

Meaning, Contexts and Justification

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Abstract. Contextualism in philosophy of language and in epistemology are two distinct but closely entangled projects. The epistemological thesis is grounded in a semantic claim concerning the context-sensitivity of the predicate “know”: we gain insight into epistemological problems by investigating our linguistic intuitions concerning knowledge attribution sentences. Our aim here is to evaluate the plausibility of a project that takes the opposite starting point: the general idea is to establish the semantic contextualist thesis on the epistemological one. According to semantic contextualism, virtually no sentences of a natural language express complete propositions – meaning underdetermines truth conditions. In our paper, instead of assuming the traditional view of meaning in terms of truth conditions, we suggest that a theory of meaning as justification may shed new light on the contextualist approach. We thus show how the notion of justification can be contextualized, arguing that our attempt provides an interesting and quite straightforward way of contextualizing meaning.

1 Introduction

Epistemological contextualism and semantic contextualism are two distinct but closely entangled projects in contemporary philosophy. According to epistemological contextualism, our knowledge attributions are context-sensitive.¹ That is, the truth-conditions of knowledge ascribing sentences – sentences of the form of

(1) S knows that p -

vary depending on the context in which they are uttered: the predicate “know” is context-dependent. According to the classic view in epistemology, knowledge is justified true belief. Invariantism claims that there is *one and only one* epistemic standard for knowledge. On the contrary, contextualism admits the legitimacy of *several* epistemic standards that vary with the context of use of (1); it is right to claim – for the same cognitive subject S and the same proposition p – that (1) is true in one context, and false in another.

¹ Cf. DeRose (1992), (1996), (1999), (2002), and (2004); Cohen (1999); Hawthorne (2004); Stanley (2004).

The epistemological contextualist thesis is grounded in a semantic claim about the context-sensitivity of the predicate “know”: we can gain insight into epistemological problems² by investigating our linguistic intuitions concerning knowledge attribution sentences. Broadly speaking, the semantic thesis grounding epistemological contextualism is that a sentence of the form (1) does not express a complete proposition. Different utterances of (1) can, in different contexts of utterance, express different propositions. The proposition expressed by a knowledge attribution is determined in part by the context of use: we must add in information about the context in order to determine the proposition expressed by (1). If we fill in the gaps by appealing to low epistemic standards, (1) might be evaluated as expressing a true proposition; if, in a different context, we fill in the gaps by appealing to high epistemic standards, (1) might be evaluated as expressing a false proposition.

Many scholars have tried to spell out the semantic contextualist thesis on which epistemological contextualism is grounded.³ Their goal is to examine various kinds of linguistic context dependence, and to assess their relevance to epistemological contextualism: ellipsis, ambiguity, indexicality, context-sensitivity of scalar predicates and dependence on standards of precision.

Our general aim in this paper is to evaluate the plausibility of a project that takes the opposite starting point, i.e. that of establishing the semantic contextualist thesis on the epistemological one. Our paper is structured as follows. In section 2 a standard version of semantic contextualism is presented. According to contextualism in philosophy of language, the truth conditions of any sentence are not fixed by the semantics of the sentence: different utterances of the same sentence can, in different contexts, express different propositions. In section 3 a theory of meaning is sketched according to which the meaning of an assertion is its justification: our account is based on Wittgenstein's view of language and Dummett's theory of meaning as justification. In section 4, following Annis (1978), we show how the notion of justification can be contextualized. *S* may be justified in uttering *p* in context *C*₁, but not justified in uttering *p* in context *C*₂: justification depends on a specific issue-context, which determines the appropriate objector-group. In section 5 and in the conclusion, we argue that if Annis' attempt is sound, it could provide an interesting and quite straightforward way of contextualizing meaning.

2 Semantic Contextualism

As Kent Bach rightly points out, epistemological contextualism is a semantic thesis about a given expression, or a family of expressions – namely about “know” and knowledge-ascribing sentences. According to Bach, this sort of contextualism is not to be confused with contextualism in philosophy of language. Here the term is used for a radical thesis concerning virtually *all sentences*: no sentences express complete propositions – meaning underdetermines truth-conditions.⁴

² Especially skepticism: see DeRose (1995) and Williams (1999).

