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How Does Context (Properly Construed) Help to Solve the Underdetermination Problem in the Semantics of Epistemic Modals?

ABSTRACT: In this paper, I propose a novel solution to the underdetermination problem for the semantics of epistemic modals within the contextualist camp. My solution is built on two factors: (i) accounting for the context that semantically matters in terms of framework or super-framework context and (ii) positing two forms of communication: a conversation and an exchange that differ substantially regarding how much contextual supplementation they require when epistemic use of modals is the case. In a nutshell, my core argument says that from the perspective of the framework-context contextualism which I sketch, the underdetermination problem arises only for the uses of modals that appear in the form of discourse I call "exchanges." My considerations open a new perspective on thinking about context(s) in the theory of meaning and communication.
KEYWORDS: epistemic modals • context • contextualism • semantics • discourse

What Is the Underdetermination Problem and Why Is It a Problem for Contextualists?

Before turning to the central issue of this paper, it is helpful to outline some background. Contextualism in the philosophy of language is the general thesis that the meaning of a sentence—or more precisely, the proposition it expresses—is not fully determined by its lexical content and syntactic structure, but also depends on the context in which it is used.[1]

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[1] In the philosophy of language, 'context' is a technical term with a substantial and complex literature (for a concise and accessible overview, *cf.* D. Mazarella, A. Negro, C. Penco Carlo. "Contexts: Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Context (But Were Afraid to Ask)," *Argumenta*, Vol. 8, issue 1, 2022, pp. 9–33). A central distinction is between *linguistic* and *extralinguistic* context. Linguistic context refers to the surrounding sequence of words that precede or follow the sentence under consideration. Extralinguistic context comprises both physical and cognitive aspects of the relevant situation. In this paper, unless otherwise specified, 'context' refers to the extralinguistic notion, as further clarified in the main text.

A simple illustration is often cited by contextualists: the sentence "He is off to the conference" cannot be fully understood without knowing who "he" refers to and which conference is at issue. One might grasp the general topic—that a male individual is attending an event aimed at the exchange or acquisition of knowledge—but, as contextualists emphasize, such general understanding falls short of determining the sentence's truth-conditions. Without resolving the relevant referents, one cannot determine whether the sentence is true or false, and thus does not know precisely what is said. Linguistic competence may suffice to extract schematic content, but that content underdetermines the proposition expressed.

There is ongoing debate over the extent to which contextualism in semantics should be endorsed. While it is widely accepted that demonstratives and pronouns are context-sensitive, the status of other expressions—such as 'house,' 'cat,' or 'flower'—is less clear. For example, if an utterance of 'flower' does not specify, lexically, which flower is referred to, does that entail that 'flower' is context-sensitive?[2] That conclusion would be contentious. Contemporary philosophers of language typically seek to delineate context-sensitive expressions with care, avoiding overgeneralization.

Crucially for the purposes of this paper, the context-sensitivity of modal expressions is not in serious dispute. Words such as 'might,' 'must,' and 'ought' are associated with general usage conditions, as recorded in standard lexicons. However, such information alone does little to determine their precise meaning in any particular case. For instance, consider the sentence "John might be in his office now." It expresses the possibility of John being in his office at a given time, but it leaves open which kind of possibility is intended—metaphysical, epistemic, deontic, teleological, or otherwise. The only way to resolve this ambiguity is to appeal to contextual cues present in the utterance situation.

Here, however, the main difficulty for contextualism begins to emerge. Identifying the *flavour* of modality (e.g., epistemic or deontic) is only one part of the interpretative task. A further and distinct challenge is to determine the *proposition* expressed by the modal sentence once the flavour has been fixed. Since this paper focuses on epistemic modals and their purported challenge to contextualism, I will develop this problem further by examining a representative case involving an epistemic modal.

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[2] Radical contextualists such as Francois Recanati hold that no sentence of a natural language expresses a full proposition, even when unambiguous and with no indexicals. *Cf.* F. Recanati, *Direct Reference: From Language to Thought*, Oxford–Cambridge (MA) 1993.

