
Methods & Debates: Contextualism

Survey

Second semester 2009–2010

Topic

The debate around contextualism that has been conducted in recent years gives an interesting new perspective on the relationships between linguistics, in particular semantics, and philosophy, in particular epistemology and philosophy of language. The central question in the debate is to what extent our epistemological vocabulary is context-dependent, and what implications that may have for core concepts of epistemology, such as knowledge and truth.

On the basis of empirical observations concerning the context-dependency of meaning in general some authors have argued that such concepts as knowledge, truth, evidence, and the like, are context-dependent as well. The methodological implication of that would be an empirically grounded form of traditional ‘ordinary language philosophy’ as it was practised in the fifties and sixties of the previous century by the later Wittgenstein, Austin, and others. Within epistemology, it is argued, a contextualist approach would lead to adequate answers to the challenge of scepticism without any strong relativistic consequences.

Both the empirical grounding as well as the question whether, and if so how, empirical arguments can be used in philosophical arguments, this new form of contextualism has led to interesting debates. In this course we study the current state of affairs by reading, analysing and discussing:

- three core papers outlining epistemological contextualism (DeRose, Lewis, Cohen)
- three recent papers that position epistemological contextualism in a broader field and evaluate it critically (Richard, Williamson, Schaffer)
- and three papers that address the supposed empirical grounding of contextualism (Stanley, Cappelen & Lepore, Travis)

In addition we start by reading a more general introduction to varieties of contextualism (Recanati).

Organisation

In the first meeting some background information concerning the way in which context-dependence and indexicality are treated in current semantic theories is

provided, and an introduction is given to the debate about contextualism in epistemology and philosophy of language. The paper by Recanati (Recanati, 2005) is required reading.

In the next three weeks the participants will give presentations on core papers in the debate that outline, defend and criticise epistemological contextualism and that discuss its supposed empirical groundings. From those presentations open questions are derived that will be discussed during the fifth and final meeting.

Time allotted for each presentation is 30 minutes, with an additional 15 minutes for questions and discussion. The participants are requested to prepare a Power-Point presentation and/or hand-out that contains the main issues to be presented, and the main questions to be discussed. As part of the preparation of the presentations each participant meets with the instructors for 20 minutes on the Thursday before their presentation (between 10.00 and 11.30 hrs) in order to discuss the presentation and get feedback.

All the reading material is available on-line on the Research Masters Blackboard site (in the 'Documents' section).

Schedule

- Meeting 1 (01/02): introduction
required reading: Recanati (2005)
- Meeting 2 (08/02): epistemological contextualism
Presentations: DeRose (1992) Lewis (1996), Cohen (1999)
- Meeting 3 (15/02): critical reviews of contextualism
Presentations: Richard (2004), Williamson (2005), Schaffer (2004)
- Meeting 4 (22/02): semantic backgrounds
Presentations: Stanley (2004), Cappelen & Lepore (2005), Travis (2006)
- Meeting 5 (01/03): discussion of open questions

References

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- Lewis, David K. 1996. Elusive knowledge. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 74(4), 549–67.

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- Travis, Charles. 2006. Insensitive semantics. *Mind and Language*, 21(1), 39–49.
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