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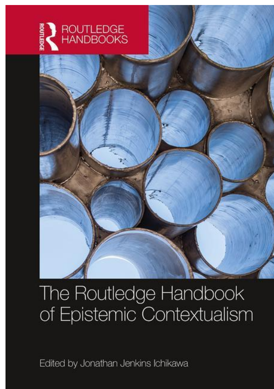

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Feminism and Contextualism

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4

FEMINISM AND CONTEXTUALISM

Evelyn Brister

Feminist theory is often associated with social and political philosophy and questions of justice, but epistemology is also a fundamental concern to feminists because feminist claims depend on knowledge of the natural and social world and on knowledge of moral duties and constraints. Feminist claims require accounts of the relation between knowledge and politics and also accounts of the practices and norms that govern how knowledge is produced, evaluated, and circulated. Feminist epistemology keeps social relations in sight while investigating questions about knowledge and knowledge-making practices that are relevant to the goal of cultivating social equality.[1] Contextualist epistemology, with its emphasis on the social and practical context of justification, knowledge attribution, and so on, would thus seem to have much in common with feminist epistemology.

This chapter has two purposes. First, I examine how contextualism is suited to feminist epistemic aims, and I take stock of feminist engagements with epistemic contextualism. Second, I will argue that feminist epistemology provides arguments that can both deepen and strengthen contextualist views and also shed light on internal debates among contextualists. So, just as epistemology is of fundamental importance to feminist theory, I'll argue that feminist theory can play an important role in certain areas of epistemology.

Feminist epistemologists have talked about "context" and "contextualism" since at least the early 1990s and in ways that don't always map neatly onto how those terms are generally used today. For this reason, and to highlight the various connections between feminist epistemology, feminist philosophy of science, and contextualism, I'll use the term "contextualist" in a somewhat broader sense than many of the other essays in this volume. So in addition to the by now standard meaning of epistemic contextualism – where it refers to a theory of knowledge attribution, as in the work of Keith DeRose (1995) and others – I'll also refer to contextualism as a theory of justification, perhaps best exemplified in the work of Michael Williams (1991, 2001). But more than that, I'll also argue that the leading alternative to contextualism – the subject-sensitive or interest-relative invariantism (IRI) of Jason Stanley, John Hawthorne, and Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath – is actually also contextual in the broad sense valued by feminist epistemologists. That is, Stanley and other "sensitive" invariantists argue that knowledge attribution depends on more than just epistemic factors: it also depends on practical features of an inquirer's situation. Contextualists and sensitive invariantists can thus agree that there are cases where the truth of the statement "S knows that p" depends on more than just the subject's evidence, or reasons, or other epistemic factors (where they disagree is

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on what, exactly, this "more" is). Two people can have exactly the same evidence for p, but, depending on the context or situation, perhaps only one of them can truthfully be said "to know p." As I'll note below, this broad recognition of the importance of context – shared by epistemic contextualists, sensitive invariantists, and defenders of contextualist theories of justification – provides a rich but not entirely unproblematic set of resources for feminist epistemology.

Feminist epistemology has two characteristic features. First, it investigates the social production of knowledge by examining how knowers, knowledge claims, and epistemic practices are socially situated, paying special attention to categories of social identity, such as gender, where they make an epistemic difference (Tanesini 1999). Second, it is broadly naturalistic in order to account for empirical findings concerning social and biological categories (Grasswick 2013). While these features are not universal across all feminist epistemology, they are characteristic in that they emerge out of concerns for how gender categories shape how and by whom knowledge claims are made. This last point is also what makes feminist epistemology *feminist*: while social epistemology is also concerned with social institutions and processes, feminist epistemology is grounded in a concern for how gender, in particular, and power, in general, operates in social contexts.

This means that feminist epistemologists typically reject a conception of epistemology as focused exclusively on questions about interchangeable individual knowers. In this sense it is often opposed to individualistic epistemology: for example, the kind of epistemology that aims to give necessary and sufficient conditions for *S* knows that *p*. Rather, feminist epistemology has prioritized issues relating to the epistemic interdependence of subjects, such as trust and credibility, and questions concerning the epistemic relevance of social identity and social power, for instance in testimonial interactions. Feminist epistemology doubts that individualist epistemology can address the questions that are particularly relevant for knowers who are excluded from knowledge-making institutions, who are treated as less credible, whose rational capabilities are in doubt, and who are otherwise treated differently as knowing subjects. The suspicion is not just that individualist epistemology is incomplete, in that it has not yet fully explained how social interactions are relevant to knowing, but that it is pernicious, because it treats individual knowing subjects as all alike, an ideal that loses sight of the epistemic problems that matter to real people in the non-ideal situations that are the rule, not the exception.