³ Cf. Schiffer (1996), Stalnaker (2004), Stanley (2004), Partee (2004), Bianchi & Vassallo (2005), and DeRose (2005).

⁴ Bach (2005), p. 54n.

2.1 The Standard View

First of all, let us briefly characterize the traditional image of language.⁵ According to the Standard View in semantics, the expressions of a natural language have stable meanings fixed by language conventions, and truth conditions determined once and for all. More particularly: a) every expression has a conventional meaning - a meaning determined by the form of the expression; b) the meaning of a sentence is identified with the truth conditions of the sentence; c) the meaning of a complex expression is a function of the meanings of its parts.

2.2 Semantic Underdetermination

According to the Standard View, if we abstract from ellipsis, ambiguity and indexicality strictly understood⁶, it is possible to attribute truth conditions to a sentence independently of its context, that is in virtue of its meaning alone. Over the past thirty years, however, linguists and philosophers have begun to underline the phenomenon of *semantic underdetermination*, that is the fact that the encoded meaning of the linguistic expressions employed by a speaker underdetermines the proposition explicitly expressed by the utterance. According to contextualism⁷, most sentences of a natural language do not express complete propositions, and hence do not have fixed truth-conditions – even when unambiguous and devoid of indexicals. Every utterance expresses a proposition only when completed and enriched with pragmatic constituents that do not correspond to any syntactic element of the sentence (neither an explicit constituent, as in cases of syntactic ellipsis, nor a hidden indexical present at the level of the logical form of the sentence) and yet are part of the semantic interpretation of the utterance.

2.3 Wittgenstein, Searle and Travis

Contextualism is a view suggested by the later Wittgenstein. The motto "meaning is use"⁸ is one of the most notorious and controversial of Wittgensteinian theses. Ordinary language philosophy⁹ and, as a result, contemporary contextualism are based on interpretations of this very thesis: to understand a word is to know how to use it.

⁵ Held by philosophers and logicians like Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, the earlier Ludwig Wittgenstein, Alfred Tarski and Willard Quine, and nowadays by model-theoretic semanticists.

⁶ That is concerning only a small number of expressions such as true indexicals and demonstratives.

⁷ The individuation of a single "contextualist paradigm" is far from obvious; it is nonetheless possible to identify a general research program, common to several authors, in the works, initially, of John Searle and Charles Travis, and more recently of Kent Bach, Robyn Carston, François Recanati, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson. The labels are different: "pragmatic view" (Travis (1997)), "contextualism" or "truth-conditional pragmatics" (Recanati (1993) and Carston (2002)), "inferential communicative model" (Sperber & Wilson (1986/1995)).

⁸ Cf. Wittgenstein (1953) § 43: "For a large class of cases - though not for *all* - in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language".

⁹ The later Wittgenstein, Friedrich Waismann, John Austin, Paul Grice, Peter Strawson.

Most contextualists ascribe to Wittgenstein the view that semantic underdetermination is *essential* to natural language. John Searle and Charles Travis explicitly take their thought experiments and their methodology from Austin and Wittgenstein.¹⁰ For rather innocent sentences like

- (2) The cat is on the mat,
- (3) Bill cut the grass,
- (4) There is milk in the refrigerator,
- (5) Tom opened the door,
- (6) Bob opened his eyes,
- (7) The surgeon opened the wound,
- (8) Sally opened the can.¹¹

