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ABSTRACT: Contextualists with regard to knowledge argue that the truth of the claim 'x knows that P' is contextually dependent. In doing so, they attempt to articulate the nature of the contextual dependence. Since part of making knowledge claims involves the adequate justification of beliefs, I shall explore whether any epistemic contextualist theories can be modified or adapted to provide an account of the context-dependence of justificatory strength for arguments. I shall conclude that the prospects are not promising.

KEY WORDS: Epistemic justification, sufficient support, argument, context dependence

INTRODUCTION

Some logicians maintain that the correct evaluation of an argument is context dependent. For example, some logicians maintain that whether the premises adequately support the conclusion of a given argument is context dependent. Some epistemologists maintain that the correct attribution of warrant to belief to achieve knowledge is context dependent. For example, some epistemologist maintain that whether your epistemic position is sufficiently strong to make your belief justified or warranted or knowledge is context dependent.

Assume for the moment that both logical contextualism and epistemic contextualism are the case. The primary goal of this paper is to begin to explore the relationship between these two contextualisms. In particular I shall be very interested in the following question—could the mechanisms which underwrite the context dependence of the standards of epistemic justification, i.e. the degree to which one's epistemic position must support one's belief in order for the belief to count as justified, be the same mechanisms which underwrite the context dependence of the standards of the justification the conclusion is required to get from the premises in adequate arguments?

In section I, I shall clarify what is meant by 'context dependence.' In section II, I shall clarify the options for being an epistemic contextualist and for being a logical contextualist and suggest some reasons why the two contextualisms might be related. In sections III, IV, and V, I shall examine the epistemic contextualist views of David Annis, David Lewis, and Keith DeRose respectively. I shall argue that each fails to provide significant insight into the primary question and shall conclude that while at a general level the contextualisms have some common characteristics, at the specific level of epistemic support and premise support of the conclusion there is no evidence that the mechanisms that underwrite these context dependencies are related.

1.

What do we mean when we say that a particular attribute is context dependent? One thing we might mean, but which turns out to be rather trivial, is just that in some situations an entity has the attribute, but in others it does not. But this reading of 'context dependent' is just another way of saying that the attribute in question is a contingent attribute (at least with regard to that entity) and so most properties turn out to be context dependent. For example, on this reading, 'truth' which many would take as a paradigmatic (though not uncontroversial) example of a context independent attribute turns out to be context dependent. After all, in some situations it is true that the grass on my front lawn is green, but in others it is not true.

A much more restrictive understanding of context dependence is the following: An attribute is context dependent just in case the criteria or standards for its correct application vary from context to context. In other words it is not just 'the having of the attribute' which varies from context to context, but rather the 'what it takes to have the attribute' which varies from context to context. For example, 'guilt' is a legally context dependent attribute. In civil court only a preponderance of the evidence is what it takes for a legitimate finding of guilt, but in a criminal court proof beyond a reasonable doubt is required.

We must be careful to distinguish the context dependence of the criteria itself from the *means* of satisfying the criteria. Suppose 'proficiency' with regards to basketball shots is ten baskets in under 30 seconds from the free throw line. Both person A and B get ten baskets in under 30 seconds, but B always requires more shots to get ten baskets than A. For B, what it takes to get ten baskets is more shots than what it takes for A, but this does not make 'proficiency' context dependent—the *means* B must use to satisfy the criteria of proficiency is different from A's, but the *criteria* both must satisfy is the same. Similarly, there may be various means for a prosecutor to establish preponderance of the evidence, but that does not change the fact that the threshold which must be passed to establish 'guilt' in a civil case is just 'more likely true than not.'

2.

An epistemological contextualist then is usually one who claims that the 'knows that' relation in 'x knows that P' is context dependent, i.e. that the criteria for x to know that P can vary from context to context. Let knowledge be warranted belief, where warrant just is whatever it is that makes a belief knowledge. Warrant is usually taken to be justification, truth, and 'something else', where much of epistemology post-Gettier has been devoted to trying to determine what the 'something else' might be. Regardless, if we assume, as I shall, that the criteria for being in a belief state are not context dependent, then, if knowledge is context dependent, it must be warrant that is context dependent.

What is it for warrant to be context dependent? One possibility is that warrant itself in some contexts is merely, say, justification and truth, but in others is justification, truth, and 'something else.' Another possibility is that in some situations the 'something else' is X but in others it is Y. Yet another possibility is that while what justification, truth, and the 'something else' are is constant, the criteria for satisfying at least one of the three are not. In general then, either the criteria set for warrant could change in some way from context to context or what it takes to satisfy at least one member of the criteria set could vary from context to context.

