## CONTEXTUALISM: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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According to contextualism, the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions depend on features of the attributor’s context. Contextualists take their view to be supported by cases in which the intuitive correctness of knowledge attributions depends on the attributor’s context. Williamson offers a complex invariantist account of such cases which appeals to two elements, psychological bias and a failure of luminosity. He provides independent reasons for thinking that contextualist cases are characterized by psychological bias and a failure of luminosity, and argues that some of our intuitions about the cases are explained by the former factor and some by the latter. I argue that psychological bias is the more fundamental of these elements. I show how, by itself, psychological bias can explain all the intuitions concerning contextualist cases. Further, it gives the best account of why contextualist cases are characterized by a failure of luminosity.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to contextualism, the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions depend on features of the attributor’s context. Contextualists take their view to be supported by cases in which the intuitive correctness of knowledge attributions depends on the attributor’s context. Since invariantists reject contextualism, they need to provide an alternative explanation of contextualist cases. Here, I examine Williamson’s recent invariantist account of such cases.¹

Consider a first-person version of the standard airport case. Two individuals, Lo and Hi, both truly believe that the New York flight stops in Chicago on the basis of their itinerary; neither has positive reason to doubt the itinerary. In Lo’s context it is not important whether the flight stops in Chicago, and no one has raised error possibilities. In Hi’s context it is very important that the flight stops in Chicago, and the possibility that the itinerary is wrong has been raised. Plausibly, Lo, but not Hi, will self-attribute knowledge that the flight stops in Chicago; further, Lo’s self-attribute and Hi’s failure to self-attribute seem appropriate (call this ‘the attribution intuition’). In addition, it seems that Hi will deny that she knows that the flight stops in Chicago and her denial of knowledge seems appropriate (‘the denial intuition’). Further, it seems appropriate for Lo, but not Hi, to use the proposition that the flight stops in Chicago in practical reasoning (‘the practical reasoning intuition’).

A contextualist would explain these intuitions by arguing that Lo’s self-attribution of knowledge is true, whereas if Hi were to self-attribute knowledge, her attribution would be false. By contrast, Williamson endorses a classic invariantist view on which neither the importance of the issue nor the salience of error in either the subject’s or attributor’s context affects the truth-value of knowledge attributions. On his non-sceptical classic invariantist view, it is true for both Lo and Hi to say ‘I know that the New York flight stops in Chicago’. As a result he needs to explain the various intuitions about the case. It may seem especially hard for Williamson to explain the practical reasoning intuition, given that he endorses (CKK, p. 231) the following principle which links knowledge attributions and practical reasoning:

KPR1. One knows $p$ iff $p$ is an appropriate premise for one’s practical reasoning.2

Given that both Lo and Hi can truly self-ascribe knowledge that the New York flight stops in Chicago, by KPR1 it is appropriate for both to use that proposition in practical reasoning. Why, then, does it seem appropriate for Lo, but not Hi, to use the proposition that the flight stops in Chicago in practical reasoning (pp. 230–3)?

Williamson appeals to luminosity considerations to explain away the attribution intuition and the practical reasoning intuition. He argues that in the airport case, although both Lo and Hi know that the New York flight stops in Chicago, they do not know that they do, i.e., the case is a counter-example to luminosity, where a condition $c$ is luminous iff ‘for every case $\alpha$, if in $\alpha$ $c$ obtains, then in $\alpha$ one is in a position to know that $c$ obtains’.3 According to the knowledge rule for assertion, or KR for short, one is warranted in asserting $p$ only if one knows that $p$ (KL, ch. 11; CKK, p. 233). Given that Hi does not know that she knows that the New York flight stops in Chicago, she is not warranted in asserting ‘I know that the New York flight stops in Chicago’. So it seems appropriate for Hi to fail to self-attribute knowledge. Williamson combines his claim that Hi lacks second-order knowledge with a principle concerning practical reasoning additional to KPR1 to explain the practical reasoning intuition. Since both Lo and Hi know that the New York flight stops in Chicago, in the sense of KPR1, it is appropriate for them to use that proposition in practical reasoning. However, Williamson argues that there is an additional principle concerning practical reasoning which applies asymmetrically to Lo and Hi. According to this principle, call it KPR2, if the stakes are high, a subject who knows that $p$ is blameworthy for using $p$ in practical reasoning if she does not know that it’s appropriate for her to so use it, i.e., if she doesn’t know that she knows that $p$. However, if the stakes are low, a subject who knows that $p$ but does not know that she does is not blameworthy for using $p$ in practical reasoning. By KPR2, it is appropriate for Lo, but not Hi, to use the proposition that the New York flight stops in Chicago in practical reasoning (pp. 230–3).

