

GROUNDING SEMANTIC CONTEXTUALISM ON EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONTEXTUALISM

Nicla Vassallo¹ and Claudia Bianchi²

¹Full Professor, Philosophy Department, University of Genoa, via Balbi 4, 16126 Genova, Italy; email: nicla@nous.unige.it; web page: www.dif.unige.it/epi/hp/vassallo

²Associate Professor, Faculty of Philosophy, San Raffaele University, Palazzo Borromeo, 20031 Cesano Maderno (MI), Italy; email: claudia2.bianchi@hsr.it; web page: www.unisr.it/persona.asp?id=361

Abstract

According to Dummett, the meaning of an assertion is given by its justification. In this perspective, semantics and epistemology are strictly entangled: knowing the meaning of a sentence amounts to knowing the justification one must offer for it. Contemporary contextualist epistemologists have influentially shown how the notion of justification can be contextualized: justification depends on a specific context. If we combine Dummett's epistemic account of meaning with a contextualist perspective on justification, we obtain an original outline of a contextualist theory of meaning. In our paper, we develop and assess this account, pointing out some serious drawbacks.

1. Introduction

According to Michael Dummett, the meaning of an assertion is given by its justification: justification completely exhausts meaning.¹ In this perspective, semantics and epistemology are strictly entangled: knowing the meaning of a sentence amounts to knowing the justification one must offer for it. Contemporary contextualist epistemologists have convincingly shown how the notion of justification can be contextualized: justification depends on a specific issue-context. If we combine Dummett's epistemic account of meaning with a contextualist perspective on justification, we obtain an outline of a contextualist theory of meaning.² This theory is undoubtedly new and original, but it suffers of some serious drawbacks.

Our paper is structured as follows. In section 2 an epistemic account of meaning is sketched, based on Wittgenstein's slogan 'meaning is use' and Dummett's theory of meaning as justification. In section 3, we show how a specific notion of justification (the one proposed by foundationalism) 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,

¹ Cf., for example, Dummett (1976), (1978) and (1979).

² We will discuss neither the different varieties of semantic contextualism and epistemological contextualism, nor all their problems. For some of them, cf. Preyer and Peter (2005).

which determines the appropriate objector-group.³ Precisely because of this reference to appropriate objector-groups, the proposal faces a difficulty that we try to overcome. In section 4, we outline a seemingly attractive way of contextualizing meaning, and we point out its major shortcomings. While in Dummett's semantic theory the meaning of an assertion is given by its justification, in epistemology a theory of justification aims to clarify the meaning of the expression 'justification'. We then end up either admitting two different notions of meaning (an unpalatable conclusion) or facing a patent circularity: our theory of meaning is grounded on our theory of justification – while our theory of justification is grounded on our theory of meaning.⁴

2. Meaning as justification and foundationalism

Dummett interprets Wittgenstein's slogan 'meaning is use' as follows: it is the justification of an assertion that constitutes the meaning of the assertion. In other words, the meaning of an assertion is given by the justification of the assertion, or by its conditions of assertibility. For our present purposes it is not necessary to consider the details of Dummett's thesis; it can be nevertheless useful to try to understand if there is some specific theory of justification that he could adopt. In fact, if we do not succeed in finding this theory, our attempt to contextualizing the notion of meaning through the contextualization of the notion of justification is doomed to failure – at least in a Dummettian perspective.

Foundationalism is the more traditional theory of justification. Its central idea is that assertions 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 obtain their justification from them through deductive and inductive inferences. Basic assertions are useful to stop the regress of justification. Aristotle was the first clearly to individuate the problem.⁵

According to him, regress:

- (i) can go on *ad infinitum*;
- (ii) can stop with unjustified assertions;
- (iii) can be circular;
- (iv) can stop in immediately justified assertions.

Foundationalists choose (iv), and judge (i), (ii), and (iii) as unsatisfactory.

When Wittgenstein tries to clarify his slogan 'meaning is use', he says that 'it is what is regarded as the *foundation* of an assertion that constitutes the sense of the assertion'. However in the official English translation we have him

³ Cf. Annis (1978/1996).