A logical contextualist is often one who claims that the 'adequate' attribute applied to arguments as in 'Argument X is adequate' is context dependent, i.e. that the criteria for X being an adequate argument can vary from context to context. Assume that arguments are ordered sets of reasons and a conclusion. Assume that arguments are adequate if, at the very least, the premises are themselves adequate and the premises sufficiently support the conclusion.

What then is it for adequacy to be context dependent? One possibility is that adequacy itself in some contexts is merely adequate premises which sufficiently support the conclusion, but in others it is some additional criterion X along with adequate premises which sufficiently support the premises. Another possibility is that the criteria for what counts as sufficient support, say, change from context to context. In general then, either the criteria set for adequacy could vary in some way or what it takes to satisfy at least one member of the criteria set could vary from context to context.

Given the numerous ways in which warrant and adequacy could be context dependent, it is quite possible that the two sorts of contextualism are not similar at all. For example, if warrant varies because its criteria set varies, but adequacy varies because the satisfaction conditions of a member of its criteria set (which has no analogue in the warrant set) change, then the two contextualisms will be unrelated. It may also turn out that the conextualisms are related in some, but not all, ways. For example, if warrant varies only because one of its criteria's satisfaction conditions changes, but adequacy varies because both an analogue of the warrant criterion changes and adequacy's criteria set changes then adequacy will turn out to be more context dependent than warrant. [Indeed I suspect that many a philosopher's initial reaction to 'x knows that P' and 'Argument X is adequate' would be that the latter is more context dependent than the former. In addition, many epistemologists reject that 'x knows that P' is context dependent at all, but far more logicians are willing to accept that argument adequacy is context dependent in at least some ways.]

At this point, given the framework above I am going to limit the issue still further. My main interest will be the context dependence of sufficient support. In other words I am looking to see, first, if there is an analogue of sufficient support in the criteria set for warrant and, second, if there is, whether it is context dependent in a way that may be related to the way sufficient support is context dependent.

So is there an analogue of sufficient support in the criteria set of warrant? I maintain that the sufficient support relation is context dependent because I maintain that for premises to sufficiently support the conclusion the actual support the premises provide must be greater than the required support and that required support is context dependent.

But epistemic justification may also be a sort of support relation—my reasons for believing that P are epistemically justificatory just in case they give me enough support for P. Hence, what epistemologists say about the context dependence of epistemic justification may have a bearing on the context dependence of sufficient support in the realm of argument evaluation. [Of course, if it is the 'something else' that is making warrant context dependent, then, without more knowledge of what the 'something else' is, it is hard to see in advance whether the examining various theories of the contextual dependence of warrant will have any bearing on the contextual dependence of sufficient support.]

I turn now to examining some of the mechanisms that have been suggested to account for the alleged context dependence of warrant.

3.

According to David Annis, in 'A Contextual Theory of Epistemic Justification', for '*S* to be justified in believing *h* relative to some specific issue-context, *S* must be able to meet all current objections falling into (A) [that *S* is not in a position to know that *h*] and (B) [that *h* is false] which express a real doubt of the qualified objector group where the objectors are critical truth seekers.' (Annis, p. 295) Put more baldly, for S to be justified in believing h, S must be able to meet all relevant objections. What *is* a relevant objection and what counts as *meeting* a relevant objection will be context dependent, and so epistemic justification is context dependent.

Annis' theory is quite general [and given that his goal is to articulate and defend the reasonability of a contextualist theory of epistemic justification he cannot be criticized for not providing all the details] and clearly has a relation to the general question of whether an argument is adequate or not. Consider, for example, the following comment from *The Uses of Argument*: 'A sound argument, a well-grounded or firmly-backed claim, is one which will stand up to criticism, one for which a case can be presented coming up to the standard required if it is to deserve a favourable verdict' (Toulmin, p. 8).

But even if it is plausible, at a certain level of generality, to say that both adequate arguments and epistemically justified beliefs are ones that can be appropriately defended against all relevant objections, whether there are any specific similarities remains to be seen. Indeed, by focusing on the objector group and the meeting of its objections, Annis obscures the truly relevant underlying contextual features.

According to Annis, 'the importance (value or utility) attached to outcome of accepting h when it is false or rejecting h when it is true is a component of the issue-context' (Annis, p. 295). [I have articulated something similar in earlier work on this topic. (Goddu, 2003)]. However, this conflicts with his own notion of how the objector group sets what counts as a relevant objection. He writes: '[T]o demand a response the objection must be an expression of a real doubt.... S is not required to respond to an objection if in general it would be assigned a low probability by the people questioning S' (Annis, p. 294).