2 Williamson labels this principle KPR*: it is a simpler version of a contextualized principle linking knowledge and practical reasoning which contextualists may endorse which he labels KPR, ‘A first-person present-tense ascription of “know” with respect to a proposition is true in a context iff that proposition is an appropriate premise for practical reasoning in that context’ (CKK, p. 227).


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The fact that Hi does not know that she knows that the New York flight stops in Chicago does not warrant Hi’s denial of knowledge ‘I do not know that the New York flight stops in Chicago’: it would only warrant refraining from claiming such knowledge. Williamson instead explains the denial intuition by appeal to the idea that our judgements about knowledge are subject to a certain systematic error, or ‘psychological bias’, namely, that the salience of error leads us to overestimate the objective likelihood of error, and so falsely judge that subjects lack knowledge (pp. 234–5).4

In particular, when considering Hi’s position, the salience of error leads us and Hi to overestimate the probability of error, and falsely judge that Hi does not know that the New York flight stops in Chicago. As a result, Hi’s denial ‘I do not know that the New York flight stops in Chicago’ seems appropriate to Hi and to us.

How should we understand the two parts of Williamson’s view? One possibility is that there are separate reasons to think that the airport case exemplifies psychological bias and a failure of luminosity. An alternative possibility is that psychological bias and the failure of luminosity are not independent, but that, rather, one element explains the other. If, as a result of psychological bias, a subject falsely believes that she does not know that \( p \), then on pain of having obviously contradictory beliefs, she would not believe that she does know that \( p \), and so, assuming knowledge entails belief, would not know that she knows that \( p \). So psychological bias could affect whether one’s knowledge is luminous. I will explore this possible understanding of Williamson’s view by examining two objections to the idea that luminosity is central to the explanation of the attribution and practical reasoning intuitions.

II. LUMINOSITY AND BELIEF

A first reason for doubting the centrality of luminosity is the thought that the real explanation of the attribution and practical reasoning intuitions is not whether Hi knows that she knows the target proposition, but rather whether we and Hi believe that she knows that she knows the target. For instance, Williamson holds that if the stakes are high, a subject is blameworthy for using \( p \) in practical reasoning if she knows that \( p \) but doesn’t know that she knows that \( p \). Even given this principle, the fact that Hi does not know that she knows the target would not explain our judgement that it is inappropriate for Hi to use the target in practical reasoning, unless it causes us to believe that Hi does not know that she knows the target. A similar point holds for the attribution intuition. Even given KR, the fact that Hi does not know that she knows the target would not explain our judgement that it is inappropriate for Hi to self-attributte knowledge of the target, unless it causes us to believe that Hi does not know that she knows the target. In general, it is not Lo’s and Hi’s epistemic positions per se which explain the attribution and practical reasoning intuitions, but our beliefs about their epistemic positions.

4 See also J. Hawthorne, Knowledge and Lotteries (Oxford UP, 2004), p. 164.
Further, in the case of the attribution intuition, the beliefs which do the explanatory work cannot fully reflect the epistemic facts. On Williamson’s view, both Lo and Hi know the target proposition but neither knows that she does. If we truly believe that Hi lacks second-order knowledge of the target, then appeal to KR may explain why Hi’s failure to self-attribute knowledge seems appropriate. But if we and Lo truly believe that she does not know that she knows the target, then by our and her lights, in the sense of KR her self- attribution of knowledge is inappropriate. A defender of KR can accept that it’s not always a great crime to break that rule, e.g., in casual conversation (KL, p. 258). Nevertheless, if by our and Lo’s lights, Lo’s self- attribution of knowledge breaks KR, then by our and Lo’s lights, it is incorrect, even if that’s no great crime. So to explain why it seems correct to us and Lo for Lo to self-attribute knowledge, Williamson must suppose that neither we nor Lo realize that Lo lacks second-order knowledge of the target. Further, Williamson must suppose that we and Lo falsely believe that Lo knows that she knows the target. For, if we and Lo have no opinion on the matter, then we and Lo must accept that for all we and Lo know, Lo may be breaking KR in self-attributing knowledge. But then it’s hard to explain why it seems unambiguously appropriate to us and to Lo for Lo to self-attribute knowledge. So in order to explain the attribution intuition, Williamson needs to suppose that we and Lo make a mistake about Lo’s epistemic position, a mistake which requires explanation, say by appeal to some kind of psychological bias.

