Jonathan Schaffer is sympathetic to the contextualist approach to epistemology, broadly construed, but thinks that it hasn’t got the account of the verb “knows” quite right. Contextualists are on to something, but their view needs to be reformulated to give a correct account of the way we talk about knowledge, and (he argues) the reformulated view can do a better job of developing and defending the contextualist strategy for responding to skepticism. The structure of his paper is clear and straightforward: he states three theses that he takes to define contextualism about knowledge, and three parallel but contrasting theses that he uses to define contrastivism, his alternative to contextualism. He then argues that each of his three theses is superior to its counterpart.

One issue is whether there really a disagreement between the two doctrines; as Schaffer notes, some Contextualists have suggested that his contrastivism is simply a version of contextualism – one way of implementing the general account. So part of the burden of the argument of the paper is to defend the claim that the two accounts really are in conflict.

If there is a conflict between the accounts, it is a conflict between general kinds of analysis, rather than between two specific analyses, since the contrast is made at a high level of abstraction. As Schaffer emphasizes, his contrasting sets of theses are designed to leave both of the doctrines he is comparing neutral about the details of the analysis of knowledge. But even at this very general level, he argues, there is a significant difference between contextualism and contrastivism.

This is a rich paper, and there is too much going on in it to talk about it all. I am going to start with the question whether there really is a disagreement between the two doctrines, and if there is, what kind of disagreement it is. I will then spend most of my time on
the first pair of theses that Schaffer contrasts, and on the syntactic arguments in favor of the contrastive analysis, though I will also have a little bit to say about the third pair of theses, equivocation and compatibility.

I. WHAT KIND OF DISAGREEMENT?

To try to get clearer about the nature of the difference between contrastivism and contextualism, let me begin with a distinction between two ways that context resolves an ambiguity, a distinction that points to two different kinds of pragmatic/semantic mechanisms. First, consider one of the standard examples of structural or lexical ambiguity: “Visiting relatives can be boring,” “We watched her duck.” “They met at the bank”) Sentences with each of these surface forms can express different propositions (even after the referents of the contextual elements are fixed) and whenever the sentences are used appropriately, it is the context that resolves the ambiguity, determining which of the alternative propositions is expressed. But in these cases, it is not that context determines some contextual parameter that fixes the value of some indexical expression in the sentence. Rather, the sentence has two alternative meanings, corresponding to two alternative underlying structures or logical forms. If one identifies the sentence with its underlying form, and not with its surface expression, then there is no ambiguity. The role of context (of the common ground, or presumed shared information of the participants in the conversation) is just to answer the question of which of two or more sentences it was, in the case in question, that was expressed in that surface form.

In some cases where a surface representation is potentially ambiguous, it may be controversial whether the explanation should be of this kind, or whether theory should hypothesize that the meaning of the sentence is unambiguous, even at some underlying level, but that meaning determines propositional content only relative to some contextually determined parameter. And in some cases, it might be more or less arbitrary which kind of account to give. Consider proper names: One might say that the name “John” is one name, whose character (to use David Kaplan’s term for the meaning of indexical expressions) tells you that it refers to the
contextually salient person in a certain class. Or, one might say that it is like an ambiguous word. The logical form of “John went to the store” will contain a subscripted name “John_i,” which is to be understood as an unambiguous name for one particular person. I doubt that it matters very much which one says. In other cases, it might make a difference, but be controversial. And it might be that one kind of mechanism was right for one language, and the other kind for another.

It is uncontroversial that adjectives such as “large,” and “successful” are context-dependent, in some sense. One theory might say that there is an elliptical “for an F” implicit in every predicative use of such adjectives. Another might say that the meaning of “large” is a variable character that determines a property as a function of some contextual parameter that does not correspond to anything in the underlying syntax of the sentence. There may be a real empirical difference between such alternative accounts that will come out in the consequences that the alternative analyses have when they are combined with other theoretical commitments of one’s overall semantic theory. (I suspect that, in the case of such adjectives, it would be hopeless to try to explain all of the contextual variation in terms of some kind of ellipsis.) But whatever the fate of such disputes, the point to note here is that while there may be a real difference between two hypotheses about the semantic mechanism that explains the role of context, there is not thereby necessarily any difference in the truth conditions ascribed, in context, to the sentences in which the adjectives occur. The very same feature that the contextualist treats as a parameter of the context might be taken by the ellipsis theorist to be determined by some element of the underlying representation of the sentence.

Now it seems to me that the two kinds of analysis of knowledge that Schaffer is comparing differ in this way. That is, they give different accounts of the linguistic mechanisms that explain how we talk about knowledge, but do not necessarily differ with respect to the truth conditions of statements made with the word “know.” I will support this claim by sketching contrasting but equivalent analyses of the two kinds.