Searle and Travis set up anomalous or strange contexts: the cat and the mat are traveling in interstellar space, Bill is cutting grass like a cake, Tom is opening the door with a knife, the refrigerator is filled wall-to-wall with milk, prepared to trap the unwary opener in a deluge. These examples are meant to show that every sentence has a literal meaning only against a background of contextual assumptions fixing its truth conditions: the background states, for example, that gravitation is, or is not, effective, or the way people "normally" cut things, and grass in particular, or open doors, eyes, or wounds. What is more, this background is not unique, constant or fixed once and for all: it may change with different occasions of use. Consequently, Searle and Travis argue, following Wittgenstein, that the semantic properties of an expression depend on the context of use of the expression: the conventional meaning of a sentence, if taken independently of any context whatsoever, underdetermines its truth conditions. In examples (5) – (8), the conventional meaning of *open* does not change, but its interpretation is different in each sentence: so, for example, we could ask ourselves if (5) would be true, if Tom opened the door with a can opener, or a scalpel. What satisfies the application conditions of *open* is different in each case: the stable, conventional meaning of the predicate seems to determine a different contribution to the truth conditions of each sentence. Following Searle and Travis, contextualism criticizes the thesis - essential to the Standard View - according to which there are stable meanings conventionally associated with linguistic expressions, and sets of truth conditions conventionally associated with sentences.

3 Meaning as Justification

We have said that contextualism is a view many scholars ascribe to the later Wittgenstein and to his motto "meaning is use": to understand a word is to know how to use it in a variety of different contexts. This very idea was fundamental for Logical Positivism's thesis "the meaning of a sentence is its verification condition"¹²; it can be traced to Sellars and his inferential theory of meaning, and, more recently, to

¹⁰ Cf. Wittgenstein (1953) and Austin (1961). See Searle (1979), (1980) and (1992), and Travis (1975), (1981), (1985), (1989), (1996), (1997) and (2000).

¹¹ Searle (1983), p. 147.

¹² Cf. Carnap (1928) and Ayer (1936).

Brandom.¹³ In this paper we will focus exclusively on Michael Dummett's interpretation of Wittgenstein's slogan.

3.1 “Meaning Is Use”: Wittgenstein and Dummett

According to Dummett,¹⁴ Wittgenstein is suggesting a conception of meaning as justification: as Wittgenstein writes, "it is what is regarded as the justification of an assertion that constitutes the sense of the assertion".¹⁵ Following Wittgenstein, Dummett claims that justification completely exhausts meaning – in other words, the meaning of an assertion is given by its justification or its assertion conditions: "We no longer explain the sense of a statement by stipulating its truth-value in terms of the truth-values of its constituents, but by stipulating when it may be asserted in terms of the conditions under which its constituents may be asserted".¹⁶ In this perspective, semantics and epistemology are entangled: knowing the meaning of a sentence amounts to knowing the justification one must offer for it. In this way, we end up with an *epistemic* account of meaning. Dummett gives a general account of meaning, arguing for a rejection of classical logic, and opposing the traditional view of meaning in terms of truth conditions. This paper will not scrutinize the details of Dummett's or Wittgenstein's proposals¹⁷; nevertheless it may be useful to understand which theory of justification is compatible with their views.

3.2 Foundationalism

In contemporary epistemology we find four main theories of justification: foundationalism, coherentism, reliabilism, and proper functionalism. Foundationalism is the more traditional theory of justification.¹⁸ Its central idea is that beliefs are divided into basic ones and derived ones. The former need no inferential justification, but have an immediate one. The latter are founded on the former and derive their justification from them through deductive and inductive inferences. Basic beliefs are useful to stop the regress of justification, and in fact, according to foundationalism, regress must stop in immediately justified beliefs.

Wittgenstein may be interpreted as holding a foundationalist conception of justification – that distinguishes between basic propositions and inferentially justified propositions: "If you do know that *here is one hand*, we'll grant you all the rest. When one says that such and such a proposition can't be proved, of course that does not mean that it can't be derived from other propositions; any proposition can be derived from other ones. But they may be no more certain than it is itself".¹⁹ Furthermore, Wittgenstein embraces the foundationalist answer to regress: regress must stop in

¹³ Cf. Sellars (1963); Brandom (1994) and (2000).

¹⁴ Cf. Dummett (1976), (1978), and (1979).

¹⁵ Wittgenstein (1969a, I, 40).

¹⁶ Dummett (1978), pp. 17-18.

¹⁷ For a more detailed analysis about both Dummett's theory and our criticisms of meaning as truth conditions, see Vassallo & Bianchi forthcoming.

¹⁸ It has been maintained by Aristotle, Descartes and Locke – to mention a few outstanding philosophers.