It seems, then, that judgments about Lo’s and Hi’s epistemic positions are not only involved in explaining the denial intuition but also the attribution and practical reasoning intuitions. What explains the latter intuitions is not the subjects’ lack of second-order knowledge per se but rather our and their beliefs about whether they possess second-order knowledge. In the case of the attribution intuition, the belief concerning Lo’s epistemic position is false, so psychological bias may be involved in explaining the attribution intuition.

III. LUMINOSITY AND CONTEXTUALIST CASES

In this section, I set aside the worry of the last section, and instead consider a second worry about luminosity, namely, that in some contextualist cases, the subject may know the target and know that she does. I leave for later consideration the position for which I will finally argue, that psychological bias provides reason to think that in contextualist cases, Hi lacks second-order knowledge of the target.

Williamson suggests that in contextualist examples, the subject knows without knowing that she does, since these examples are ‘ones in which the subject counts as knowing by ordinary standards, but not by very much. For the anti-sceptical insensitive invariantist, these are cases close to the boundary between knowledge and ignorance, just on the knowledge side.’ But, Williamson says, ‘the anti-luminosity argument predicts that one will know without being in a position to know that one knows in exactly such cases’ (CKK, p. 232). Even if what Williamson says is true of actual contextualist cases, it is not obviously true of all possible contextualist cases.
There seems no reason why a contextualist couldn’t use a case of knowledge that is clearly well above ordinary standards for counting as knowledge. As long as the stakes are high enough in the high standards context, then it will still seem plausible that the subject lacks knowledge in the high context. But if the contextualist uses such a case, Williamson’s anti-luminosity argument provides no reason for thinking that the subject knows without knowing that she knows.

For instance, suppose that Lo truly believes that the seaweed in front of her is correctly classified as of type F, on the basis of the testimony of an accompanying expert. She has no reason to doubt the expert’s competence and the expert is in fact reliable. Such a case is well above the ordinary standards for knowledge. So on a non-sceptical invariantist view, Lo knows that the seaweed is of type F and knows that she knows this. Since in Lo’s context, the stakes are low and no doubts have been raised, it seems correct for her to say ‘I know that the seaweed is of type F’ and to use the relevant proposition in practical reasoning. Hi is in the same epistemic position as Lo; she truly believes that the seaweed in front of her is correctly classified as of type F on the basis of the testimony of an accompanying expert, where she has no reason to doubt the expert’s competence and the expert is in fact reliable. However, given the prevailing marine conditions, seaweed F could rapidly come to dominate the local seaweed population, leading to loss of the marine diversity for which the area is internationally renowned. The only way to prevent this loss would be a hugely expensive clean-up programme which would require closure of nearby tourist resorts. Further, in Hi’s context, various error possibilities have been raised, such as the possibility that the expert is mistaken (‘Experts do sometimes make mistakes’). In such a high stakes context, it seems inappropriate for Hi to say ‘I know that the seaweed is of type F’ or to rely on the proposition that the seaweed is of type F in practical reasoning, say, in deciding whether to close the local resort. Instead, it seems that Hi should make further checks by asking one or more other experts for their opinion. Further, if the issue is raised, say, by a local reporter, it seems appropriate for Hi to say ‘We don’t yet know if the seaweed is category F, although one expert has indicated that she thinks that it is; further expert testimony is being sought’.

It seems, then, that Williamson needs to extend his analysis to deal with contextualist cases in which the subject comfortably exceeds the ordinary standards for knowing the target proposition. Williamson suggests that he can do so by treating such cases as ones in which the subject knows the target and knows that she does, but lacks some higher level of knowledge (CKK, p. 234). For instance, suppose that the subject knows that \( p \), knows that she knows that \( p \), but does not know that she knows that she knows that \( p \). Williamson may say that given how high the stakes are in the high context, the subject may be blameworthy for relying on \( p \) in practical reasoning if she doesn’t know that she knows that it’s appropriate to rely on \( p \) in practical reasoning, in other words if she doesn’t know that she knows that she knows that \( p \). Similarly, when the stakes are high, one may be blameworthy for

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5 ‘... if the stakes are high enough, prudent human agents will engage in third-order reasoning about whether to trust their second-order reasoning about whether to trust their first-order reasoning’ (CKK, p. 233).
asserting \( p \) if one does not know that one has warrant to assert \( p \). If that is right, then Hi is blameworthy for asserting ‘I know that \( p \)’ if she does not know that she knows that she knows \( p \). Although Williamson may appeal to higher levels of knowledge to explain the attribution and practical reasoning intuitions, it is less clear how he can explain the denial intuition. Williamson originally explained the denial intuition by arguing that when we and Hi herself consider Hi’s position, psychological bias leads us and Hi to judge that Hi does not know the target proposition. This explanation is implausible when applied to a contextualist case in which both Lo and Hi know the target proposition and know that they do. For, given that knowledge entails belief, the assumption that Hi knows that she knows the target entails that she believes that she knows it. But Hi would have straightforwardly inconsistent beliefs if she believes that she knows the target and believes that she does not know the target.