Consider a sentence with epistemic use of a modal, made famous by two prominent linguists Kai von Fintel and Anthony S. Gillies in their 2011 paper: "The keys might be in the car."[3] The problem meant to be exhibited by the sentence is this: we generally know what the sentence is about: it is about the possibility of the keys in question being in the relevant car, but we do not know the sentence's meaning, i.e. *the* proposition expressed. This is so because while the sentence refers to the possibility of the keys being in the car, determining the exact proposition expressed requires knowing whose knowledge or body of information determines values for a modal's parameters. But how can we know for sure whose epistemic perspective contextually counts if that perspective is not directly revealed in the linguistic material? The range of potential epistemic perspectives though is plenty and there seems to be no reliable method of putting a stop on available interpretations.[4] If critics of contextualism are right, then we cannot get the keys-sentence's meaning aright unless we settle first whose knowledge is the one which we should take to be part of the modal's meaning. Is it *what* I know, what I and my roommate know together, what the cleaning person knows, what you the reader know on the basis of a research study that enlists top five places in the apartment where people typically find their keys, or perhaps is it what a hypothetical omniscient being knows? Lack of a principled method of determining a single contextually salient value parameter for a modal of a type is referred to in the literature with a name 'the underdetermination problem' (henceforth the UP for short).[5] It is widely held that the UP is unescapable since the modal's parameter is contextually delivered. And what makes up a context i s obscure.

It is my view that the underdetermination problem does not stand alone, but it is backgrounded by the following argument:

> P1. Modals do not have determinate and independent meaning as words like 'cat,' 'home,' 'conference' have. What 'ought,' 'must,' 'might,' etc. mean depends on linguistic and non-linguistic context. Therefore, modals are "ambiguous by design" (to use von Fintel and Gillies' nice expression).[6]

[3] K. von Fintel, A. S. Gillies, "Might Made Right," in: *Epistemic Modality*, eds. B. Weather-son, A. Egan, Oxford 2011, pp. 108–130.
[4] *Cf.* J. MacFarlane, "Epistemic Modals Are Assesment-Sensitive," in: *Epistemic Modality*, pp. 144–178.
[5] To my best knowledge, none of the authors who discuss it at length offers a definition of the underdetermination problem. They simply describe it in a way that renders natural the interpretation of it which I propose in the main text.
[6] *Cf.* K. von Fintel, A. S. Gillies, "Might Made Right."

P2. Context-sensitivity of modals stands in conflict with the idea of there being a stable resolution of the contextual underdeterminacy because there is no just one 'right' context for what is said with use of a modal of a type if that context is not explicitly marked in the linguistic material.

Conclusion: Since modals are context-sensitive, they cannot have determinate meaning without a context. Since semantics for modals in no way restricts contexts that go and do not go through, contextually salient, and *good* interpretation of a modal's meaning is either a matter of happenstance, guess, or correct recognizing of meaning intention of the person who uses a given modal.

Call the above argument "scepticism about contextual determination of modal's meaning" (SCDM).

The problem with SCDM is that it is false because premise 2 is false. Precisely, what is false is the idea that context-sensitivity poorly matches with there being fixed, extra-linguistic resolutions of modal's underdeterminacy. To deter the underdetermination problem, what we need is to show that there are two blended concepts of context being in use by semanticists and linguists: context of utterance and context of conversation. Whereas it is true that context of utterance which is not the context of conversation (my understanding what conversation is exposed in what follows) does not resolve the modal's indeterminacy, context of conversation, properly construed in terms of framework-context or super-framework context (my terms to be explained in section 1) *does it all*: resolves or dissolves all the underdeterminacy that needs addressing.

The proposed approach to context that distinguishes between context of utterance and context of conversation is fueled by the observation that communicative situations are much more fine-grained than we usually assume and that treating any linguistic interaction between people as a conversation is a faulty oversimplification. Communicative encounters take different forms. Some are short and unexpected, other are long, dynamic, have predictable topic. Some are primitive and other complex. For that reason, I prefer to speak about units of discourse. A unit of discourse, on my proposal, is a communicative situation that is not subject to fragmentation without the risk of misunderstanding what it really is about. Bluntly put, unit of discourse cannot be fruitfully analyzed as a set of utterances. Units of discourse vary and are subject to different norms. I distinguish two most common units of discourse: conversation and exchange. According to my

stipulated view, a communicative encounter in order to be a conversation must satisfy the following conditions: (i) it is pursued for some reason, and the reason in question is usually associated with a concrete situation in which participants of the considered communicative enterprise are situated or, to use Egan's nice phrasing, that reason is "within their epistemic reach,"[7] (ii) it has a shared goal which is not reached through quick exchange of information, but through a process of exchanging and calibrating the information which is shared, (iii) if it is to unfold smoothly, it requires common ground, (iv) it has sufficiently clearly set topic (which is subject to dynamic changes as conversation unfolds) that organizes the exchange of words between interlocutors and creates the plot. Now, the following stipulated key features of conversation which are: shared goal, reason-drivenness, subject(s)-devotion, narrativity make conversations significantly differ from mere utterances. I shall argue that if use of an epistemic modal is part of a conversation, as above construed, indeterminacy of its meaning usually is a fiction.