As a result, the relationship between feminist epistemology and epistemic contextualism is complicated and conflicted. Feminist epistemology has interests and motivations that may diverge from those of epistemic contextualism. On the one hand, epistemic contextualism has its origin in the concerns of individualist epistemology. For example, some versions of contextualism are centrally concerned with skepticism. But Cartesian skepticism, with its solipsistic implications, is exemplary of the paradoxes that arise out of the assumptions of individualist epistemology. Feminists and social epistemologists, whose starting point is how categories of social identity affect knowledge production, may view the problem of skepticism as neither pressing nor even particularly relevant.[2] On the other hand, however, because contextualism highlights the epistemic importance of context, and because context may include social relations, contextualism does allow for the concerns of feminist epistemology to come into view. Thus, in spite of the apparent distance between the concerns of contextualists and the concerns of feminist epistemologists, they may contribute useful insight and criticism to each other.

Feminism, contextualism, and justification

By paying close attention to social categories and to assumptions of gender essentialism, feminist epistemologists have developed an acute sensitivity to how social contexts affect belief and action. Thus, according to feminist epistemologists, knowers are differently situated in the world

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by having different perspectives that are due to their different bodies and experiences, different social roles, different interests, different access to testimonial evidence, and different relations to other knowers. Feminist epistemology's attention to situated knowledge is more particular than a general interest in inquiry as social. When feminist epistemologists point to situated knowing, they are indicating not just that inquiry is a social process, but that social location or social identity makes a difference in inquiry. Within feminist epistemology there are multiple approaches to the situatedness of knowers, and most, perhaps all, of these explicitly reject epistemic relativism or the claim, as Elizabeth Anderson (2015) puts it, that "perspectives can only be judged in their own terms." While these approaches recognize the role of context in addressing a range of epistemic questions, including knowledge ascriptions and standards of justification, the contextualism defended by feminist epistemologists is typically a broader sense than that proposed by contextualists such as Keith DeRose (1995, 2009), David Lewis (1979, 1996), and Michael Williams (1991, 2001). While DeRose, Lewis, and Williams focus on relatively narrow issues concerning knowledge-attribution or epistemic justification, feminist epistemologists frequently emphasize the moral and political factors that both motivate epistemological inquiry and operate within particular contexts. For example, Peg O'Connor (2012) defends a position called "felted contextualism" that she presents as an alternative to absolutism and relativism in moral epistemology. José Medina (2013) has developed a view called "polyphonic contextualism" which addresses how agents are unjustly excluded from certain discursive contexts.

Another broadly contextualist account that is motivated, in part, by feminist interests is Helen Longino's (1990) account of scientific reasoning: what she calls "contextual empiricism." In *Science as Social Knowledge*, Longino develops contextual empiricism as an account of the conditions ascribing scientific knowledge in particular. Her view is empiricist rather than holist in that it takes experience as the primary source of justification for knowledge claims, and it is contextualist rather than absolutist in that the standards of justification are relative to a social context (1990: 186). Here Longino takes the context of scientific knowledge production to include verifiable empirical statements, value assumptions that may not be empirically verifiable, and social norms for justificatory practices.

In her later book *The Fate of Knowledge* (2004), Longino explicitly invokes contextualism as a theory of justification, citing Annis (1978) and Cohen (1987) as providing the sort of epistemic theory that supports her account of science as socially produced knowledge: "To be justified is to be able to meet objections in a way that satisfies the practices and norms of one's group" (2004: 105). A contextualist theory of justification and Longino's social account of scientific reasoning overlap in that both spotlight the justificatory norms that arise out of a community's practices of challenge and response. For Longino, this means that standards of scientific justification (such as what kind of and how much observational evidence is required to support a particular hypothesis) are at least partly the product of a social context and cannot be established as a priori necessary rules for weighing empirical evidence. A contextualist theory of justification, as opposed, for example, to standard foundationalism or coherentism, can account for the intersubjective justificatory practices of scientists in the production of new knowledge claims (2004: 81–82). At the same time, contextualism fulfills Longino's need to present a normative alternative to purely descriptive, and hence relative, sociological accounts of scientists' cognitive and discursive behavior.

