant alternatives. What is objectionable is relying on the intuitive plausibility of the Dretske/Goldman language to gain credibility for the theory when giving stipulative understandings of the key notions.

So I doubt that a RAT can take any comfort in allowing the class of relevant alternatives to be empty in order to save closure. Regardless of what a RAT might say, however, contrastivism is in a worse position, since it simply has no option at all. Contrastivists will have to choose between the closure motif and the antiskeptical motif that guide development of versions of contextualism. Because such a choice is forced, contrastivists cannot ride the coattails of contextualism in defending their view. They will have to take either of two unsavory paths: deny closure or shoulder the burden of determining what kinds of weakening of the contrast class are allowable for a given proposition. Taking the latter path undermines the claim to anti-skeptical virtues for contrastivism, and doing the work to reinstate this virtue while still preserving closure is to take on a daunting task, one offering no guarantees that it can be accomplished. In this way, contrastivism is in a much weaker position than contextualism.¹²

Endnotes

1. For example, see the pragmatic theories offered by John Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Jason Stanley, "Context, Interest-Relativity, and Knowledge," forthcoming; and Matthew McGrath and Jeremy Fantl, "Evidence, Pragmatics, and Justification," *The Philosophical Review*, 111, 1: 67-74, January 2002.
2. Jonathan Schaffer, "From Contextualism to Contrastivism," *Philosophical Studies* 2003, pp. 73-103.
3. See Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits*, Oxford, 2000; John Hawthorne, "Is Knowledge Closed Under Deduction?" *Blackwell Debate Series*, 2004.
4. Jonathan Schaffer, "From Contextualism to Contrastivism," *Philosophical Studies* 2003, p. 92.
5. Ibid. p. 92.
6. See Gail Stine, "Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives, and Deductive Closure," *Philosophical Studies* 29 (1976), pp. 249-261.
7. Gail Stine, "Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives, and Deductive Closure," *Philosophical Studies* 29 (1976), pp. 249-261.
8. I owe this point to an anonymous referee for this journal.
9. I owe this suggestion as well to an anonymous referee for this journal.
10. Stewart Cohen suggests such an understanding of relevance in "How to be a Fallibilist," *Philosophical Perspectives* 2, ed. J. Tomberlin, pp. 91-123.
11. See Fred Dretske, "Epistemic Operators," *Journal of Philosophy* 67 (1970), pp. 1007-1023; and Alvin Goldman, "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge," reprinted in *Essays on Knowledge and Justification*, edited by Pappas and Swain, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 120-145.

12. Thanks to Robert Johnson, Peter Markie, Matt McGrath, and Peter Vallentyne for helpful discussion on this topic.