Another unit of discourse we are familiar with in ordinary communicative situations, according to my proposal, is what I call 'exchange.' In a nutshell, exchange is a short conversational act initiated by a speaker who, usually, wants to get a swift reply to a concrete question. Importantly, exchanges in contrast to conversations are poorly, if at all, influenced by the specificity of concrete circumstances in which communicating parties are situated. Exchanges may be about anything and can be had with whomever. They are subject to no rule regarding the connection of the topic of an exchange to the circumstances of the exchange. Consider a real-life situation, call it BAG, when a woman standing at the bus stop asks another woman pointing to a bag on that woman's shoulder: "Where is that bag from? It's so beautiful!" It is impossible to know for sure what she meant. Did her question concern the name of the fashion house that produced it, or rather the shop in which the bag was bought? The fact that in case of exchanges there is flexibility in resolving the indeterminacy about the proposition expressed, upon my stipulation, is a mark that the considered scenario falls under exchanges and not conversations in my sense of the term 'conversation' earlier explained. Exchanges are built out of utterances: single statements that are subject to no principles regarding what follows next. They may but also may not set the stage for an upcoming conversation. My view stipulates that if an epistemic modal claim shows to be part of an exchange (in my sense of the term 'exchange'), then critics of contextualism are right: there is no single

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[7] A. Egan, "Epistemic Modals, Relativism, and Assertion," *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 133(1), 2007, pp. 8–9.

resolution of the contextual parameter for the epistemic use of a modal in the respective claim. However, if an epistemic modal claim is most naturally interpreted as part of a conversation (again, in my sense of that term), then the underdetermination problem does not arise since context, properly construed (explained in next section) offers a single resolution to the under-determinacy regarding the owner of the informational state that in a given context semantically matters.

Brief Introduction to the Framework-Context Contextualism for Epistemic Modals

Having briefly characterized two units of discourse: conversations and exchanges, we are now ready to show how, contrary to the heavy criticism from both contextualists and their rivals, discourse is able to effectively help in determining the epistemic perspective that semantically matters when *conversations* take place. To that end, I introduce two central technical notions that underpin my account of context in terms of *salient framework-context*: 'conceptual representation' and 'frame.' A *conceptual representation* is a mental representation of a communicative situation, constructed through an agent's grasp of its essential features. A *frame* is a set of possible conceptual representations of a given situation.

Conceptual representations within the same frame may vary in their degree of conceptual clarity and their adequacy in accommodating the salient information provided by the situation. Naturally, both the number and adequacy of these representations depend on the extent and quality of the agent's knowledge of the situation-determining features—that is, those physical and cognitive aspects of the context that render it interpretable as a situation.

On this account, the notion of a *situation* is substantive. It is not merely a state of affairs, as it is often treated in the literature,[8] but rather an agent's interpretation of such a state of affairs, guided by the question: "What is it about?" In other words, a situation, for present purposes, is what an agent takes a given context to be, in light of their attempt to identify its core significance.

The core thesis of *framework-context contextualism* (FCC) can now be stated: communicative situations are apprehended through concepts that track their essential features. These concepts both articulate the agent's interpretation of what is going on and constrain the informational bound-

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8 *Cf.* J. Barwise, J. Perry, *Situations and Attitudes*, Cambridge (MA) – London 1983.

aries relevant to that interpretation. By identifying the salient features of a concrete situation, the relevant concept generates a *frame*, which in turn defines a *framework-context*—a context understood as falling under a particular type of situation.

Framework-contexts, in my terminology, are thus contextually grounded interpretations of particular communicative situations, organized by the conceptual features that allow those situations to be classified under a general type. Hence the term 'framework-context.'