IV. PSYCHOLOGICAL BIAS ALONE

In the light of the problems raised in the last two sections, we may try to explain away all the intuitions using psychological bias alone. Since we’re considering non-sceptical classic invariantism, we’ll assume that both Lo and Hi know the target proposition \( p \). But for now, we’ll leave it open whether they know that they know that \( p \). Suppose that psychological bias operates so that when we, or Hi, consider Hi’s position, the high stakes and salience of error lead us and Hi to judge that Hi does not know the target, but when we and Lo consider Lo’s position, the low stakes and lack of salient error lead us and Lo to judge that Lo knows the target. If we and Lo judge that Lo knows the target, then this explains why it would seem inappropriate for Lo to deny that she knows the target. Further, we can explain why it seems appropriate for Lo to use the target in practical reasoning by combining the judgement that Lo knows the target with KPR\(_1\): one knows \( p \) iff \( p \) is an appropriate premise for one’s practical reasoning. As we saw earlier, given KR, it seems appropriate to us and Lo for Lo to self-ascribe knowledge only if she and we believe that she knows the target. So explaining the intuitions concerning Lo requires two assumptions: (1) that we and Lo believe that she knows the target; and (2) that we and Lo believe that she knows that she knows the target.

Now consider Hi. If psychological bias operates so that we and Hi judge that Hi does not know the target, then this explains why Hi’s denial of knowledge seems appropriate to us and Hi. We can explain why it seems inappropriate for Hi to use the target as a premise in practical reasoning by combining our, and Hi’s, judgement that Hi does not know the target with KPR\(_1\): one knows \( p \) iff \( p \) is an appropriate premise for one’s practical reasoning. By KR, an assertion by Hi that she knows the target would be warranted only if Hi knows that she knows the target. Since psychological bias leads us and Hi to judge that she does not know the target, we and she judge that she does not know that she knows the target, and thus that she does not meet the condition for being warranted in asserting that she knows the target. The explanation of the intuitions concerning Hi requires just one
assumption: (1) that we and Hi believe that she does not know the target, and in virtue of this belief, we and Hi further believe that she does not know that she knows the target.

It is important that psychological bias can deal both with cases in which, by ordinary standards, the subject counts as only just knowing the target and with cases in which the subject counts as comfortably knowing the target. First, consider a case in which the subject only just counts as knowing the target and so does not know that she knows the target. Such a case is perfectly compatible with the explanation offered by psychological bias of the intuitions concerning Lo. The suggested explanation requires the assumptions that (i) we and Lo believe that she knows the target; and (2) we and Lo believe that she knows that she knows the target. These assumptions are compatible with the hypothesis that Lo knows the target but does not know that she does (although the belief that Lo knows that she knows the target turns out to be false). Further, a case in which Hi knows the target but does not know that she does is compatible with the assumption used to explain the intuitions concerning Hi, namely, (1) that we and Hi believe that she does not know the target and so we and Hi believe that she does not know that she knows the target. (Here the first belief, that Hi does not know the target, is false.)

Now consider a contextualist case which does not involve a borderline case of knowledge by ordinary standards. According to non-sceptical classic invariantism, in such a case, Lo knows the target proposition and knows that she does. This second kind of contextualist case is consistent with the assumptions used to explain the intuitions about Lo, namely, that (i) we and Lo believe that she knows the target; and (2) we and Lo believe that she knows that she knows the target. (In this second kind of case, both of the beliefs about Lo are true.) However, now consider Hi in a case in which she and Lo count as clearly exceeding the ordinary standards for knowing the target. In such a case Lo knows the target and knows that she does. According to the suggested explanation of the data concerning Hi, psychological bias operates so that we and Hi believe that she does not know the target. Given that knowledge entails belief, if Hi were to know that she knows the target, she would believe that she knows the target. But Hi would have obviously inconsistent beliefs if she believes that she does know the target and believes that she does not. To avoid this, it seems that a defender of the psychological bias account should hold that even in a case in which Hi counts as clearly exceeding ordinary standards for knowing the target, Hi does not know that she knows the target. So it turns out that in such a non-borderline case of knowledge, there is a difference in the epistemic positions of Lo and Hi: Hi does not know that she knows the target, but Lo does know that she knows the target. (Of course, to admit this difference in the epistemic positions of Lo and Hi is not to accept contextualism. The defender of psychological bias is forced to deny that Hi knows that she knows the target because, via psychological bias, Hi believes that she does not know it, and so cannot consistently believe that she knows it. But that one can fail to have knowledge by failing to believe is something that an invariantist can accept.)