First, the contextualist analysis: Assume that context determines a set of relevant alternative possible worlds – the RA worlds of that
context. Then the analysis of knowledge is this: *x knows that P* is true, relative to a context that determines the RA set \( \Gamma \) if and only if x has the capacity to distinguish the actual world from any non-P possible world in \( \Gamma \).

Second, a corresponding contrastivist analysis: *x knows that P rather than Q* is true iff P is true, and x has the capacity to distinguish the actual world from any Q world.

I am not going to worry about what it means to have the capacity to distinguish the actual world from some other world – this capacity might be explained in different ways, or that clause of the account might be replaced with some other way of spelling out the relevant capacity. But however the contextualist explains the relation that must hold between the actual situation and the relevant alternatives, the same explanation will be available to the contrastivist for explaining the relation that must hold between the actual situation (in which P) and the alternatives in which Q. The difference between contrastivism and contextualism will not be in that part of the story.

I assume that it will be a constraint on the Q in the contrastivist analysis that it must be a contrast with P in the sense that it is incompatible with P (at least relative to the context) On this assumption, the two analyses will be equivalent, provided that the RA set \( \Gamma \) in the contextualist analysis is appropriately related to the Q in the contrastive analysis. Specifically, they will be equivalent, provided that the Q is a proposition that is true in all of the relevant alternatives in which P is false. Given a Q, one can define a set of relevant alternatives in terms of it: the possible situations in which either P or Q.

If I am right, then the dispute between contrastivism and contextualism is not a dispute about the truth conditions of knowledge claims, but about the way the facts about knowledge are expressed. I don’t want to suggest that the question of implementation is not important, or that my point should be taken as a criticism, or as something that Schaffer should disagree with. But if the issue is a question about how facts about knowledge are represented, then that will put some constraints on how much difference the difference between contrastivism and contextualism makes for the philosophical issues about knowledge and skepticism.
2. SYNTACTIC ARGUMENTS

Schaffer begins with what he describes as some syntactic arguments, which is appropriate if the difference between the two theories he is comparing has the character I have suggested. I think these considerations help to sharpen the issue, but I don’t find any of them persuasive. Let me go through them in turn:

The first is the argument from contrastive ascriptions. It is evidence that there is a covert reference or variable (an extra argument place) if that reference can be made explicit. So while we can say “John prefers Picasso,” leaving it implicit what he prefers Picasso to, we can also say “John prefers Picasso to Matisse.” Similarly, Schaffer argues, we can make binary knowledge attributions, such as “John knows that Picasso painted that picture,” but we can make overtly contrastive knowledge claims, such as “John knows that Picasso rather than Matisse painted that picture.” But I am suspicious of the “rather than” construction: if its possibility showed that there was an implicit reference in the underlying structure, then there would be far too many implicit references. Consider, not “prefers,” but “likes” or “loves”: I can say that Mary likes (or loves) Sam rather than Bill, but I don’t think that these verbs express ternary relations, or that the underlying grammatical structure or logical form of sentences with “like” will contain a reference to a contrasting object. I suspect that for virtually any transitive verb V, if one can say something of the form x V-ed y, one could find a context, and a z such that one could say the corresponding thing of the form x V-ed y rather than z. Or more generally, where one can say P, one might say P, rather than Q, where Q is some contrasting thing that one might have said. “Sam is rich rather than happy,” “The cat is on the mat, rather than the windowsill,” “Al Qaeda rather than Iraq, should be the threat we worry about.” (Schaffer tends to use “rather than” in his examples of his “prefers” paradigm, which seems to me a mistake. I agree that “prefers” is genuinely ternary, but it is overt examples with “prefers to” rather than the ones with “prefers rather than” that show this. I might say, given the right context, “John prefers Picasso rather than Cezanne to Matisse,” but that would not show that “prefers” was really four-place.)