⁴ In what follows, we will use 'assertion' instead of 'belief'. This terminological choice – uncommon in epistemology where we normally speak of beliefs – allows us to grasp immediately some epistemological consequences of Dummett's notion of meaning. We will focus on Dummett's philosophy just insofar as it will be necessary to our purposes, and we will speak of assertions in general, without specifying if they are empirical or mathematical. Moreover, we will not deal with well-known critiques raised against the notion of meaning as justification by Prawitz (1977) and Putnam (1979) among others.

⁵ Cf. *Posterior Analytics* I (A), 3.

saying: 'it is what is regarded as the *justification* of an assertion that constitutes the sense of the assertion'.⁶ This is of course the origin of Dummett's conception of meaning as justification. Wittgenstein's reference to 'foundation' is important since he may in fact be interpreted as holding a foundationalist conception of justification – distinguishing between basic propositions and inferentially justified ones: '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'.⁷ Furthermore, though he seems to leave more than one option open, Wittgenstein embraces the foundationalist answer to regress, i.e. (iv)⁸

If now we try to understand if there is some theory of justification that Dummett could adopt, we are inclined to believe that he has in mind foundationalism. On the one hand because, as we said, he gets inspiration for his theory of meaning as justification from Wittgenstein (and Wittgenstein adheres to a version of foundationalism), on the other hand because one of Dummett's strong convictions is the following: most assertions cannot be used as reports of immediate observations and they can be established only through an inference based on what it has been observed; therefore their justification must be inferential.⁹ It is then utterly reasonable to claim that Dummett holds a foundationalist view about justification and distinguishes between basic assertions – justified by observation – and inferentially justified assertions.

3. Contextualizing the notion of justification

Plato was the first to consistently face the problem of justification¹⁰, present throughout the entire history of philosophy. We cannot but recognize that this history has been dominated by invariantism. According to this thesis there is one and only one epistemic standard, and therefore it is wrong to claim – for the same cognitive subject *S* and the same proposition *p* – that

(1) *S* is justified in asserting that *p*
is true in one context, and false in another context. Conversely, the contextualist thesis admits the legitimacy of several epistemic standards that

⁶ Cf. Wittgenstein (1969a, I, 40).

⁷ Wittgenstein (1969b, 1).

⁸ Cf. Wittgenstein (1969b, 192). The problem is then to understand what he means with 'immediately justified assertions'. In 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' (1969b, 204); 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 [assertion]' (1969b, 360). Moreover, in at least one occasion, Wittgenstein seems to accept answer (ii): 'At the foundation of well-founded [assertion] lies [assertion] that is not founded' (1969b, 253). These are however exegetical difficulties that do not concern us here.

⁹ Cf., for example, Dummett (2001, p. 136).

¹⁰ Cf. *Meno* 97e-98a.

vary with 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 context.

David Annis proposes a contextualist account of justification in a foundationalist framework. According to him, S must be able to meet certain objections couched in terms of precise epistemic aims – i.e. achieving true assertions and avoiding false assertions. Concerning a proposition p , the epistemic claims of 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'. 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 '.¹¹ Obviously, these people must pursue the above epistemic aims – looking for truth and avoiding falsity – because, otherwise, their objections will not be appropriate, and S must reply in such a way to produce a general agreement that the force of these objections entirely collapses or, at least, that it is considerably decreased. It is however obvious that S can also reply by noting that the objections are not appropriate, because they are not based on the actual available evidence, or because they are not the result of a real doubt, or because they do not pursue epistemic aims, or because they do not belong to the types (a) or (b).

The question 'Is S justified in asserting that p is true?' is always relative to an issue-context or to a conversational context. For example, let us suppose that we are going to decide if Sophie – an ordinary person in an ordinary context – is justified in asserting that Crete monopolized the trade routes in Eastern Mediterranean during the so-called Minoan Age. We ask Sophie: 'Why do you assert it?'. We are satisfied if she answers that she has read it in an article about Crete on 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. In fact let us suppose that Sophie is taking her bachelor examination in History of Eastern Mediterranean. We do not judge her justified at all in her assertion if she appeals to her reading the newspaper, because in this new context we apply a rather elevated epistemic standard. So, with regard to an issue-context a subject can be justified in asserting a proposition p , and with regard to another issue-context the very same subject may not be justified at all in asserting 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'.¹² So, while in an ordinary context, the appropriate objector-group is constituted by ordinary people, and not by historians, in the above bachelor examination it is surely constituted by historians. Given a certain issue-context, if the appropriate objector-group asks S reasons for her assertion, this assertion is not a basic one in that context, because it will be

¹¹ Annis (1978/1996, p. 207).