¹⁹ Wittgenstein (1969b, 1).

immediately justified beliefs.²⁰ As a matter of fact, he writes: "Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; - but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game";²¹ and "I KNOW that this is my foot. I could not accept any experience as proof to the contrary.- That may be an exclamation; but what *follows* from it? At least that I shall act with a certainty that knows no doubt, in accordance with my belief".²²

As we have said, Dummett's inspiration is Wittgenstein. It is utterly reasonable to claim that both authors hold a foundationalist view about justification and distinguish between basic beliefs – justified by observation and experience - and inferentially justified beliefs.

4 Contextualizing Justification

Epistemology has long been dominated by invariantism, the thesis claiming that there is *one and only one* epistemic standard. The contextualist thesis is quite recent.²³ It admits the legitimacy of several epistemic standards that vary with context of use of

(1) S knows that *p*

or

(9) S is justified in believing that *p*.

So, according to this thesis, it might be right to claim – for the same cognitive subject S – that (1) is true in one context, and is false in another context; the same holds for (9).

The locus classicus of contextualism about justification is David Annis' article "A Contextualist Theory of Epistemic Justification".²⁴ The model of justification proposed by Annis is that of a person's being able to meet certain objections: the key point is the ability of the cognitive subject to reply to objections couched in terms of precise epistemic aims, that is achieving true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs. Concerning a proposition *p*, the epistemic claims of a cognitive subject S may be objected to in two different ways: (A) S is not in a position to know that *p* is true; (B) *p* is false. Because we do not want to have conditions so strong that S cannot satisfy them, not every objection is possible or, at least, S is not required to answer every objection. Objections must be "based on the current evidence available", and "must be a manifestation of a real doubt where the doubt is occasioned by a real life situation".²⁵

²⁰ Cf. Wittgenstein (1969b, 192). But cf. Wittgenstein (1969b, 253) suggesting a different interpretation.

²¹ Wittgenstein (1969b, 204).

²² Wittgenstein (1969b, 360).

²³ See footnote 1.

²⁴ Annis (1978) is a seminal work. There are of course other works that maintain that the notion of justification can be contextualized: see for example Williams (1991) and (1999).

²⁵ It may be said that S "is not required to respond to an objection if *in general* it would be assigned a low probability by the people questioning S". Cf. Annis (1978, p. 207).

The main question is: is S justified in believing that p is true? According to Annis, this question is always relative to an *issue-context* or to a conversational context. Let us suppose that we are going to decide if House – an ordinary person in an ordinary context – is justified in believing that

(10) Polio is caused by a virus.²⁶

We ask House: “Why do you believe it?” We are satisfied if he answers that he has read it in a newspaper and that newspapers are generally reliable, because we apply a rather relaxed epistemic standard – we are in an ordinary context. Of course the same answer is not accepted if the context changes. Let us suppose that the context is an examination for the M.D. degree. We do not judge House to be justified at all in his belief if he appeals to his having read the newspaper, because in this new context we apply a rather elevated epistemic standard. So, with regard to an issue-context a person can be justified in believing a proposition p , and with regard to another issue-context the very same person may not be justified at all in believing the very same proposition. It is evident that the issue-context “determines the level of understanding and knowledge that S must exhibit, and it determines an appropriate objector-group”.²⁷ So, while in an ordinary context, the appropriate objector-group is constituted by ordinary people, in the context of the examination for the M.D. degree it is constituted by qualified medical examiners.

For a better understanding, let us consider another example. Here is Cameron – an ordinary person in an ordinary context (let's say, a party). She is in perfect psychophysical condition and would like to drink a glass of red wine. She grabs a glass of red wine and says:

(11) This wine is red.