To summarize the view in slogan form: without the relevant concepts that frame which features of a context count for the purposes of interpreting a modal expression (e.g., epistemic, deontic), context remains undifferentiated—an amorphous mass, or *magma*.

However, and this is crucial, in ordinary *conversational* circumstances we do not float in a contextual magma. Framework-context contextualism is designed to explain how we navigate through contextual opportunities to finally land in *a context* that truly matters for the purpose of a given communicative situation.

As should now be clear, framework-context contextualism (FCC) builds on a novel conception of context, structured in terms of both *framework-context* and *super-framework context*. A *framework-context* refers to an agent's interpretation of what is going on in a given situation. In contrast, a *super-framework context*, as the prefix suggests, involves a higher-order selection among framework-contexts. Its identification requires more than merely grasping the aboutness of a situation; it demands recognition that the situation, due to its inherent ambiguity and potential for conflicting interpretations, calls for a more general perspective to uncover its genuine character.

FCC maintains—though without full argument in this paper—that the identification of the most contextually salient super-framework context is guided by a question: how do the available framework-contexts (that is, competing conceptual interpretations of the situation) align with the conversational goal operative in that context?

Consider a brief illustration. Suppose two individuals are deciding which horse to bet on. The context can be construed in at least two ways: one in which an epistemic question governs—"What do we know about the past performance of the horses?"—and another in which a practical question governs—"What should we do?" Notably, these questions may yield divergent and even conflicting prescriptions. The available evidence might strongly support betting on horse A, while hearsay or intuitive judgment might favor horse B.

I maintain that the governing question—epistemic or practical—determines the most appropriate framework-context, and thereby the most accurate interpretation of the situation.

What is also important is that the FCC rejects the widely accepted notion in modal semantics—bare modals. Precisely, the FCC rejects the view that the notion of bare modals helps to understand the nature of modals. If the FCC is tenable, then it does not. FCC holds that the notion of bare modals (to be explained in a moment) applies to those utterances of modals that are not properly construed as part of conversation.

So, what bare modals are? Bare modals are modals that lack explicit restrictor in the linguistic material. "The keys might be in the car" or "Joe should be in his office right now" are clear examples of bare modals because sentences in question do not mention the phrase "in view of…" or its semantic counterpart. The problem with the idea of bare modals, as an adherent of the FCC sees it, is that it does not work outside the region of pure semantics in which theoreticians are occupied with sentences construed as independent units of semantic content. In real life when we enter communicative situations, we do not enter 'blank' situations, that is, we do not enter 'empty' communicative contexts which we begin to mold from the very moment in which we decide to speak up. Even if we do not give a thought to what context[9] we are in, the fact that we already are in some *situation*, depictable one way or another, is striking evidence that we are in a framework-context, to use my terminology. This is so because the situation in which we find ourselves is graspable with use of relevant concepts which in turn frame the considered context by setting constraints on available interpretations of the nature of the respective situation. Notice that when communicative situation is approached from the offered perspective, the putative 'bare' character of modals judged upon the linguistic material in fact is a fiction because it is the type of the discourse unit (i.e. conversation or exchange) in question that delivers the proper resolution for linguistically marked modal's underdeterminacy. If bare modal is used in a conversation, the underdeterminacy is to be happily resolved. If, on the other hand, bare modal is employed in an exchange (on my understanding of what exchange is), then underdeterminacy remains sustained. It is important to stress that in both cases contextualism is not challenged since it either solves the UP (when conversations come into play) or explains away the impossibility of stable resolution to contextual underdeterminacy in case of exchanges, re-

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[9] If not stated otherwise, by 'context' I understand a concrete situation in which a form of communication: conversation or exchange (in my sense of these terms) takes place.

vealing that the impossibility in question has nothing to do with the potency or the impotency of context as such, but rather is connected with the nature of the type of discourse that exchanges represent.