¹² Annis (1978/1996, p. 208).

derived from reasons and, therefore, from assertions that are meant to support it. In the above ordinary context Sophie's assertion is obviously derived because the basic assertion is: 'newspapers are generally reliable'. But in a context where newspapers' reliability is in question, the assertion 'newspapers are generally reliable' will not be basic anymore.

The regress problem seems solved, but there is in fact a rather serious difficulty.¹³ Since *S* is not required to respond to an objection if it would be assigned a low probability by the appropriate objector-group, *S* is justified to assert a proposition *p* only if:

- the appropriate objector-group *G* does not ask reasons for *S*'s assertion - because of the low probability assigned to a whatsoever objection *O*: the assertion is contextually basic and justified;
- *G* asks reasons for *S*'s assertion - because of the high probability assigned to *O*: if *S* can adequately answer, her assertion is justified, though not contextually basic but obviously derived (*S* has to appeal to other assertions in order to reply to *O*).

It is important to notice that, regarding basic assertions, it is the appropriate objector-group *G* to assign a low probability to *O*. Consequently this appropriate objector-group *G* must *assert* that a whatsoever objection *O* has a low probability. Let us call *w* the assertion 'O has a low probability' made by *G* and let us ask if *G* is justified in asserting *w*. According to the contextualism under consideration, we must take into account an appropriate objector-group *G*₁ in order to say that *G* is justified to assert *w*. Again, we have two possibilities:

- *G*₁ does not ask reasons for *G*'s assertion - because of the low probability assigned to *O*₁: the assertion is contextually basic and justified;
- *G*₁ asks reasons for *G*'s assertion, because of the high probability assigned to *O*₁: if *G* can adequately answer, the assertion is justified, though not contextually basic, but obviously derived (*G* has to appeal to other assertions in order to reply to objection *O*₁).

But, of course, regarding basic assertions, also *G*₁ has to assign a low probability to *O*₁. So also *G*₁ must *assert* that *O*₁ has a low probability. Let us call *y* the assertion '*O*₁ has a low probability' made by *G*₁ and let us ask if *G*₁ is justified in asserting *y*. We must take once more into account an appropriate objector-group *G*₂ in order to say that *G*₁ is justified to assert *y*, and again:

- *G*₂ does not ask reasons for *G*₁'s assertion - because of the low probability assigned to *O*₂: the assertion is contextually basic and justified;
- *G*₂ asks reasons for *G*₁'s assertion - because of the high probability assigned to *O*₂: if *G*₁ can adequately answer, the assertion is justified, though not contextually basic, but obviously derived (*G*₁ has to appeal to other assertions in order to reply to objection *O*₂).

Our argument can be obviously reiterated with *G*₂ that requires the appropriate objector-group *G*₃, *G*₃ that requires the appropriate objector-group *G*₄, *G*₄ that

¹³ Accounts of this difficulty are present elsewhere: cf., for example, Brady (1998).

requires the appropriate objector-group G_5 , and so on, *ad infinitum*. And if this line of reasoning is reiterable, as it seems, the contextualism under consideration cannot solve the regress problem. In fact, while foundationalism wants the regress to stop in immediately justified assertions – solution (iv) above – contextualism cannot but adopt a regress that goes on *ad infinitum* – solution (i) above.

