Metaphysics // Fall 2025

Handout 11

Common sense and contextualism: Lewis

Moorean facts and scepticism. We operate daily under the assumption that we know a lot. This abundance of common, everyday facts—e.g., knowing that it's day now—is a ' Moorean fact '. To sustain any serious or lasting doubt about this knowledge would be absurd. 418

However, as soon as we engage in philosophical epistemology, we are immediately confronted with a sceptical argument suggesting that we know practically nothing. Behind the sceptical position is the demand that knowledge must be infallible. If a subject *S* asserts knowledge of a proposition *P* but cannot eliminate a possibility in which *P* is false, it appears contradictory to claim *S* knows *P*. Speaking of ' fallible knowledge ', or knowledge persisting despite uneliminated possibilities of error, ' sounds contradictory ': 419

(11-1) ??He knows, yet he has not eliminated all possibilities of error. 420

The problem deepens when we allow for paranoid or far-fetched possibilities of error (deception, conspiracies, hallucinogens) to go unchecked. These possibilities of error are ubiquitous and uneliminated, infecting even our most trivial knowledge. Since knowledge is defined as infallible, and infallible knowledge is rare (perhaps limited only to necessary truths or present experience of here now), the conclusion is that we possess very little knowledge. This outcome contradicts our initial common-sense conviction.

We are, then, caught between two undesirable extremes: the ' whirlpool of scepticism ' and the ' rock of fallibilism '. Although fallibilism (=accepting knowledge despite uneliminated error) is sometimes chosen as the lesser evil, it is not good enough, as we see in (11-1). 419

A better approach is to dodge this choice by blaming epistemology itself, so to speak. Knowledge may be highly context-dependent, similar to how standards of evaluation change based on the topic (e.g., judging different sports teams by different standards). When philosophical scrutiny is applied, the context shifts, and knowledge claims that were previously true should now become false.

Dropping the justification requirement. Some philosophers propose that knowledge is context-dependent because of the fluctuating the standards required for justification. Under the demanding standards of epistemology, justification is rarely met. 421

This approach is flawed, Lewis argues, because the relationship between knowledge and justification is not unassailable:

Justification is not sufficient Having a highly justified true opinion is not enough for knowledge. For instance, no matter how good the odds, believing one will lose a fair lottery does not constitute knowledge, because one might still win. Only a rigourous deductive argument is sufficient, but this is too much to demand in many cases.

Justification is not always necessary We gain knowledge through processes like perception, memory, and testimony without constructing non-circular supporting arguments. Furthermore, a subject can know, like knowing a face or a chicken's sex, even after forgetting the initial evidence or being unable to articulate the cues leading to that knowledge. 422

Since there is no necessary link between justification and knowledge, the context-dependence of knowledge requires a different explanation. 422

Knowledge defined. The first step is to link knoweldge again to infallibility: 422

(11-2) A subject *S* knows proposition *P* iff: *P* holds true in every possibility left uneliminated by *S*'s evidence.

This is equivalent to stating that *S*'s evidence eliminates every possibility in which not-*P*.

The possibilities here must be specific enough, so that they cannot be split into subcases that apply differently to the evidence or the knowledge proposition *P*. Importantly, these possibilities include conditions regarding the subject's identity and the time (' de se et nunc ' possibilities), as subjects can know who and when they are. The possibilities are not constrained by natural laws or actual history.

A possibility W is ‘ uneliminated ’ if the subject’s entire perceptual experience and memory in W exactly match the subject’s perceptual experience and memory in the actual world (=actuality). Elimination is achieved because the existence of the subject’s experience conflicts with the possibility W, not because the propositional content of the experience conflicts with W. 424

THE *SOTTO VOCE* PROVISO. To prevent the definition of infallible elimination from immediately yielding skepticism, ‘ every possibility ’ must be understood as restricted to a relevant domain, as is common in natural language quantification. 425

Remark 1. Digression on the restriction of ‘ every ’…

This leads to a silent condition:

(11-3) *S* knows that *P* iff: *S*’s evidence eliminates every possibility in which not-*P*—except for those possibilities that we (the speakers and hearers) are properly ignoring.

This construction parallels the definition of a surface as ‘ flat ’: it has no bumps, except for those ‘ properly ’ ignored. Epistemology, therefore, becomes the investigation into what may be properly presupposed (or ignored). 425

WHAT ARE THE RELEVANT ALTERNATIVES. The domain of relevant alternatives (=the uneliminated possibilities that can’t properly be ignored) is governed by several rules. Some rules are prohibitory, in the sense we can’t ignore them:

Rule of Actuality The possibility that is the actual state of affairs for the subject can never be properly ignored. Actuality is always a relevant alternative, which guarantees that only true propositions can be known. As Lewis notes, this has a nice consequence that truth should not be baked into the definition of knowledge. 426

There are complications here having to do with knowledge ascriptions across time and worlds. Lewis argues that in such cases of competing actualities, the rule applies to the epistemic agent’s actuality, not to our (observer’s) actuality.