In her article "Contextualism in Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science" (2011), Kristina Rolin argues that Michael Williams' (2001) version of epistemic contextualism can support Longino's contextual empiricism against significant objections raised by feminist philosophers of science. According to Rolin, Williams' account of contextualist justification is more sophisticated than the earlier accounts cited by Longino, and his particular version anticipates

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and defends against three objections: (1) that contextual empiricism implies dogmatism, (2) that it lacks justification itself, and (3) that it endorses value relativism (Rolin 2011). Here I will discuss the importance of the response to the first two of these objections and will later consider the third (that contextual empiricism is relativist). By showing how a contextualist theory of justification can insulate Longino's account against these two objections – namely, that it implies dogmatism and is not itself justified – Rolin shows how to extend an epistemological theory beyond its original purpose. This is good both for Longino's contextual empiricism and for contextualism itself – which, as I noted earlier, has over the years referred to a variety of different positions. As Robin McKenna (2015) has recently noted, "While contextualism has increased in sophistication over the past decade, the point of the view has perhaps become lost in the process" (500). This leads McKenna to then recommend that contextualists address the question "How does contextualism in our sense relate to broader forms of contextualism?" (500). Here, the question addressed is how a contextualist theory of justification (namely, Williams' version) relates to a contextualist theory of scientific rationality (Longino's contextual empiricism).

Rolin shows how to expand a contextualist epistemology to promote a contextualist philosophy of science. So, for example, Sharon Crasnow has criticized Longino's contextual empiricism for being unable to resolve disputes over epistemic standards – with the result that such standards can only then be accepted dogmatically (2003: 136). Rolin responds to this objection by arguing that, in Williams' contextualism, the notion of epistemic responsibility *does* provide grounds for adjudicating such standards. According to Rolin and Williams, while we make assumptions, in particular contexts, about the relevant epistemic standards, these assumptions function as default entitlements: this means that they are still subject to appropriate challenges, provided that a challenger is prepared to provide reasons to question the truth or reliability of the standard (Rolin 2011: 38).

Solomon and Richardson (2005) raise a second objection to Longino's contextual empiricism: that her social account of scientific objectivity rests on four norms of social epistemic practice that are still in need of naturalistic justification – for instance by showing their presence in historical episodes of scientific advancement. Here, too, Rolin draws on Williams' (2001) version of epistemic contextualism to support Longino's account. Rather than requiring a naturalistic justification, Rolin argues that it is enough that Longino's social account of objectivity can draw support from Williams' contextualist theory of justification. On Williams' account, the criteria for epistemic responsibility require that (1) justificatory norms be public so that challenges to a default assumption be heard, (2) that both the challenger and the claimant follow the contextual standards for an appropriate challenge, and (3) that appropriate challenges require a response regardless of the social identity of the person presenting them. These correspond to three of Longino's epistemic norms for objective scientific communities (Rolin 2011: 40). The fourth such norm, that appropriate challenges receive a response (or uptake of criticism, as Longino calls it), follows from Williams' notion of a defense commitment (Rolin 2011: 40).

These two challenges to Longino's account have come from philosophers of science whose work supports feminist commitments. Even so, it can be argued that their challenges operate at a sufficiently high level of abstraction so as to distance them from any particular concerns about gender, race, and marginalized social identity. What this shows, then, is that Longino's account of scientific objectivity – one that shows how sexist scientific theories may be mistakenly endorsed as objective, and can critique such theories on those grounds – can be supported by a contextualist theory of justification. This raises a further question: How tight is the connection between epistemic contextualism and specifically feminist epistemological concerns?