Framework-Context in Action

It is interesting to observe that when viewed from the already introduced outlook on the discourse that have types, with these types setting constraints on what context can or cannot do when one or the other type of discourse takes place, most examples discussed in the relevant literature as examples of epistemic modals used in *conversations* are not what they are. The reason why is simple: these examples are too underdescribed. If a person A says to a person B: "The keys might be in the car" to which a person B responds: "No, they might be on the desk," what we are justified to say about their communicative context is simply that they exchange views on the possible whereabouts of the keys in question. Period. However, and that is crucial, it is difficult to believe that when people A and B talk, we lack more information about the background of their communicative interaction. However, the more we learn about the details of the circumstances, the relevant common ground, etc., the more reason is there to assume that the considered communicative interaction meets my criteria for conversation. To see what I have in mind, notice that A's saying that the keys might be in the car may be situated in variety of contexts such as, say, A's searching for the keys in assistance with a roommate, A's searching for the keys alone when a postman comes, A's searching the keys with assistance of a neighbor and so on and so forth. The FCC proposes that the choice of the description of the situation in terms of its salient features navigates onto the relevant concepts that capture the essence of the situation. Suppose that for the context in which A and B are in a communicative interaction, the concepts that most accurately capture the essence of what's going on there are: 'searching for the keys' – 'household.' In fact, the FCC holds that 'SEARCHING FOR THE KEYS—HOUSEHOLD'[10] is a framework-context (henceforth FC for short) for the communicative situation between them. Now, if we have figured out a relevant FC (recall that there may be more than one relevant FC depending on the level of generality that guides one's selection of fitting framework-contexts), that very FC determines the modal's restrictor.

How does it do so, you may ask? How can the FC 'SEARCHING FOR THE KEYS—HOUSEHOLD' be able to determine *whose* epistemic

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[10] I use capital letters to graphically represent framework-contexts.

perspective contributes to what is said in the sentence which you produce: "The keys might be in the car?" Crudely, how *a situation* can tell us whose epistemic perspective is the one that contextually counts? An adherent of the FCC like me is eager to answer that it can, but she will also stress that the question is ill-posed. The answer provided by the FCC to the considered question goes roundabout. This is so because determination of the agential perspective (answering the 'whose' question) that is contextually salient is an effect of prior determination of the kind of perspective that matters within the adopted FC. So, if we operate within the FC 'SEARCHING FOR THE KEYS—HOUSEHOLD,' our primary job is to figure out the sort of epistemic perspective that is okay in this FC. Once we establish what sort of information seems to be of relevance if people from the same household are searching for keys to the apartment that belongs to one of them and given what we know about the reliability of each of the keys-searchers, we are closer to working out an answer to the 'whose' question. Importantly though, on the FCC, we do not deal with the 'whose' question directly because according to the FCC the owner of relevant informational state (a particular agent or agents) is/are interesting insofar as she/they is/are the transmitter of the epistemic perspective that originally belongs to a situational context. It is the situational context construed in terms of relevant FC that is the source of salient epistemic perspective in the FCC and not agent or agents.[11] Key reason for removing salience from mental states of agents and for placing it instead on situations interpreted in terms of relevant framework-contexts is that unless we recognize the nature of a particular context and understand what the situation is all about, there indeed is no stable constraint on the choice of information that matters because we do not have access to speakers' mental states. Since we do not know in view of what evidence or information you formulate your epistemic judgment, the FCC proposes to leave determination of salient epistemic perspective to the situational context construed under the guise of relevant framework-context that captures most aptly the crux of the situational "what is going on?"

It is important to bear in mind that the 'whose' question about which contextualists, as well as their opponents, get rather obsessed—astonishingly, to my personal view—assumes that it is the role of contextualism for epistemic modals to pinpoint a concrete *agential* perspective. Unless contextualism explicitly addresses the 'whose' question and indicates the concrete person(s) whose informational state count(s), it proves to fall flat.

[11] For more on construal of the perspective in the framework-context contextualism see J. Klimczyk "The Framework-contextualist Approach to Context and Perspective in Semantics of Epistemic Modals," *Studia Semiotyczne* (forthcoming).

However, this assumption behind interpretation of contextualism is a substantive assumption and not part of contextualism as such.[12] Contextualism to be plausible must simply offer a contextualist solution to the problem of how to principally determine value parameters for respective modals and not offer an agent-centric solution to it. It is not as if contextualism must be agent-centric or collapse! Another option is on the sleeve. This other option is a context-centric, precisely the framework-context-centric approach that the FCC advocates.

To see how the context-centrism operates from within the FCC, return to the FC 'SEARCHING FOR THE KEYS—HOUSEHOLD.' What we learn on conceptual grounds with little help of unsophisticated inferences is that the sort of information that strikes FC-relevant is some which is associated with the insider sort of perspective. Finally, this is what the word 'household' suggests. There is a pro tanto reason to assume that people who live under the same roof have a sort of insight into each other's everyday habits like placing petty stuff of everyday importance such as the keys to the apartment. 'Insider sort of perspective,' I stipulate, is perspective that belongs to someone who is acquainted with the context in question through first-person access to it. A roommate, a wife, a child—they all have the insider perspective within the FC under consideration.