In order to overcome the above serious difficulty, we can perhaps adhere to a view that does not mention the necessity of any objector-group, but appeals solely to the features of the conversational context, as in Keith DeRose's view:

If you're a foundationalist, then if you're also a contextualist, you may well come to think of the issue of which [assertions] are properly basic (i.e., the issue of which [assertions] are justified to a degree sufficient for knowledge independent of any support they receive from other [assertions]), and/or the issue of how strongly supported an [assertion] in the superstructure must be in order to count as knowledge or as a justified [assertion], to be matters that vary according to features of conversational context.¹⁴

We must however specify in detail the features of the conversational context; sooner or later, we may find 'the appropriate objector-group' between them. So, in order to block the regress and overcome the above difficulty, it is better to turn to Michael Williams' concept of methodological necessity. In order to converse (or to carry out scientific research), we must restrict the possibility of raising objections: it is not permissible to go on asking for justifications, because this would induce us to ignore the conversational constraints:

In both science and ordinary life, constraints on justification are many and various. Not merely that, they shift with context in ways that are probably impossible to reduce to rule. In part, they will have to do with the specific content of whatever claim is at issue. But they will also be decisively influenced by the subject of inquiry to which the claim in question belongs (history, physics, ornithology, etc.). We can call these *topical* or, where some definite subject or distinctive form of inquiry is involved, *disciplinary* constraints... 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 [assertion]. So to disciplinary we must add *dialectical* constraints: constraints reflecting the current state of a particular argument or problem-situation.¹⁵

¹⁴ DeRose (1999, p. 190).

¹⁵ Williams (1991, p. 117).

4. Contextualizing the notion of meaning: some problems

In section 3, we have sketched a plausible contextualist proposal about justification. Our proposal has a crucial feature: it contextualizes foundationalism and foundationalism – as we have shown in section 2 – is the theory of justification Dummett is inclined to accept. At this point, the notion of meaning can be contextualized in a straightforward way. Meaning amounts to justification (as Dummett claims) and justification can be seen in a foundationalist perspective (as we have argued): if we can contextualize foundationalism in a reasonable way, then we can obviously contextualize the notion of meaning, thanks to the contextualization of the notion of justification. So, as promised in section 1, we obtain an original and innovative account of a contextualistic theory of meaning. However, we are well aware that we must face some major problems: let us consider some of them.

First of all, let us take into account the semantic value of assertions containing terms related to justification, as for example 'to be justified'. We have said that, according to contextualism, it is legitimate to state that

(1) *S* is justified in asserting that *p*

is true in one context, and false in another context. Clearly, since the predicates 'true' and 'false' are indispensable for this kind of contextualism, we must appeal to the notion of meaning as truth-conditions, and not to the notion of meaning as justification. It is easier to realize this point if, taking a semantic perspective, we deal with assertions containing 'is justified' as we deal with assertions containing indexicals. The interpretation of an assertion containing an indexical depends on the characteristics of the context in which the assertion is uttered. This means that the interpretation varies with the context of use:

(2) I am Greek

is false if uttered by Alessandro (who is an Italian), and true if uttered by Alexander (who is a Greek). According to Kaplan, we need to distinguish the 'character' from the 'content': in different contexts of use, the character of an assertion containing an indexical is constant, while the content changes; such a character is the linguistic meaning or, better, a function from contexts of utterance to contents, while the content is the sense or the proposition expressed by the assertion.¹⁶ What is, then, the character of (1)? According to DeRose, it is roughly the following: '*S* is in a *good enough* epistemic position with respect to *p*'.¹⁷ And what is the content of (1)? It is how good an epistemic position *S* must be in to count as being justified in asserting that *p* - and this shifts from context to context. Let us now consider the following assertion:

(3) Sophie is justified in asserting that there is some excellent wine in this bottle.

The character of 'is justified' in (3) is invariable. The content varies with the context of attributor, and, in particular, with the epistemic position the attributor requires for the cognitive subject. If I am not a sommelier, but a normal person, I may truly state that (3) is true, if Sophie is in a certain epistemic position: for example, it is clear to her that the wine is of an

¹⁶ Cf. Kaplan (1970) and Kaplan (1989).

¹⁷ DeRose (1992, p. 922).

'appellation contrôlée', that it is palatable and tasty. Of course such a position is not judged good enough, if I am a sommelier, and so in this case I may state that (3) is false. The way in which the truth-conditions of (3) vary with context is not different at all from the way in which the truth-conditions of (2) vary with context. We cannot but admit that our way to contextualize the notion of meaning through the contextualization of the notion of justification presupposes not only the notion of meaning as justification, but also the notion of meaning as truth-conditions.