Rule of Belief Any possibility that the subject believes, or ought to believe based on adequate justification, to obtain is not properly ignored. The degree of belief required depends on the stakes. If error would be particularly disastrous (e.g., a jury decision), fewer possibilities may be ignored, meaning a relatively low degree of belief in an error possibility might be sufficiently high to make it relevant. 428

Rule of Resemblance If one possibility cannot be properly ignored (due to other rules like Actuality or Belief), then any other possibility that ostensibly resembles in relevant regards it also cannot be properly ignored. Resemblances between multiple non-ignorable possibilities can have an additive effect. 429

The Rule of Resemblance must be applied carefully to avoid global scepticism: the resemblance between actuality and a radical deception scenario based only on shared evidence is generally ignored. This is *ad hoc*, and Lewis confesses he doesn’t know how to do better. 430

There are also presumptive rules that we *may* defeasibly ignore:

Rule of Reliability Information-transmitting processes (perception, memory, testimony) are typically reliable. We are permitted to presuppose that these processes are not failing us, enabling us to defeasibly ignore possibilities of failure. This allows us to ignore the uneliminated possibility of hallucination, unless that possibility is too close to actuality due to the Rule of Actuality or Resemblance. 432

Rules of Method We are defeasibly permitted to ignore possible failures in standard non-deductive inferences, such as presupposing that a sample is representative or that the best explanation of our evidence is the true one. 433

Rule of Conservatism Possibilities that are generally ignored and commonly known to be ignored by those around us may also be properly ignored. So we normally can adopt community presuppositions. 433

Rule of Attention This rule determines the dynamic context: a possibility currently being attended to is, by definition, not being ignored at all, and thus is not properly ignored. Attention determines the domain of relevant possibilities in the current conversation. 434

Puzzles. The Rule of Resemblance can help to solve some puzzles. First, the lottery problem: Since the possibility that one ticket wins is actual (and therefore non-ignorable), and all ticket-winning possibilities saliently resemble each other, all such possibilities become relevant alternatives. This prevents the subject from knowing they will lose. 430

Next, Gettier cases: In the case of the stopped clock, there is the uneliminated possibility that the subject looked at the clock at the wrong time (e.g., 4:22) while it displayed the correct time (4:39) perfectly resembles actuality regarding the clock's state, preventing knowledge. Similarly, in the bogus barn case, the uneliminated possibility of seeing a fake barn resembles actuality due to the abundance of fakes in the area. Similarly in other such cases. 431

Next, scepticism. We can use the Rule of Attention. When someone engages in epistemology, they intentionally focus on far-fetched possibilities of error. Since these possibilities are now attended to, they are no longer properly ignored, making them relevant alternatives. Because the subject's evidence does not eliminate these alternatives, knowledge claims become false in that specific, strict context. 434

This is why knowledge is *elusive*: when you examine it closely, ' straightway it vanishes '. This loss is temporary, however: outside the epistemological context, knowledge persists. 435 434

Closure. Since knowledge is analysed as a modality, it must be closed under strict implication. Let's not bother about the precise technical meaning of this claim. Let's just say that some closure principle *is* valid for knowledge. Then we must explain the apparent failures of closure. These failures, Lewis now argues, are in fact failures of pragmatics: they arise, because the context is switched midway. 441

Let's explain a bit further. Suppose I say, ' I know I have hands. ' I say this in an everyday, ' lax ' context. In that context, I ignore the demon possibility. But when I say, ' I know that I am not handless and deceive ', I make my utterance in a philosophical, much stricter context.

With this in mind, consider first the closure principle (=the idea that knowledge is ' closed ' under strict implication):

(11-4) [I know P, and it is a conceptual truth that $P \supset Q$] $\Rightarrow$ [I know Q].

If this is plausible, then the sceptic can run the following closure-based argument (we need to adapt its version to what Lewis says about it in 441–442):

(11-5)
- (I-S) I know that I have hands.
- (II-S) It is a conceptual truth: if I have hands, then I am not a handless being deceived by a demon (=some sceptical scenario).
- (III-S) IF I know that I have hands, and it is a conceptual truth that, if I have hands, then I am not a handless being deceived by a demon, THEN: I know that I am not a handless being deceived by a demon. [Closure principle (11-4)]
- (IV-S) But I don't know that I am not a handless being deceived by a demon etc.—how *can* I know that, if I haven't excluded every sceptical scenario! [Sceptical premiss]
- (V-S) Therefore, I don't know that I have hands. [from (III-S), (IV-S), *modus tollens*]
- (VI-S) Contradiction! [from (V-S), (I-S)]

Well, argues Lewis, when we mention the possibility of the demon to make the claim (IV-S), we shift the context: we make the demon possibility relevant, while it was not relevant when we asserted (I-S). If the context stayed fixed throughout, we wouldn't have been able to assert (IV-S).

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