On the one hand, it is no accident that contextualism – rather than some other theory of justification – is well-suited to support an account of scientific objectivity that is motivated by

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feminist criticisms of science. As Rolin points out, Crasnow's objection to Longino's account hinges on assuming that standards of argumentation are either fixed or entirely relative, while contextualism provides a more nuanced explanation of how these standards are anchored to particular discursive contexts. For the contextualist, standards of argumentation are social, as feminist epistemological approaches must be (Grasswick and Webb 2002). Moreover, the structure of Williams' (2001) account can be tied to particular practices in scientific communities, and these are practices that are tied to democratic deliberation (Intemann 2011). And, as Miranda Fricker (2008) notes, Williams' contextualist theory of justification provides an account of how knowers with shifting, socially situated epistemic needs for good information and reliable informants manage to interact with each other to produce knowledge. This kind of contextualism can be called upon whenever feminist epistemology requires a theory that recognizes the practical needs of real knowers engaged in social interactions.

On the other hand, a contextualist account of justification may still be insufficient for the theoretical needs of some feminist epistemologists. Where there are problems that cannot be settled by a theory of justification, this kind of contextualism is largely irrelevant; even where it is relevant, it may yet be insufficiently developed. Rolin, for example, expresses a wish for a more refined account of epistemic responsibility which would analyze "what counts as an appropriate challenge in actual scientific debates, how the burden of proof shifts in these debates, and how relations of power influence these practices" (2011: 42). Without such refinements, there is the lingering concern that a contextualist theory of justification opens the door to epistemic relativism – and relativism is anathema to most feminists, as I explain below. So, while a contextualist theory of justification can lend support to Longino's feminist account of scientific objectivity, some feminist epistemologists remain unconvinced that it lives up to its billing.

Feminism, contextualism, and relativism

I'll now return to the third objection to Longino's contextual empiricism: that it implies a kind of relativism with respect to moral and social values. The objection to Longino's account of socially produced objectivity is that it is regrettably neutral with respect to how feminist (or sexist) values may legitimately influence the evaluation of scientific knowledge claims (Intemann 2008, 2011). Namely, the charge is that while the account promotes diversity of moral and social values in science as a resource for critical discussion, it does not privilege any particular moral and social values over others. Feminists, however, are positively committed to political and social equality and opposed to illiberal views (e.g. misogyny and racism). Thus, coupled with the understanding that values influence not only the formulation and application of scientific theories but also the interpretation and analysis of evidence, sexist values will produce bad science. Some feminist epistemologists see Longino's account of scientific objectivity as being "too evenhanded vis-a-vis moral and social values" (Rolin 2011: 33). Hicks (2011) argues, further, that Longino's view is committed to "actively cultivating" critical beliefs, including critical moral and social views, even if that means promoting anti-feminist (i.e. sexist and racist) values (337).

This concern with relativism has been named "the bias paradox" (Antony 1993). It arises for accounts of objectivity or justification that allow that epistemological views are perspectival. As Deborah Heikes (2004) puts the question it raises: "if there are no unbiased, impartial standards available for evaluating epistemic views, how is it that we can make any principled distinctions among various subjective perspectives?" (318). According to Antony, theories such as Longino's (and Williams') "inevitably leave themselves without resources for making the needed normative distinctions because they deprive themselves of any conceptual tools for distinguishing the grounds of a statement's truth from the explanation of a statement's

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acceptance" (1993: 115). The dilemma posed by the bias paradox is that if all knowledge is socially situated and incomplete, then there is no external or secure position from which to opt for some values over others or to validate the privilege held by some knowers in certain situations, and yet some feminist epistemologists (including standpoint theorists and some critics of Longino) do hold both theses.

Rolin (2006) diagnoses the source of the bias paradox as an unwitting and unwise acceptance of a foundationalist theory of justification. She argues that adopting a contextualist theory of justification, such as Williams', resolves the bias paradox by providing grounds whereby some values act as default commitments and are justified in particular contexts, though they are not *absolutely* justified and may be challenged and, perhaps, revised. Williams (2007) defends his form of contextualism against the charge of relativism on the grounds that the objection depends on a false choice between the view that epistemic systems are equally valid and the view that epistemic standards must be absolute. He argues that while "epistemology cannot offer guarantees" that "there will be neutral epistemic principles for determining who is right and who is wrong," the contextualist conception of justification describes a way forward in disagreements about epistemic standards that accurately describes how fallible, contingent, and dependent on hard work and "ingenuity" inquiry is (111).