Is she justified in believing (11)? The issue-context is an ordinary situation, and it is neither a physics examination, where Cameron would be requested to have a good knowledge of light transmission, nor a cognitive science examination, where Cameron would be requested to have a good knowledge of color perception. The room is an ordinary context where the objector-group is constituted by ordinary people with good perceptual abilities, and cognition of standard perceptive conditions and of causes of perceptual errors. In such a familiar context, objections are not usually raised: Cameron's belief is considered immediately justified and, as such, is to be regarded as contextually basic. But suppose that Chase, who knows that the room is illuminated by a red light, raises the following objection: “The wine might appear red just because of the red light”. If Cameron does not find a way to reply, her belief is to be regarded as unjustified. However, she might answer: “Yes, I know about the red light, but the waiter guaranteed me that the wine is red also under a normal light”. Her belief would be justified in virtue of this answer and, therefore, the justification for (11) would be derived. Given a certain issue-context, if the appropriate objector-group asks S for reasons for her belief, this belief is not a basic one in that context, because it will be derived from reasons and, therefore, from beliefs that are meant to

²⁶ This is, of course, an adaptation of Annis' example: cf. Annis (1978, p. 208).

²⁷ Annis (1978, p. 208).

support it. In the above ordinary context Cameron's belief is obviously derived, because the basic belief is:

(12) Waiters are generally reliable.²⁸

The regress problem seems solved, without the necessity to postulate basic beliefs given forever and so without the possibility of referring to them as the myth of the given: according to contextualism, contextually basic beliefs vary with issue-context.²⁹

According to DeRose, contextualism may be seen as compatible with foundationalism. He writes: "If you're a foundationalist, then if you're also a contextualist, you may well come to think of the issue of which beliefs are properly basic (i.e., the issue of which beliefs are justified to a degree sufficient for knowledge independent of any support they receive from other beliefs), and/or the issue of how strongly supported a belief in the superstructure must be in order to count as knowledge or as a justified belief, to be matters that vary according to features of conversational context".³⁰

5 Contextualizing Meaning

Let us assume that the contextualist account of justification given above is acceptable. What is more, at least according to DeRose, the account is compatible with foundationalism – the theory of justification Dummett is inclined to accept. The notion of justification can be contextualized; it follows that the notion of meaning – if you accept a theory of meaning as justification – can be contextualized.

Let's go back to Searle and Travis' examples:

- (2) The cat is on the mat,
- (3) Bill cut the grass,
- (4) There is milk in the refrigerator,
- (5) Tom opened the door.

As we have said, these examples are meant to show that every sentence has a literal meaning only against a background of contextual assumptions fixing its truth

²⁸ Of course, in a context where waiters' reliability is in question, the belief expressed by (12) will not be basic anymore.

²⁹ Williams proposes a similar solution with his notion of *methodological necessity*: "Not entertaining radical doubts about the age of the Earth or the reliability of documentary evidence is a precondition of doing history *at all*. There are many things that, as historians, we might be dubious about, but not these. *Disciplinary* constraints fix ranges of admissible questions. But what is and is not appropriate in the way of justification may also be strongly influenced by what specific objection has been entered to a given claim or belief. So to disciplinary we must add *dialectical* constraints: constraints reflecting the current state of a particular argument or problem-situation": Williams (1991, p. 117).

³⁰ DeRose (1999, p. 190). Henderson (1994) also claims that contextualism can make use of foundationalism. We must point out, however, that Annis (1978) interprets contextualism as an *alternative* to foundationalism. He considers contextualism superior to foundationalism because the former is able to face the regress problem in a satisfactory way, since it does not postulate beliefs given forever, and is therefore not subject to objections raised against the latter. Cf. also Williams (1991) and (1999).

conditions, and that this background is not unique, constant, fixed once and for all. Now, if we accept an account of meaning as justification along Dummett's lines, we must say that the meaning of (2), for instance, is given by the justification the speaker has to assert (2): knowing the meaning of (2) amounts to knowing the justification one must offer for it. In a foundationalist account, (2) can be a basic proposition or a derived one. If (2) is a basic proposition, it will be justified by observation and experience; if (2) is a derived proposition, its justification will be derived from basic propositions through deductive and inductive inferences.

Moreover, if Annis' proposal is sound, we can contextualize the notion of justification: it is right to claim – for the same cognitive subject *S* – that (2) is justified in one context, and unjustified in another context. When asking whether *S* is justified in believing or asserting (2), we must consider this relative to some specific issue-context, which determines the level of understanding and knowledge required; this in turn determines the appropriate objector-group.

