

STEWART COHEN AND THE CONTEXTUALIST THEORY OF JUSTIFICATION

AHMAD REZA HEMMATI MOGHADDAM, Institute for Research in Fundamental Sciences (IPM),
School of Analytic Philosophy, Niavaran, Tehran, Iran

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Epistemic contextualism is a thesis about truth conditions of knowledge ascribed to sentences such as “S knows that p” and “S does not know that p”. According to contextualists it is the speaker’s context – the one attributing knowledge – that is pertinent to the truth conditions and truth value of knowledge attributions. Thus, in one context a speaker might say “S knows p” while in another context another he/she might say “S does not know p” without any contradiction involved. Cohen’s version of contextualism takes justification, rather than knowledge, to come in degrees. I shall argue that Cohen’s contextualist theory of justification suffers from several major problems.

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I. Introduction. Epistemic contextualism is a thesis about truth conditions of knowledge ascribing sentences such as “S knows that p” and “S does not know that p. According to contemporary contextualism, it is the speaker’s context – the one attributing knowledge – that is pertinent to the truth conditions and truth value of knowledge attributions. The subject’s context is not relevant. Thus, in one context a speaker might say ‘S knows p’ while in another context another speaker might say ‘S does not know p’ without contradicting themselves. One way to understand the claim that knowledge ascriptions are context-sensitive is to view ‘knowledge’ as displaying a kind of indexicality, that is, ascriptions of knowledge involve an indexical reference to standards. In this essay, I want to examine Cohen’s rather distinct route to contextualism (Cohen, 1999). He takes justification, or having good reasons, to come in degrees. One belief may be more or less justified than another belief but it is eventually the context that determines how justified a belief must be in order to be justified *simpliciter*. On the other hand, since justification is a component of knowledge, knowledge ascriptions will be equally context-sensitive. In what follows, however, I shall be concerned with Cohen’s contextualist theory of justification.

2. Zebra argument and non-evidential rationality. One of the main virtues of contextualism is said to be its ability to explain our inconsistent inclinations about skepticism and the truth of our knowledge ascriptions. Consider, as an example, the following description and set of propositions pertaining to Dretske’s zebra example (**Zebra**).

| | |
|-----------|--|
| EvidenceZ | Having a visual experience as of a striped horse-like animal |
| Zebra-I | I am justified in believing that that animal is a zebra. |
| ClosureZ | If I am justified in believing that the animal is a zebra, I am justified in believing that it is not a disguised mule. |
| Zebra-II | I am not justified in believing that the animal is not a cleverly disguised mule. |

Zebra-I, ClosureZ and Zebra-II constitute a paradox because what we have here is an inconsistent set of propositions despite the fact that each has considerable intuitive appeal. Cohen's treatment of the paradox proceeds along the following lines (although he talks primarily about knowledge). In everyday contexts, with their pertinent standards, EvidenceZ is adequate enough for believing that one is seeing a zebra and so Zebra-I is true. My reasons for believing that I do not see a cleverly disguised mule, on the other hand, consists of inductive evidence I have against the possibility of such deception. Again, in ordinary contexts such reasons are good enough to justify me in believing that the animals I see are not disguised mules and so Zebra-II is false. In skeptical contexts, however, these reasons fail to discharge their justification-conferring function because the standards in such contexts are much higher than those of the ordinary contexts. In both types of contexts, however, ClosureZ is true. Contextualism, thus, seems to explain why **Zebra** seems paradoxical.

Let us however look more carefully at Cohen's account of the epistemic status of the Zebra-propositions in everyday contexts. In such contexts, says Cohen, EvidenceZ is adequate enough to confer justification on my belief that I see a zebra. But it is only in the context of a background theory that observations have evidential meaning. This means that one's evidence justifies a belief only against a set of background conditions or assumptions of the agent. These assumptions have been variously described as 'background conditions' (BonJour 1998), 'presuppositions' (Burge 2003) and 'cornerstones' (Wright 2004). Cornerstones for a region of thought are those propositions such that a warranted doubt about them would defeat or undermine a putative justification for any belief in the corresponding region. According to some philosophers, such as Crispin Wright, EvidenceZ confers justification on my belief that I see a zebra only if I am antecedently justified in believing that the animal is not a disguised mule. Wright himself does not dispute the claim that EvidenceZ provides support for the belief that I see a zebra which is why he goes on to suggest that we enjoy some sort of default justification (warrant) to accept the proposition that "That animal is not a disguised mule" (or that "There is an external world", "I am not a BIV" and so on). This default justification or warrant, which he calls "entitlement," need not be something that the agent does anything to earn.

Cohen does not seem to endorse this position for he says that "my reasons for believing that I see a zebra consists of the animals' looking like zebras...[and] my [equally strong] reason for believing that I do not see a cleverly disguised mule consists of the inductive evidence I have against the possibility of such a deception" (Cohen, 1999, p. 66). But things become more complicated when he seeks to extend his contextualist approach to skeptical paradoxes involving global alternatives like "I am a BIV and I will

never have evidence that I am” (for the sake of simplicity, I shall henceforth ignore the second conjunct). An example of such a paradox (**BIV**) would consist of the following propositions and specifications.

| | |
|-----------|--|
| EvidenceB | Having a visual experience as of two hands. |
| BIV-I | I am justified in believing that I have hand. |
| ClosureB | If I am justified in believing that I have hands, I am justified in believing that I am not a BIV. |
| BIV-II | I am not justified in believing that I am not a BIV. |

How would a contextualist treat this version of the paradox? Let us begin by considering whether these propositions are true in everyday contexts. According to Cohen, BIV-I is true given the evidence at my disposal, that is, EvidenceB. But is BIV-II also true? Cohen concedes that no amount of evidence counts against the hypothesis that I am not a BIV. So how could BIV-II be false (in ordinary contexts)?