To return to the charge that Longino's account of scientific objectivity is impartial when it should be partial – partial toward inclusive, democratic, and pro-science values – Rolin invokes a contextualist theory of justification to defend Longino:

> In Williams' contextualism, value judgments are subjected to the default and challenge structure of justification in the same way as scientific theories, hypotheses, pieces of empirical evidence, and standards of argumentation. This means that some value judgments are likely to lose their justification because they will be met with an appropriate challenge.
>
> *(2011: 40)*

In other words, sexist value judgments can be challenged in the same way as any other judgment. As part of the process of challenging these judgments we may appeal to grounds that indicate the superiority of feminist over sexist values, but this is a local process that occurs in particular contexts of inquiry and is not stipulated by epistemologists. While contextualism identifies the desire for stable, external validation of certain moral and social values as unnecessary, this has remained a sticking point for feminist epistemologists who do not trust that an open-ended process of inquiry will yield consistent socially progressive results.

Similarly, Nancy Daukas has argued against contextualism for not adequately preventing relativism (2002). Daukas' concern is that, if standards of justification are context-relative, then it is possible that in some contexts knowledge claims could be justified in the absence of empirical support. There might, for instance, be a standard of justification which grants the right of epistemic assessment to a patriarchal authority or one which uses only consistency with religious doctrine as a standard of justification (Daukas 2011: 55). Therefore, a claim that is not justified in a scientific context in 2016 would not be attributed as "knowledge" in that context, but a claimant could be attributed to "know" that claim in a context where different standards of justification hold. Moreover, Daukas argues that variability in context creates relativism between contexts:

> Contextualism implies that when a feminist (or any other) epistemologist critiques a particular theory of knowledge, her critique may simply illustrate how the conventions

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> defining 'knowledge' in the critic's 'home' context of inquiry differ from those of the 'target' context of inquiry. So semantic contextualism precludes the possibility of a vantage point from which to argue that one theory offers a more accurate, more insightful, more empirically adequate analysis of epistemic practices and attitudes than does another.
>
> *(2011: 56)*

Thus, Daukas' concern is that contextualism amounts to relativism. Like Intemann, she is particularly concerned that assumptions held in the context of inquiry could stymie transformative criticism from outside that context because different contexts may prioritize different goals of inquiry and develop different standards of justification.

Daukas characterizes her view as "invariantist," holding "that truth-conditions on knowledge claims are stable, and so do not vary contextually" (2011: 54). It is not clear whether she would hold that her argument against contextualism would also hold against sensitive invariantists such as Stanley. So, while nominally opposed to the epistemic contextualism of DeRose and others – Stanley is adamant that there is a "*univocal* knowledge relation" (2005: 86, emphasis added) – Stanley's position is *broadly* contextual in that it treats the knowledge relation as "sensitive to the subject's practical situation at the putative time of knowing" (2005: 86). In other words, while the meaning of "knowledge" does not change with the context (knowledge doesn't come in a range of degrees or strengths), it is harder to truthfully attribute knowledge when the stakes are high for the subject. As a result, according to Stanley, knowledge attribution does depend on practical contextual factors and not just on the quality or quantity of one's evidence.

The relevance of Stanley's interest-relative invariantism to the specific needs and interests of feminist epistemology deserves further attention. In *How Propaganda Works* (2015), he identifies and develops the political relevance of his views on philosophy of language and epistemology, arguing "that flawed ideologies rob groups of knowledge of their own mental states by systematically concealing their interests from them" and by serving as "impediments to democratic deliberation" (5). More generally, he notes that his argument for interest-relative invariantism (2005) was an attempt to "connect practical notions with epistemic ones":

> I argued that having more at stake in decisions made knowledge harder to acquire. So, for example, poor citizens who would benefit greatly from the extra spending derived from modest tax increases on wealthy citizens, as well as their advocates, would have a considerably higher bar for knowledge. If so, their claims would be taken less seriously. Since knowledge was required for action, poor citizens would also have a higher epistemic bar for political action.
>
> *(Stanley 2015: xvii–xviii)*

If knowledge is interest relative and stake dependent, as Stanley argues, then this needs to be recognized for practical and political reasons: otherwise, we won't fully appreciate the "obstacles in the way of oppressed groups trying to ameliorate their oppression" (2015: 254). Since IRI pays attention to the different stakes that agents and attributors have in knowledge claims, it would be an interesting project to test some of the thought experiments used by Stanley by setting them in realistic settings where social identities and social locations make a difference to the stakes of knowers.[3] Such an investigation by feminist epistemologists would show another route through which social power hinders or promotes agents' ability to know and, therefore, to achieve their other aims.