Suppose that Foreman – an ordinary person in an ordinary context – asserts (2): is he justified in his assertion? The issue-context is an ordinary situation and ordinary people constitute the objector-group. In such a familiar context, objections are not usually raised: Foreman's belief is considered immediately justified and, as such, is to be regarded as contextually basic. But suppose that Chase, knowing that House has been fooling around with their new Graviton, raises the following objection: "What if the Graviton is on, and gravitation is no longer effective? How do you know that the cat is on the mat? Maybe there is no gravitational field relative to which the cat is above the mat and they are both floating freely". If Foreman does not find a way to reply, his utterance of (2) is to be regarded as unjustified. However he might answer: "Yes, I know about the Graviton, but I've checked: it is switched off". His belief would be justified in virtue of this answer and, therefore, the justification for (2) would be derived. Given the new issue-context, if the appropriate objector-group asks Foreman reasons for his belief, this belief is not a basic one in that context, because it will be derived from reasons and, therefore, from beliefs that are meant to support it.

Or, let us suppose that we are going to decide whether House – who is having breakfast with Cameron – is justified in believing that

(4) There is milk in the refrigerator.

We ask House: "Why do you believe it?" We are satisfied if he answers that he has just checked, and there was something that looked like a perfectly normal bottle of milk, because we apply a rather relaxed epistemic standard – we are in an ordinary context. The same answer is not accepted if the context changes. Let us suppose that some patient, fed up with House's bad temper, has been trying in various ways to kill him – sabotaging his motorbike, sawing his cane, substituting his pain-killers, poisoning his food. If Cameron raises the following objection: "What if the crazy patient replaced the milk with some poison?", we will no longer judge House justified in uttering (4). In this new context we apply a rather elevated epistemic standard: in order to attribute justification to House, it is necessary that he be able to rule out the possibility raised by Cameron. Of course House is not required to answer *every* objection. But in the crazy patient case, the objection is based on the current evidence available, and is a manifestation of a real doubt, occasioned by a real life situation.

6 Concluding Remarks

Semantic contextualists claim that virtually no sentences of a natural language express complete propositions. The encoded meaning of the linguistic expressions underdetermines the proposition explicitly expressed by the utterance: meaning underdetermines truth conditions. This form of underdetermination threatens the Standard View for at least two reasons. According to contextualism: i) the meaning of *any* sentence underdetermines its truth conditions - underdetermination becomes a *general property* of meaning; ii) the contextual factors that could become relevant for determining the truth conditions of a sentence cannot be specified in advance, and are not codified in the conventional meaning of the sentence. In this paper, we suggest that a theory of meaning as justification provides an interesting and straightforward way of contextualizing meaning – via the contextualization of justification.

In closing, we would like to underline a final point: in many ways Annis' issue-context may be assimilated to Searle's background. The issue context is the specific issue that is being raised, relative to a certain proposition *p*: it establishes the level of understanding and knowledge that *S* must exhibit, determining, in other words, the kind of objections *S* is required to answer. Annis claims that "social information – the beliefs, information and theories of others – plays an important part in justification".³¹ In a similar vein, Searle underlines the point that "as members of our culture we bring to bear on the literal utterance and understanding of a sentence a whole background of information about how nature works and how our culture works".³² However, he goes much further, claiming that not all the elements of the background have propositional content: needless to say, Searle's notion of background owes its non representational nature to Wittgenstein's forms of life. A sentence like (2) expresses a proposition only with regard to certain assumptions, practices, goals and ways of doing things. Assumptions, practices and goals *cannot* be made fully explicit, otherwise we incur an infinite regress. First, assumptions are indefinite in number and content: "we would never know when to stop in spelling out the background"; secondly, each specification of an assumption tends to bring in other assumptions; third, each specification we add needs an interpretation; as Wittgenstein famously put it, "in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after another; as if each one contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another standing behind it".³³

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³¹ Annis (1978), p. 209.

³² Searle (1980), pp. 226–227.

³³ Wittgenstein (1953) § 201; cf. Searle (1980), pp. 228: "The conditions which make representation possible need not themselves all be representations".

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