

## Philosophy 311: Knowledge and Justification

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### Handout 21: Contextualism

Whether or not you can truly call someone 'tall' depends upon the context. For example:

Henry is nine years old and just shy of five feet tall. The average height for a nine-year-old is four feet six. Consider two different conversational contexts:

#### *Low*

We're talking about the other nine year olds in Henry's class.

I say, 'Henry is tall! He's almost five feet!'

#### *High*

We're talking about NBA basketball players.

I say 'Henry is not tall! He's not even five feet!'

It seems that I've spoken truly in both Low and High. That's because what it takes to be truly called 'tall' depends on the conversational context:

	'Henry is tall'	'Henry is not tall'
Low	<i>True</i>	<i>False</i>
High	<i>False</i>	<i>True</i>

Contextualists say that 'know' works in a similar way. For example:

It's Monday, and I know that Alicia teaches on Mondays. Though I didn't actually see her, I saw her office door open this morning, and I saw people coming out of her classroom earlier this afternoon. I believe she was on campus, and (let's suppose) I'm right.

#### *Low*

We're arranging a casual social event, and talking about which faculty members to invite. We want to be sure that we invite everyone who was here today so as not to hurt anyone's feelings.

I say, 'I know Alicia was here; we should find out if she wants to come.'

#### *High*

The police are investigating a serious crime, and they need to find out where Alicia was today. It's a matter of utmost importance. Lives are at stake.

I say, 'I don't know that Alicia was here; I saw that her office door was open but it could have been the custodian or somebody else in there.'

It seems that I've spoken truly in both Low and High. If so, then what it takes to be truly said to 'know' something depends upon the conversational context.

*Contextualism and Skepticism*

Contextualism opens up a novel approach to skeptical arguments. Consider two contexts:

*Ordinary*

We're out at the bar talking about our unfortunate friend who lost both his hands in a freak skiing accident. My friend says, "Hey, you shouldn't complain so much! Be grateful. At least you have hands!"

I say, "Well, of course. I know I have hands! Still, I wish I made more money."

*Skeptical*

We're in an epistemology class talking about the possibility that we're all bodiless brains in vats. You say, "Look, if you were a BIV, everything would seem to you just as it does now. You can't be sure that you're not a handless BIV. So how do you know you have hands?"

I say, "You're right. I don't know that I have hands. But I believe I do!"

Given contextualism, we can say that I've spoken truly in both contexts:

	'I know that I have hands.'	'I don't know that I have hands.'
Ordinary	<i>True</i>	<i>False</i>
Skeptical	<i>False</i>	<i>True</i>

The contextualist says that in a context where you're taking a skeptical argument seriously, you can't truly say that you 'know' that you have hands. But this doesn't show that you speak falsely when you say that you 'know' in ordinary contexts. Ordinary contexts aren't ones in which we're taking skeptical arguments seriously.