We have seen that even if Hi is in a non-borderline case, psychological bias has the effect that Hi does not know that she knows the target. This provides us with a
new way to interpret Williamson’s original account of the contextualist intuitions. Williamson originally offered grounds independent of psychological bias for supposing that contextualist cases are counter-examples to luminosity: in particular, he argued that standard contextualist cases involve subjects who only just count as knowing the target by ordinary standards. However, we have now seen that Williamson need not provide such independent grounds for supposing that contextualist cases are counter-examples to luminosity. For whenever psychological bias operates so that we and Hi judge that Hi does not know the target, then on pain of having obviously contradictory beliefs, Hi does not believe that she does know the target, and so does not know that she knows the target, nor has knowledge at any higher order that she knows the target. Further, if Hi believes that she does not know the target, then on pain of having obviously contradictory beliefs, she does not believe that she knows the target, nor believe that she has knowledge at any higher order that she knows the target.

Although psychological bias has the consequence that Hi lacks second-order knowledge of the target, so far this failure of luminosity is not doing any explanatory work and seems to be merely a consequence of the factor which is doing the explanatory work, namely, psychological bias. However, it turns out that even on the psychological bias account, the failure of luminosity carries out independent explanatory work. We have seen that psychological bias in conjunction with KPR₁ can explain why it seems correct for Lo to use the target in practical reasoning, and why it seems incorrect for Hi to do so. However, without further addition, this account leaves the latter intuition as misguided. On the invariantist view being considered, Hi does know the target and our belief that she does not is incorrect. By KPR₁, one knows $p$ iff $p$ is an appropriate premise for one’s practical reasoning. So if KPR₁ were the only norm governing practical reasoning, it would be the case that Hi should use the target in practical reasoning despite our intuition that she should not.

Williamson avoids this unfortunate result by arguing that Hi does not know that she knows the target, and exploiting KPR₂: if stakes are high, a subject is blame-worthy for using a proposition in practical reasoning if she knows it but does not know that she does. An account of the cases which treats psychological bias as fundamental could incorporate this extra element. On this view, psychological bias would explain why it seems correct for Hi to deny knowledge, and incorrect for Hi to self-attribute knowledge or use the target in practical reasoning. As we have seen, psychological bias has the further consequence that Hi lacks second-order knowledge of the target. Combining this lack of second-order knowledge with KPR₂ has the result that our intuition that Hi should not use the target in practical reasoning is correct. On this extended account, the failure of luminosity does play an explanatory role in addition to psychological bias; however, the failure of luminosity is itself a consequence of psychological bias. So the account treats psychological bias as fundamental, and need not provide any grounds independent of psychological bias for thinking that contextualist cases exemplify a failure of luminosity.
V. CONCLUSION

Williamson suggested that an invariantist could explain away the intuitions in contextualist cases by appeal to two independently grounded factors, a failure of luminosity and psychological bias: the former explains the attribution and practical reasoning intuitions, whereas the latter explains the denial intuition. However, I have suggested an account in which psychological bias is fundamental. I have argued that judgements about Lo’s and Hi’s epistemic positions are crucial to explaining the attribution and practical reasoning intuitions (§II). Further, in some cases, the beliefs crucial to explaining why Lo’s self-attribution of knowledge seems appropriate are mistaken: psychological bias offers a potential account of this mistaken judgement (§II). Last, we have seen that psychological bias in conjunction with KR and KPR$_1$ can explain all of the intuitions about contextualist cases (§IV). Psychological bias has the interesting consequence that whether or not Hi’s knowledge of the target counts as a borderline case by ordinary standards, Hi does not know that she knows the target. Combined with KPR$_2$, this failure of luminosity can be used to provide an account of why we’re correct in thinking that Hi should not use the target as a premise in practical reasoning. Despite this, psychological bias is more fundamental. It explains the attribution, practical reasoning and denial intuitions without appeal to a separate failure of luminosity. Further, it provides the best explanation of why Hi does not know that she knows the target.6

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