Second is the argument from binding. As Schaffer remarks in a footnote, this is not a decisive test, since the intuitions that provide
the data are fragile, and the data there are might be given pragmatic explanations. In any case, the data seem to me pretty thin in the case of “knows”. But I have a more general worry about the binding diagnostic: I am puzzled about exactly what is supposed to be shown by the binding examples, and I would like see the binding diagnostic spelled out in more detail. Consider verbs like “select” (which Schaffer mentions as a paradigm of a ternary relation) or “choose” Now it seems to me that far from being paradigms of ternary relations, “choose” and “select” are (in contrast to “prefer”) clearly binary. It is true that whenever someone selects something, she selects it from some set of alternatives. It is also true that whenever John signs his name, he does it with some kind of writing implement. But the statement “John signed his name” does not contain a covert reference to a pen or a pencil, with the truth value of the statement depending on whether the covert reference is to the kind of implement actually used. In the same way, the truth value of a statement about what one selects is not relative (in the way that “prefers” statements are) to an implicitly specified set from which one selects. That is, suppose the facts are that I had a choice of broccoli, eggplant or spinach. I preferred the broccoli to the spinach, and the spinach to the eggplant, so I chose broccoli. Now the statement “Bob preferred the spinach” is false if the covert reference (to what spinach is preferred to) is to both of the other alternatives, but the statement is true if the covert reference is to the eggplant alone. But “Bob chose the spinach” is just straightforwardly false, about this situation. No filling in of covert references can make it true. Even if I throw in a “rather than” clause (“Bob chose the spinach rather than the eggplant”) the statement is still false. (It is true that I would have chosen the spinach over the eggplant, if those had been the options, but that is another matter.)

Now back to the binding diagnostic: One can say (implausibly), “At every meal, Bob chose the broccoli,” which implies that at meal one, Bob chose the broccoli over the other options that were available at meal one, and at meal two he chose the broccoli over the other options that were available at meal two, etc. That does not show anything about a covert argument place for the alternatives from which the choice was made. To draw this conclusion would be no more plausible than to take the fact that I can say “John signed
his name on every contract,” (perhaps using different writing imple-
ments to sign different contracts) as a reason to think that there is a
covert reference to the writing implement to be bound.

Even in cases where there is clearly some relativity, it is not
clear to me that the binding argument shows that the relativity must
be explained in terms of a covert variable in the underlying struc-
ture rather than by a contextual parameter. Suppose I coin a verb
“schmefers” which means “prefers to all of the relevant alterna-
tives,” with the relevant alternatives to be determined by context.
Given this stipulation, what does it mean to say that “in every ice
cream parlor, Ann schmefers chocolate”? One interpretation might
be that the relevant alternatives are the one’s that are available in the
ice cream parlor in question.

Consider context-dependent adjectives such as “large” or “old”
Binding examples of these are familiar: “Many of the animals in
the zoo are old,” where it is understood that an elephant is old if
it is old for an elephant, a boa constrictor is old if it is old for boa
constrictors, etc. Some may take such examples to show that there
must be an argument place in the underlying structure to be bound,
but I don’t see why that should be necessary.

Third, there is the argument from ellipsis. When I say “Ann
prefers chocolate, and Ben does too,” it has to be (for this to be
true) that Ben prefers chocolate to the same thing that Mary is said
to prefer chocolate to. I am not sure this is right, but suppose it
is. And suppose it is also true that when I say “Holmes knows
that Mary stole the bicycle, and Watson does too,” that the set of
relevant or contrasting alternative must be the same for both Holmes
and Watson. If the contrastive analysis of “know,” were right, then
a syntactic copying view of ellipsis would explain this kind of
fact, but isn’t it also highly plausible to hypothesize that contextual
parameters relative to which indexical expressions are interpreted
also remain the same (unless there is some indication that they
have shifted) when you conjoin two parallel claims? Consider an
example, not of ellipsis, but where the whole expression is repeated:
“Holmes knows that Mary stole the bicycle, and Watson knows
that Mary stole the bicycle too.” The presumption that the relevant
contrasts remain the same seems to me equally strong here, even
though no copying mechanism will be involved. The contextu-
alist’s principle (that it is presumed that contextual parameters don’t shift unless there is some indication that they do), which is surely independently motivated, predicts this.

Fourth is the focus argument: I agree that stress is used to mark a contrast, and that in the case of knowledge claims, what the contrast is may make a difference to the truth conditions. That is common ground between contextualists and contrastivists. But I don’t think the contrastive stress, and the focus that it represents, is an indication of some kind of unarticulated grammatical constituent. Again, we can compare the binary but context dependent “likes” with the ternary “prefers.” I might say “Harry likes drinking tea” in order to correct someone who, when I said that Harry likes tea, thought I meant that he likes bathing in it. Or consider this dialogue with “prefers”: (A) “Harry prefers tea to milk.” (B) “Myself, I would rather bathe in milk.” (A) No, Harry prefers drinking tea, not bathing in it. Here the contrast is not used to indicate the unmentioned third term of the “prefers” relation.