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Feminism, contextualism, and skepticism

One of contextualism's strengths is that it promises a response to skepticism. This is certainly how DeRose (1995) presents the position, but it is also a feature of Williams' (2007) contextualist approach to justification. Despite their differences – DeRose is providing a theory of knowledge attribution, while Williams is offering a theory of justification – they agree that contextual factors are relevant in setting the terms of epistemic success and in finding a way around the problem of skepticism. They disagree, however, in exactly how to, finally, put skepticism behind us.

So, in ordinary contexts, standards of justification or knowledge attribution are suited to the type of inquiry at hand, and justification and knowledge are possible in those ordinary contexts, provided that the relevant contextual standards are met. But while Williams argues that "we need not answer a skeptical challenge to a belief unless there is good reason to doubt the belief" (2007: 93) and doubts, furthermore, that skepticism is capable of offering such genuinely "good reasons," DeRose has argued that the skeptic *can* change the standards of knowledge attribution and thereby undermine the intuition that we know quite a lot of things. Thus, according to DeRose, there are some contexts where, as a result of skeptical maneuvers, we don't actually know, for example, that we have two hands.

From DeRose's perspective, the skeptic's challenge to the possibility of knowledge is neither meaningless nor irrelevant: in fact, in contexts where skeptical doubts have been raised, the skeptic's challenge successfully prevents our having knowledge and, therefore, prevents our acting on the basis of knowing that one statement is true rather than another. DeRose's response to the skeptic is then to isolate the special context where skeptical challenges are relevant from the contexts where we do have ordinary standards for knowledge. Apparently, everyone wins: we're right to claim "knowledge" in ordinary contexts while the skeptic is right to say "we don't have knowledge" in contexts where skeptical doubts are on the table. Unfortunately, this is an unstable truce. DeRose's approach makes it appear that the epistemic standards in ordinary contexts are inferior and second rate compared to the high standards that the skeptic insists upon (Brister 2009, Daukas 2002). But that's not clearly correct: we don't think that orthopedic surgeons are doing their job better, or aiming for higher standards, if they first convince themselves that hands do, in fact, exist. More than that, any sense of victory over the skeptic is short-lived: once we grant that skeptical doubts are valid in certain contexts, and once we grant the skeptic the privilege of insisting on "higher" standards wherever she pleases, the meddling skeptic could show up in any conversational context, change the standards, and sink our inquiry. We would no longer be able to respond to a justificatory challenge in the ordinary way, by presenting more and better evidence to support our claim. Once the skeptic is on the scene, no *amount* of new evidence would allow us to proceed; no new *type* of evidence would save us, either.

I have diagnosed the problem here as an arbitrary deployment of epistemic power (Brister 2009). On DeRose's approach, the skeptic need not understand the standards of justification in a context or the reasons for them. The skeptic need not care what is at stake and, at least on some contextualist accounts, the skeptic need not earn entry into an epistemic community. We are entitled to say that the skeptic's move to expand skeptical contexts is unfair because it summarily puts epistemic agents on the defensive. Indeed, it undermines their epistemic agency, denying them any grounds from which they could launch a defense.

This diagnosis of the skeptic's power move urges that we recognize that skeptical standards for justification are not "higher" or more rigorous than ordinary standards. Indeed, skeptical contexts require less from a philosophical skeptic than they would of an agent skeptical about particular claims, and they are epistemically more conservative because they prevent critical inquiry from developing. The skeptic has the option of undermining some forms of inquiry while permitting

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justificatory standards in other conversational contexts to stand. The skeptical move is not incisive, it is the blunt tool of a bully who has the option to choose which inquiries to silence.[4]