So far then, the concepts under which we consider our situation (i.e., the FC) provide us with at least three substantive information being respectively: (i) that both of us (i.e., protagonists of my keys-scenario) are expected to know something about each other's traits of characters, daily routine, etc., (ii) that in view of (i) and unless some relevant respects come into play, such as lack of reliability of one of us, there is good reason to assume that the possibility of the respective keys being in the car is compatible with the information that we together—as a group of agents—have, and (iii) that within given

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[12] Interestingly, big sceptics about the power of context such as von Fintel and Gillies admit that contextualism offers a plenty of answers to the question of how context "decides to pool information" (*cf.* K. von Fintel, A. S. Gillies, "Might Made Right," p. 6), nevertheless they are unhappy about how adherents of contextualism cash out what in a context counts as "within epistemic reach" (to use Egan's phrase, A. Egan, "Epistemic Modals, Relativism, and Assertion," pp. 8–9). Notice that if the FCC is tenable, then it clearly delineates what is within contextually salient epistemic reach: the information/evidence/knowledge selected by the relevant FC under which given situational context falls. What the FCC proposes seems to be compatible also with Hacking's idea that what contextually counts is what is achieved through "practicable investigations" (I. Hacking, "Possibility," *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 76(2), 1967, pp. 143–168) since the relevant FC which according to the FCC offers a resolution to the contextual indeterminacy is nicely comprehended as an output of some practicable investigation aimed at understanding the essence of the communicative situation in question.

FC knowledge of an outsider to the FC, say, an inspector who unbeknownst to us monitors our apartment and knows where the keys are is irrelevant.

Here is the moment for a sceptic to interrupt our considerations and notice that what we learn from the FCC about the epistemic perspective that contextually matters in the considered FC is not much since contextualists of any brand (flexible contextualists, discourse contextualists, etc.) mention these three options: the information/evidence/knowledge that counts belongs to the speaker, the hearer or the group agent. No other option comes into play.

I think that sceptic is unfair in her remark because the FCC does tell us something that other versions of contextualism either are reluctant to admit or do not take it into account. The "something in question" that the FCC stresses from the beginning is that all sort of information/evidence/knowledge that does not make a match with the relevant FC (precisely: with the conceptual frames adopted as a guide to the understanding of the epistemic nature of the situation in question) is ruled out offhand. Thus, in the discussed keys-example the sort of information barred relevance is, say, the investigator's information based on video recording from hidden cameras in our house. Why is the investigator's information excluded from the reservoir of information taken to be salient in the FC under consideration, i.e., 'SEARCHING FOR THE KEYS—HOUSEHOLD?' Obviously, this is not so because the investigator's information is irrelevant since in a sense it is most strictly relevant to the topic, and moreover true (finally, the investigator *knows* where I put the keys, the camera recorded that moment). Truth has the highest epistemic vibe, nevertheless the FCC rejects the popular view that better information always triumphs over worse information.[13] What settles whether a piece of knowledge on the issue under inquiry is to be included into the set of contextually salient body of information is its accessibility from within a FC that offers an apt interpretation of the situational "what's going on?". When approached from this perspective, it should be now clear why the inspector's information is denied the (FC) contextual salience. The explanation is simple: the situation in question has been conceptually framed 'SEARCHING FOR THE KEYS—HOUSEHOLD' to mark that epistemic perspective that conversationally counts belongs to members of the household (or to be more precise: to persons who possess the information associated with the position of members of the respective household). Period. If the FC is 'SEARCHING FOR THE KEYS' simpliciter, then what the investigator

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[13] J. Ross, M. Schroeder, "Reversibility or Disagreement," *Mind*, Vol. 122 (485), 2013, pp. 43–84.

or James Bond knows would be acceptable and their informational states would have to be taken as candidates for values of the considered modal's parameter. If this is not what happens, the explanation delivered by the FCC is that what these persons know come from the outside of the FC that offers a most accurate interpretation of the nature of the contextual situation.