The final argument concerns surface paradoxes. Given certain facts about Mikey, one might be inclined to say both that Mikey knows that the drink is coke, and that Mikey does not know that the drink is coke. Different implicit contrasts resolves the apparent paradox. Now it does not seem right to call this a syntactic argument, but in any case I don’t see that it provides any basis at all for choosing between contrastivist and contextualist explanations for the variability that both accounts agree is there . . . The phenomenon in question is that the same form of words can express both a truth and a falsehood (or that a sentence and its negation both seem to express truths). Variation of interpretation that depends on a difference in a contextual parameter will explain the phenomenon exactly as well as a difference in an implicit reference There are surface paradoxes that uncontroversially turn on indexicality, such as the magician’s patter line, “Now you see it, now you don’t.”

3. “I” AND OTHER INDEXICALS

So I am inclined to think that none of these syntactic arguments has much force. But are there other reasons for preferring the contrastivist theses to those that define contextualism? Schaffer suggests at
one point that the issue between indexicality and temicity is whether “prefers” or “I” is a better model for a semantics of “knows.” If that were the choice, one would perhaps have reason to go with “prefers,” but this seems to me a highly misleading way to put the issue, since “I” is a very special case of an indexical – significantly different from almost all other expressions that might be included under this rubric. “I” is important even from other personal pronouns, and personal pronouns and demonstratives are in any case a very limited sample of expressions that are indexical in the relevant sense. It is controversial just how much of context dependence should be explained by putting the information that resolves the indeterminacy into the underlying syntactic representations and how much by contextual parameters, but I think that any plausible theory will treat a wide range of kinds of expressions as dependent for their content on context in a way that is not plausibly explained by a difference between surface form and underlying syntactic representations. Along with pronouns, demonstratives and tenses, there are quantifiers that depend for their interpretation on a contextually determined domain, modals like “ought,” “should,” “could” and “must” that depend on contextually determined sets of relevant possible circumstances, adjectives such as “short,” “intelligent,” “successful,” “similar” and “useful,” verbs such as “want,” “need” and “like,” possessive constructions that depend on a contextually salient relation – the list goes on. Schaffer suggests that if we treat “knows” as indexical, we will be treating it as a “lexical freak,” but I think it is “I” that is the lexical freak – an indexical that stand apart from other expression, including other indexical expressions, in a great many ways.

I recognize that some theorists will argue that many, perhaps most, of my examples should be explained in a way that parallels the way Schaffer wants to explain “knows.” Perhaps quantified statements are not context dependent in their underlying logical form: perhaps “everything” is elliptical for “everything that is F”, with the particular domain restrictor F syntactically represented, and the quantifier itself always ranging over the same context-independent domain, the domain of absolutely everything. Perhaps the noun phrase “John’s book” is short for a definite description, “the book that stands in relation R to John,” with the R specified
in the underlying syntactic representation. Such proposals seem to me implausible and gratuitous. If indexicality is as widespread as it seems to me to be, then there are plenty of precedents for the contextualist account of knowledge.

Let me add a comment about one of the specific arguments in this section – the argument from non-binary stability. I reject the second premise of this argument – that “indexicality predicts that non-binary ascriptions should be as shifty as their binary counterparts”. This is one place where the special features of Schaffer’s paradigm indexical “I” are misleading, since “I” is unlike other indexicals in being, in a sense, not at all shifty. Unlike most other paradigm indexicals, “I” does not have a range of interpretations that might be further restricted: meaning plus what have been called “automatic” contextual features fully determine its reference. But consider instead “this” or “here” or “we”. Consider the sentences, “this is the one causing the problem,” (gesturing toward a computer) “Harry will be here tomorrow” (said in Amherst, MA) and “We are against invading Iraq.” Compare each of these with a less shifty counterparts said in the same circumstances, “this computer [or this keyboard] is the one causing the problem,” “Harry will be here in Massachusetts [or here in Amherst] tomorrow,” and “We in this family [or we Americans] are against invading Iraq.” I see no reason why the contextualist about knowledge shouldn’t expect a contextually determined set of relevant alternatives to be able to be made less shifty in the same way by explicitly constraining it.

4. EQUIVOCATION AND COMPATIBILITY

I will conclude with a brief comment about the last pair of contrasting theses – equivocation vs. compatibility. This pair is the one that has least to do with the linguistic issue, and the most to do with the application to philosophical questions about skepticism. But I am puzzled about what the contrast is between these two theses, and how it connects with the other differences between contrastivism and contextualism, as Schaffer defines them.