But now consider the following case—a group of doctors is considering the diagnosis put forth by a resident given a certain set of symptoms. All agree that the diagnosis is the most likely answer given the symptoms. There also exist some less likely possibilities—indeed, one of the less likely possibilities is extremely unlikely, but also extremely life threatening if true. The doctors can all agree that the probability is extremely low in this context, but that does not stop it from being an objection that requires response, for the consequences of failing to rule out the extremely unlikely diagnosis can be catastrophic. Hence, what counts as a relevant objection cannot be determined solely in terms of what the objector groups considers high or low probability cases, but must also be influenced by the costs attached to failing to rule out certain possibilities even if the possibilities have very low probabilities.

Later Annis writes:

> [W]e determine whether S is justified in believing h by specifying an issue-context raised within a community of people G with certain social practices and norms of justification. This determines the level of understanding and knowledge S is expected to have and the standards he is to satisfy. The appropriate objector group is a subset of G. To be justified in believing h, S must be able to meet their objections in a way that satisfies their practices and norms. (Annis, p. 296)

Clearly, Annis' articulation here better separates the standards or norms of justification from the objector group whose objections the justified believer must meet. But other than saying that the standards of justification are there and must be met, Annis does not say anything about these standards. What we were looking for, however, is some indication of the mechanism by which these standards are set such that we could see how they vary from context to context. We must look elsewhere.

4.

In 'Elusive Knowledge' David Lewis maintains that S knows proposition P iff P holds in every possibility left uneliminated by S's evidence; equivalently, iff S's evidence eliminate every possibility in which not-P (Lewis, p. 399). But Lewis points out that it cannot be true that we really have to eliminate *every* possibility or else the skeptic wins. Hence, we need to eliminate all the possibilities consistent with my evidence (except the ones we can properly ignore). Which possibilities we can properly ignore is contextually dependent and so knowledge is contextually dependent.

      Though Lewis does not talk in terms of justification or warrant (and indeed gives some comments to suggest that he is not sure these concepts are relevant), what he says can be applied to a notion of warrant, i.e. S is warranted in believing h on the basis of E iff h holds in every relevant possibility left uneliminated by E. The possible relevance to arguments is clear—a premise set P provides sufficient support for a conclusion C iff P leaves no relevant possibility in which C is not true, where what counts as a relevant possibility is determined by contextual elements—what contextual elements? Lewis provides some answers in the case of knowing that h.

      According to Lewis, when we want to know what possibilities can or cannot be properly ignored we appeal to certain rules which determine which features of a particular context are relevant and which are not. For example, according to the rule of actuality, whatever possibility *is* the context in which you are in cannot be ignored and according to the rule of belief, whatever possibilities one ought to give sufficiently high degrees of belief in the context cannot be properly ignored. [What counts as sufficiently high? It depends upon how much is at stake. 'When error would be especially disastrous, few possibilities may be properly ignored' (Lewis, p. 402).] Of particular interest to Lewis is the rule of attention, according to which any possibility attended to is relevant—it is this rule that explains why knowledge is so elusive (at least for epistemologists) for by attending to skeptical possibilities epistemologists can no longer properly ignore them. As a result, relevant possibilities obtain in which P is false given the evidence and so, in the skeptical context at least, one does not know that P.

      To what degree, however, are Lewis' rules for determining which epistemic possibilities can be properly ignored relevant to argument evaluation? The rule of attention, for example, is not relevant—the mere fact that I bring up the possibility that a demon is deceiving us about our probability assessments does not make the possibility an acceptable objection to the calculation of how much support premises actually give a conclusion.

      While I suspect that many of Lewis' rules can be individually shown to have little bearing on argument evaluation, a more general problem exists. Consider the following argument:

George has one ticket.
There were 100,000,000 distinct tickets sold.
<u>At most one ticket won.</u>
George did not win.

The possibility that George's ticket is a winning ticket, while quite improbable, cannot be properly ignored so, according to Lewis, we do not know that George did not win. We do not know that George did not win even though our evidence provides an enormous amount of support to the belief that George did not win. But at the same time, this enormous amount of support will be sufficient in many contexts to accept the conclusion on the basis of the premises—in other words, the argument will be an adequate argument even though we cannot say that we know the conclusion to be true. But this shows that sufficient support for arguments is not a matter of showing that the conclusion is true in all relevant possibilities. We can recognize that George having the winning ticket is a relevant possibility, but still accept the argument because the possibility is so improbable.