The reason why my view does not, as a matter of principle, prioritize better knowledge over 'worse' knowledge is that such practice is not our way of handling real life situations of ignorance. To put it bluntly, if I am about to find my keys, I do not wait for God to give me the answer (he certainly knows where my keys are). In ordinary circumstances we tend to operate within the epistemic boundaries set by the nature of our situation which we recognize because we understand that our life contexts usually are not contexts in which true information or certain knowledge is available.

According to the FCC, what semantically matters for accounting for the discourse-salient meaning of an epistemic modal is thus not just the value of the information possessed, but rather whether that information, evidence or knowledge is compatible with the conceptual frames (i.e., a relevant FC in my terminology) under which the communicative situation in question is to be *properly* considered. And this is so, I contend, because it is the only sort of epistemic perspective that it makes sense to expect of us to have.

When Things Get Complicated: Context Matters Through Framework-Context or Super-Framework Context

Let me briefly summarize what the FCC holds, and then illustrate how, depending on the nature of the communicative situation, more than one *sort* of framework-context can participate in resolving the underdetermination challenge.

Recall that framework-context contextualism, as the name suggests, takes the notion of framework-context to be the key explanatory notion in figuring out the conversationally salient meaning of an epistemic modal. 'Framework-context' is a technical term I have coined, representing our understanding of a conversational situation through concepts that seem to capture the essence of the conversational encounter, or in short: what is it all about? I also hold that concept or concepts that get the nature of a conversational encounter aright frame that context by setting conceptual constraints on what sort of information, evidence or knowledge counts in *it*. But here appears the first complication. Conversational context may be conceptualized differently depending on the utmost extra-semantic goal of

a conversation. And then it turns out that the same conversational situations give rise to interpretations in terms of framework-contexts that finally select clashing epistemic perspectives. To deal with this sort of cases, the FCC introduces another theoretical tool—the notion of super-framework context. Super-framework context, roughly speaking, is an interpretation of the essence of the conversational encounter done under the guidance of the recognition of the real goal of a given conversation. This 'real' goal is discovered by identifying the reason that explains one's interest in the participation in a given conversation. In case of epistemic modals, the reason in question is either purely epistemic, or to use another phrase of mine, "epistemic in the service of practical decision." We either want to know the truth about how things are or how what we know serves attaining our goal. In this second case, it usually turns out that our selection of contextually salient information, consciously or not, is driven by the stake of not taking it into account. The two goals: *purely epistemic* and *epistemic in the service of practical decision* constitute what I call 'super-framework contexts' (henceforth SFC for short). Now, for conversations with use of epistemic modals to which the notion of the super-framework context applies, it is the relevant SFC that predetermines FCs fitting the nature of the concrete conversational context. Quick explanation of what I mean. Suppose we operate under the SFC being *epistemic in the service of practical decision* since we have worked out that this SFC most accurately sets contextual frames for a considered piece of conversation. Now, what we learn straightforwardly upon the choice of the SFC in question is that this SFC will filter out any sort of information that either shows incompatible or simply is too demanding to accept in view of the adopted practical goal. The FCC assumes that the process of selection of contextually salient FCs that goes under the guidance of the relevant SFC runs unconsciously. Once FCs that put too severe epistemic standards are eliminated, call for most appropriate interpretation of the situational "what's going on?" in terms of framework-context is open, so to speak. When a most apt FC from within the considered SFC gets selected, the epistemic perspective that strikes as most salient to the sort of context (i.e., the FC) in question awaits figuring out in the way already presented when we discussed how framework-context works. Let me now illustrate what I have in mind when I am speaking about super-framework context. To that aim, I shall discuss a modified version of MacFarlane's famous horse-betting example, BET*.[14]

BET*: Suppose we go together on a horse race with joint intention of

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[14] J. MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity. Relative Truth and Its Applications*, Oxford 2014, p. 284–285.

putting our bet on a horse that is going to win the race. We want to multiply our money and buy one ticket. Suppose that, as far as we both know on the ground of reliable and verified information, there are only two horses that our evidence suggests considering as potential winners: Exploder and Blue Blazer. Suppose next that we both share the view that Blue Blazer is a horse with better record of winning races than Exploder, but Exploder is quite an unpredictable horse and when it runs fast, it is often faster than Blue Blazer. Imagine then that I say to you: "Blue Blazer should win," which is to be read as follows: in view of the information that we both have, there is more reason to put bet on Blue Blazer than on Exploder.