If binary knowledge statements are either context dependent in the way that contextualism says, or incomplete in the way that contrastivism says, then some knowledge statements may be
equivocal, and the equivocation might explain the fallacy in certain arguments about knowledge. So one who accepts either an analysis of the kind that Schaffer favors, or a contextualist, relevant alternatives analysis might accept the equivocationist thesis, that the variable content of (binary) “knows” statements reveals how skeptical arguments are equivocal. In fact, it seems to me that Schaffer does accept the equivocationist thesis: he says that “the skeptic is accused [by the contrastivist] of illicitly shifting the contrast variable.” Isn’t this a charge of equivocation?

But the possibility of equivocation (whether explained in the contrastivist or the contextualist way) also seems to imply compatibilism, the thesis that Schaffer opposes to equivocationism. Whether or not they accuse skeptics of equivocating in their arguments, both contextualists and contrastivists should say that most ordinary (binary) knowledge claims are true in a sense and false in a sense. They just give a different account of the linguistic mechanism that explains how the same form of words can be correctly used to say different things with different truth values. So I don’t see why both sides shouldn’t accept both theses.

So what, then, is the argument about deductive transmission and epistemic modesty? Here is how I understand the contextualist account of the role of the deductive transmission assumption in the skeptical argument. Ignoring subtleties, the skeptic argues this way:

You say that Moore knows he has hands. But having hands entails not being a brain in a vat, and Moore knows that this entailment holds, so you are committed to saying that he knows he is not a brain in a vat. But he doesn’t know that he is not a brain in a vat.

The contextualist responds that deductive transmission holds only if one holds fixed the set of relevant alternatives. But there is a pragmatic constraint on the set of relevant alternatives: it must include some alternatives to the proposition that the subject is said to know. (Otherwise, the knowledge claim would be vacuous. This constraint is not a special principle, but a consequence of the general Gricean maxim that statements should be informative, in the context.) So interpretation of the conclusion of the argument requires changing the context by expanding the set of relevant alternatives, making the argument guilty of equivocation.
Now what is the contrastivist diagnosis of this argument? Moore knows he has hands, rather than stumps. Having hands entails not being a brain in a vat, so Moore knows that he is not a brain in a vat rather than . . . what? Schaffer’s principle of deductive transmission says that if we weaken the proposition known and/or strengthen the contrast proposition, the resulting knowledge claim will follow (assuming the knower makes the inference). That is, the closure principle is something like this:

If x knows p, rather than q, p entails p* and q* entails q, then x knows p* rather than q*.

Now when we weaken the p we will usually be required to strengthen the q in order to ensure that the q* contrasts with the p*. In the new knowledge statement. (It would make no sense to say that Moore knows he is not a brain in a vat, rather than having stumps, since having stumps, like having hands, entails not being a brain in a vat. It would be like saying “Mikey knows the drink is liquid, rather than Pepsi.”) The strengthened q* must entail q&not-p*. (It must entail q to be a strengthening, and it must entail not-p to be a contrast.) But the problem is that in the case in question, q&not-p* is impossible, and so not a genuine contrast. (We can’t say, “Moore knows he is not a brain in a vat, rather than being a (bodiless) brain in a vat and having stumps.” So the only permissible interpretation of the conclusion (“Moore knows he is not a brain in a vat” will be one that weakens the implicit contrast proposition, in which case the problematic knowledge statement will not follow.

I think this is the kind of diagnosis that Schaffer’s contrastivist will give of the argument. If this is right, it looks to me to be an equivocationist diagnosis, not very different from the contextualist’s account.

It is clear that it is a large part of Schaffer’s motivation to give an account of “know” that connects the concept of knowledge to the process of inquiry – of asking and answering questions. He sees this process as essentially contrastive: we partition a limited space of open possibilities, into a set of mutually exclusive alternatives, and ask which of them is actual (presupposing that it is one of them). I think this is the right way to think about knowledge, about inquiry, and about discourse and other rational activities, but as I see it, this picture guides both the contrastivist and the contextualist. I think the
issue between them, if there really is an issue, is an intramural one, about the details of the way our language is used to engage in, and to describe, this kind of activity.

NOTE

1 I should emphasize that all I have argued is that any contrastivist analysis could be reformulated as a contextualist analysis that is equivalent to it, with respect to truth conditions. But the converse claim – that any contextualist analysis could be reformulated as a contrastivist analysis – is a further claim, and I think that it is false. That is, the contrastivist formulation is more restrictive. If, for example, what context determines (according to a certain contextualist analysis) is not a set of relevant alternatives, but a standard that determines a set of relevant alternatives as a function of the facts, then it is not clear that this contextualist analysis could be reformulated in the way that fits Schaffer’s contrastivism. (Thanks to Keith DeRose, who helped me to appreciate this point.)

Department of Linguistics and Philosophy
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, MA 02139
USA
E-mail: stal@mit.edu