We have said that a contextualist account of meaning presupposes a notion of meaning as truth-conditions. We can further argue in favour of this very point noticing that all the different theories of justification (foundationalism included) try precisely to clarify the meaning of the expression 'justification', in spite of the well-know problems affecting the very notion of meaning. In this regard, what Alvin I. Goldman states is paradigmatic:

First, while there are doubtless severe theoretical problems concerning the notions of meaning and synonymy, there must *some* substance to the commonsense notions suggested by these terms. Certainly we can distinguish better and worse definitions of a given word, whether dictionary definitions or definitions offered by casual speakers... So there must be *some* phenomenon of meaning that remains to be clearly elucidated. Second, although many philosophers preach the abandonment of analyticity, their practice sometimes belies their preaching. People do things very much *like* conceptual analysis even if they officially reject it. It is hard to do much in epistemology (or other branches of philosophy) without feeling constrained to do something like conceptual analysis.¹⁸

Doing conceptual analysis amounts to present the necessary and sufficient conditions for key epistemological terms, the term 'justification' included. The concept, i.e. the *anlysandum*, is expressed by the pattern '*S* is justified in asserting that *p*', and the analysis by the pattern '*S* is justified in asserting that *p* if and only if...', where the dots must be replaced by the *analysans*, i.e. a list of necessary and sufficient conditions.

In that case, if we follow Dummett in adopting a notion of meaning as justification, and if, in epistemology, we want to define '*S* is justified in asserting that *p*', we cannot but end up with two notions of meaning: the notion of meaning as justification and the notion of meaning as truth-conditions. Since there is an obvious clash between the two notions, this result is not desirable at all. Nevertheless, on the one hand, if we choose to admit just one notion and continue to preserve Dummett's notion, we cannot but opt for the notion of meaning as justification; on the other hand, since it is hard to do much in epistemology without doing something like conceptual analysis, we cannot but try to clarify the meaning of the term 'justification'. It is inevitable at this point – in absence of the notion of meaning as truth-conditions – to run into circularity. We must admit that, in order to clarify the meaning of 'justification',

¹⁸ Goldman (1986, p. 38).

we have to resort to the very notion of meaning as justification: therefore we presuppose the very notion we want to clarify the meaning of, i.e. the notion of justification. Since the notion of meaning as truth-conditions allows us to understand the meaning of 'S is justified in asserting that *p*' without running into any circularity, it seems that there is no other way than to resort once more to the notion of meaning as truth-conditions. Yet, since we cannot admit – for the reasons we have already considered – two different notions of meaning, i.e. the notion of meaning as truth-conditions and the notion of meaning of justification, it seems reasonable to give up the notion of meaning as justification. However, on Dummett's view, this rejection is impossible. As a matter of fact he thinks that the notion of meaning as truth-conditions *requires* the notion of meaning of justification: when we make an assertion, we do not only imply that the assertion is true, but also that we have a justification for its truth.¹⁹

If, by appealing to the notion of meaning as truth-conditions, we cannot avoid the appeal to the notion of meaning as justification, it is impossible to elude the circularity underlined above. Obviously such circularity casts considerable doubts on the success of our attempt to contextualize the notion of meaning through the contextualization of the notion of justification.

5. A brief conclusion

We do wish to preserve our attempt to contextualize the notion of meaning through the contextualization of the notion of justification, and avoid the above circularity: we might then give up the practice of giving necessary and sufficient conditions for the expression 'justification' and consider 'being justified' as a natural kind or a natural propriety. Considering being justified as a natural kind or a natural property leads to investigate justification as a natural phenomenon and consequently to naturalize the very notion of justification.²⁰ If we end up with a naturalized notion of justification and at the same time we maintain a notion of meaning as justification, obviously we must naturalize the notion of meaning as well. However, naturalizing the notion of meaning does not amount to contextualizing it.

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¹⁹ Cf. Dummett (2001, p. 121).

²⁰ A strategy of this kind is clearly present in Kornblith (2002).

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