I assume that from the above plot the reader expects, like myself who is a protagonist in the considered story, that my interlocutor will show her agreement with my judgment by saying words like: "You are right, Blue Blazer should win. Let's put our money on him." However, and surprisingly, my interlocutor answers against my expectation: "No, Exploder might win. Have you forgotten that she is an unpredictable sort of horse? Moreover, and more importantly, when I was in the toilet, I overheard[15] the information that the race is fixed, and that Blue Blazer will not win, he will be suffering the effects of a soporific drug." I take BET* to show us something important about potential shortcomings of the choice of contextually salient FC upon mere understanding of the nature of the situational context and the limits it sets on the selection of epistemically salient information within given FC. The shortcoming in question is underappreciation of the role of practical interest in deciding the epistemic value of the information that contextually matters.[16] Before the information about the drugged Blue Blazer was collected, it was obvious for both interlocutors that the information in view of which they should assess the chances of winning of a particular horse are to be based on the facts about past successes of the respective horses. Now, when they realized that the race might be fixed, they no longer are so decided in their views regarding which horse should win.

[15] Notice that in my example the information about which horse is supposed to win is not confirmed, a protagonist in my example overheard the name of the 'expected horse winner' in a toilet. My example is so scarcely depicted that we have no idea about the value of that eavesdropped information, and thence we have no reason to believe it without reservation. Finally, it is possible that the information is misleading and that it was intentionally spread in smart way to discourage rival gamblers from putting their bet on the expected horse winner.

[16] The FCC for modals nicely squares with Stanley's views presented in his illuminating 2008 book in which he argues that what one knows at a given time is partly determined by one's practical interests. *Cf.* J. Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, Oxford 2008.

What does the possibility of the corrupted horse race teach us about the discourse semantics for epistemic modals? It teaches us something revelatory which is this: choice of contextually salient information is not always governed by purely epistemic reasons such as the quality of the gathered information. It may be based on stakes associated with potential decisions based upon the possessed information. Having this in mind, it seems more natural to think that a salient FC for the BET* is not, say, 'GAMBLING,' but rather 'WINNING AT ANY COST.' Why think so? The answer provided by the FCC is that if we think of what is going on in the BET* under the guidance of the concept GAMBLING (which here is also a salient FC), then it is natural that we are inclined to trust the verified information about past successes of both horses and give priority to that information over a hearsay. However, if we think that what is going on in the BET* is more accurately accounted for under the conceptual framework 'WINNING AT ANY COST,' then the overheard information, regardless of its quality which is unknown, becomes relevant since acting on it may make us the winners.

Concluding Remarks

This paper aimed to demonstrate that contextualist semantics for modals is not inevitably threatened by the underdetermination problem. The perception of contextualism as flawed in this regard, upon my understanding, stems from two primary sources. First, there is a reliance on a unifying concept of situational context that conflates context of utterance and context of conversation. Whereas the former is a basic sort of context in semantics meant to apply to a single utterance with context-sensitive expression, analyzed following core Kaplan's parameters: location, time, agent, a world, the latter is reserved to apply only to some type of discourse: conversations (construed along my proposal). Bearing in mind these two conceptions of situational context, it is easier to understand how one and the same statement as "The keys might be in the car" when interpreted just as an utterance may show incurably ambiguous, but when interpreted as part of a conversation has a clear meaning because the relevant FC or SFC determines the epistemic perspective that counts. Since according to the FCC epistemic perspective is created by the context and belongs to the context, knowing it is equivalent with identifying core qualities associated with that epistemic perspective. So, if the context of our keys-example is most appropriately construed under the interpretation provided by the FC 'SEARCHING FOR THE KEYS—HOUSEHOLD,' then the identification of the agent(s) whose informational state count(s)—answering the famous 'whose' question—goes

by working out to whom of the candidate agents involved in the conversation the epistemic perspective 'born' of the FC can be ascribed. Second, there exists a flawed understanding of discourse that fails to distinguish between conversations and exchanges, construed as different types of discourse forming independent units of semantic analysis.

I hope to have rendered attractive the idea that contextualism is not inevitably threatened to fail due to the nature of its key element: context. The upshot of my considerations presented in this paper is that context can be truly helpful in solving the annoying semantic indeterminacies if only we are ready to think outside the box about context(s) relevant to the theory of meaning and communication. ∽

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