This response may seem overwrought if we consider proper skeptical contexts to be confined to philosophy classrooms and journal pages. However, the similarity between the moves of a philosophical skeptic and that of a denialist might put these concerns in a more concrete context. A skeptic, in the everyday sense, doubts the veracity or relevance of some particular piece of evidence ("I'm skeptical that you ate all your spinach"); a philosophical skeptic doubts the possibility of the existence of any evidence at all ("I'm skeptical that I have two hands"). Similarly, a vaccination skeptic might question the quality of studies that show no correlation between the MMR vaccine and autism. These are particular, localized doubts. In theory, they could be put to rest by more or better or a different kind of evidence. On the other hand, climate denialists have raised doubts that any scientific evidence could, even in theory, demonstrate the existence of climate change. From their perspective it appears that there is, in principle, no evidence that could support climate change – just as, for philosophical skeptics, it appears that there is no evidence that could support my having two hands. Likewise, racism denialists blame poverty or anti-Christian sentiment for recent fatal violence against blacks in Ferguson, Missouri, and Charleston, South Carolina, while denying the relevance of any evidence that demonstrates racism (Heer 2015). The result of this kind of skeptical denialism has been to change the conversational context from action-oriented inquiry ("How shall we mitigate climate change?", "How shall we address racially-motivated violence?") to a conversation that requires, first, settling the existence of climate change or the existence of racism inside a skeptical context that denies the relevance of the empirical evidence identifying these phenomena. The climate science community considers the denialist strategy to be specifically designed to sideline inquiry away from practical goals and to engage scientists in a quixotic conversation about standards of justification, such as what counts as scientific consensus and whether there is a scientific conspiracy (Oreskes and Conway 2010). This skeptical epistemic strategy can be diagnosed as serving the interests of those who benefit from a status quo.

Connections and gaps between feminist epistemology and contextualism

Feminist epistemology has a distinctive contribution to make in evaluating motives to adopt a contextualist epistemology. In particular, feminist epistemology attends to differences in how subjects are socially situated and the implications situatedness has for their claims to know. While it seems likely that the texture of social difference should be relevant to the concept of "context" proposed by epistemic contextualists like Keith DeRose, no feminist epistemologist has yet made a positive connection with DeRose's contextualism explicit. Instead, Rolin (2011) has dismissed the relevance of "high standards" contexts to feminist concerns (34), and Brister (2009) has argued that the distinction between skeptical and ordinary contexts is artificial and pernicious. However, Williams' contextualist theory of justification offers resources that are a good fit with the concerns of feminist theorists, especially in philosophy of science, where care is taken to draw out practical implications of justificatory norms and practices for institutional arrangements.

Another interesting question is where to place Stanley's interest-relative invariantism in this debate. While, as I noted above, his approach is anti-contextual (in the narrow sense), it does recognize the significance of contextual factors, such as stakes, in a broader sense. In addition, because Stanley's target is contextual accounts of knowledge attribution specifically, it appears compatible with a contextualist theory of justification or justification attribution. Finally, more recently, Stanley has made it clear that IRI can shed light on the obstacles facing oppressed and marginal groups, which suggests that it, too, is broadly compatible with feminist epistemological approaches (including the work of Miranda Fricker, whom he frequently cites in his (2015)).

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We can see here how contextualism and feminist epistemology can be mutually supportive: contextualism can provide a general epistemic framework for defending feminist values and goals, while feminist epistemology can shed light on some of the overlooked factors (such as power relations) that operate in particular contexts. In addition to encouraging epistemic contextualists to consider how situatedness affects knowing, I would urge feminist epistemologists to continue to engage with classical epistemological problems, like the problem of skepticism, and the evolution of contemporary approaches to such problems. Feminist perspectives on philosophical problems remind us that there are real, practical consequences to epistemological theories and that working out such theories can be mapped to the ways that individuals and groups can better know and intervene in their worlds.

Notes

1 While feminist theory has focused primarily on gender, in recent decades feminists have widely acknowledged that their concern is with unequal social relations and marginalized social identities more generally, including race and sexuality, and with how social identities intersect. Feminist theory is thus concerned not only with gender categories; it theorizes social power relations more generally.

2 For instance, Sharyn Clough (2003) argues that relativism is a central issue for feminist epistemology but that "global skepticism is a nonstarter," and so "we no longer have any motivation for continuing the epistemological debate about how best to address skepticism" (103).

3 Sripada and Stanley (2012) have tested these thought experiments to check our invariantist intuitions; it's a separate question whether and how stakes are related to social identity.

4 It's worth noting here that Williams' contextual theory of justification uses a different strategy against the skeptic: Williams takes a "diagnostic" approach that shifts the burden of proof on to the skeptic to *show* that skeptical doubts and arguments are relevant in a particular context. Williams is doubtful that the skeptic can successfully shoulder this burden but, in any case, this approach blocks the skeptic from *automatically* changing the standards operating in a particular context.

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