Put another way, the problem is that infalibilists about knowledge such as Lewis, are looking for mechanisms that allow us to treat as non-relevant *all* cases in which our belief is false. But unless you are a deductivist, there is no corresponding motivation to seek such mechanisms when judging the adequacy of arguments. After all, in many contexts we do not need *all* relevant possibilities in which the conclusion is false to be eliminated for an argument to be adequate. We can recognize falsifying relevant possibilities, but still hold that the premises sufficiently support the conclusion. For example, consider a civil trial. The jury may easily recognize plenty of scenarios consistent with the evidence in which the accused is not guilty. But if a preponderance of the evidence supports the accused's guilt, then the evidence sufficiently supports the finding of guilt.

But if Lewis' epistemic support is a matter of ruling out all non-relevant epistemic possibilities and sufficient logical support is not a ruling out of all non-relevant logical possibilities, then the mechanisms underlying Lewis' epistemic support are likely not the mechanisms underlying the context sensitivity of sufficient support in arguments. The possibility remains that some of Lewis' rules may have a bearing on sufficient support. [For example, Lewis' system may be relevant for someone who wants to argue that the validity relation is context sensitive. An argument is valid iff it is not possible for all the premises to be true and the conclusion false, i.e. the premises exclude the possibility of the conclusion being false. If what is a possibility that needs to be excluded is context sensitive in the way Lewis describes, then validity may be context sensitive.] But given that the general thrust of Lewis' rules is towards elimination of all falsifying possibilities, whereas this is not a general thrust of non-deductivist theories of sufficient support we have some evidence that Lewis' rules have at best limited application to a theory of sufficient support.

5.

According to Keith DeRose a warranted belief is one that is both justified and sensitive. Being justified is just a matter of having one's beliefs concerning P track the facts not only in the world as it is, but also in possibilities similar to the way the world is. The problem is that justification is not enough—I am in equally good epistemic positions with respect to: *I have hands* and *I am not a brain in a vat* and yet we are more inclined to say that I know the former, but not the latter. The

difference is that the former belief is sensitive while the latter is not. In other words, in the nearest similar possibility in which I do not have hands, I don't believe that I have hands, but in the nearest similar possibility in which I am a brain in a vat, I still believe I am not. In other words, my former belief is sensitive to it actually not being the case, but my latter belief is not.

The net effect of DeRose's view, which he sketches via what he calls the Rule of Sensitivity (DeRose, p. 492), is that how far away from the way things actually are my beliefs must track the facts in order for me to count as justified is set by how far away the closest possibility is in which what I believe is false. The closest possibility in which I do not have hands is relatively close, at least when compared to the possibility that Pluto is made of green cheese. Hence, it is easier to be in a good epistemic position with regards to my having no hands than with respect to Pluto being made of green cheese. Put quite generally, the requirement that a warranted belief be sensitive sets the bar for how justified one needs to be.

So the question is whether there is an analogue of 'sensitivity' with respect to sufficient support? The short answer seems to be 'no.' Firstly, sensitivity of belief is just a special case of my beliefs tracking the facts and there is no analogue of tracking the facts when we determine sufficient support. Tracking of the facts requires a similarity ordering of epistemic possibilities, but there is no reason to think that determining sufficient support, i.e. whether the actual support is at least as great as the required support, mandates a similarity ordering of logical possibilities. Secondly, beliefs may be more or less sensitive, but in what sense are conclusions or arguments more or less 'sensitive'? Indeed, unless you are a deductivist, the fact that there are possibilities in which the premises are true and the conclusion false is not always a problem for an argument. Even if you are deductivist and are considering a valid argument, you need not interpret the discovery of a false conclusion as a problem for the degree of support the premises give that conclusion. Instead you can merely hold that while the degree of support is unchanged, given that the conclusion is false, the argument has another serious flaw—viz. at least one of the premises is false.

But if there is no logical analogue of the epistemic concept of sensitivity, then epistemic contextualisms that utilize sensitivity as the mechanism for the context dependence of epistemic justification will have no bearing on logical contextualism. Hence, DeRose's epistemic contextualism will not provide insight into the mechanism underwriting the context dependence of sufficient support.

CONCLUSION

There are other epistemic contextualist theories yet to be considered. [See for example, Cohen, 1988]. Based on the theories considered, however, there has been little success in using epistemic contextualism as a guide for the mechanism that underlies the context sensitivity of sufficient support. Annis' theory pointed to a possible general similarity but provided no specific mechanisms. Lewis' theory seemed at best applicable to a deductivist model of logical support, yet deductivists are least inclined to accept the context sensitivity of sufficient support. Finally, DeRose's theory posited a mechanism that just had no analogue in the realm of argument evaluation. So while there may be general similarities between the posited context dependence of epistemic justification and the posited context dependence of sufficient support, no evidence has yet been found that the mechanisms that underwrite these context dependencies are related.

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