In response, Cohen claims that evidence is not the only source of rationality for a belief. BIV-II is false because it is non-evidentially rational to deny such propositions. Cohen’s notion of non-evidential rationality seems very much like Wright’s notion of entitlement and it inherits the problems of that notion. According to Wright, we may recall, only if we are antecedently justified in believing that “These are not disguised mules” or “I am not a BIV” will EvidenceZ or EvidenceB support the propositions that “That animal is a zebra” or “I have hand” respectively. However, since an antecedent (evidential) justification is not available, skepticism would ensue. To meet the skeptic’s requirement, Wright introduces a notion of rational warrant, “entitlement,” that one does not have any specific evidential work to do to earn: “If I am entitled to accept P, then my doing so is beyond rational reproach even though I can point to no cognitive accomplishment in my life” (Wright 2004, p. 175). Wright seems to think that we enjoy some sort of a default justification with respect to certain beliefs though he does not say where this comes from. Neither does he say much about the *epistemic* standing of his notion of entitlement. If it is not evidential, is it deontological? If so, in what sense? Does he take deontological justification to be truth-conducive? We are eventually told that this is not an evidential warrant to believe a proposition P but to “accept” it, something like a warrant to “act on the assumption that P, take it for granted that P or (rational trust) that P” (Wright 2004, 176).

Wright does not quite explicitly address the question of how a non-evidential notion of warrant involving a weaker attitude than belief can provide an epistemic context whereby beliefs (such as those referred to in Zebra-I and BIV-I) can be said to be epistemically justified. The closest Wright gets to addressing this issue is when he considers the following example. He invites us to consider a cognitive project that is indispensable for us such that we cannot lose and may gain by doing it. We are thereby rationally entitled to do it and may take for granted its presuppositions. Suppose, for example, that Crusoe is starving on his island where the only available food are plenty of colored fruits all strange to him and none being eaten by the birds visiting the island. He has no reason to believe that the fruits are safe for consumption. Nevertheless, says Wright, assuming an interest in survival, he is warranted in eating the fruits. For they either turn out to be edible which would be fine or not

edible in which case the outcome would be no worse than the alternative of starvation. But this situation is best described as one where our reasons for believing that the fruits are safe are pragmatic rather than epistemic, thus, not truth-conducive, and not as reasons for taking the weaker attitude of acceptance towards the proposition in question. In addition to these general problems with the notion of non-evidential notion of rationality, there are also specific problems with Cohen's appeal to this notion in the context of defending contextualism. Let us consider some of these problems.

1. The appeal to the notion of non-evidential rationality is not necessarily restricted to skeptical paradoxes involving global alternatives like "I am a BIV". Consider **Zebra** again (in an everyday context) and suppose that we have no evidence for or against the alternative "These animals are disguised mules" -- not even the sort inductive evidence against the possibility of deception that Cohen considers. Then, by Cohen's lights, it would be (a priori) rational to hold that the animals in the cage are not disguised mules. This would bring Cohen's position closer to Wright's conservatism for one may now say that the reason why such evidence as EvidenceZ and EvidenceB justify the beliefs that the animals we see are zebras or that we hands is that we are antecedently justified in believing that those animals are not disguised mules or that we are not BIV.

2. Assuming closure, Cohen says that the rationality of believing any empirical proposition, like 'I have hand', can be no greater than the rationality of believing that I am not a BIV. So the degree of rationality of denying the BIV hypothesis "provides an upper bound on the degree of rationality for any empirical belief" (Cohen, 1999, p. 69). But given that Cohen's proposed notion of rationality is a priori and is of a non-evidential, perhaps pragmatic, nature, it would seem to be on a totally different epistemic plane from the sort of evidential, truth-conducive conception of rationality that we attach to our ordinary beliefs. They are, in other words, incommensurable. If so, how could we talk of the former as providing an upper bound for the latter?

3. Consider **BIV** in a skeptical context where the epistemic standards are very high. Cohen says that the degree of rationality of denying that I am a BIV is "no longer sufficient for me to know, in those contexts, that I have hand or that I am not a BIV" (Ibid, p. 69). Contextualism, thus, explains our intuitions in such skeptical contexts. However, although the contextualist approach may take care of the knowledge version of the paradox, it is not clear that it can equally resolve the justification version of the paradox that has been my focus in this paper. For Consonant with his early stance, Cohen would have to say that in high standards contexts, I am not justified in believing that I have hand. But, given our a priori entitlement to the non-evidential notion rationality, it would still be true to say that in such skeptical contexts I am justified (rational) in believing that I am not a BIV. Having noted this we may now form the following conjunction: "I am justified in believing that I am not a BIV but I am not justified in believing that I have hand". This conjunction is as abominable as the sort of conjunctions that contextualists claim those who deny closure are committed to.

4. Cohen's notion of rationality, as he says, might involve pragmatic considerations. It may also be construed in terms of how responsibly the subject has behaved in forming

his belief vis-à-vis the evidence at his disposal. However it is construed, it is best understood as a function of the subject, rather than the attributor, context. Whether someone behaves responsibly (irresponsibly) when forming a belief is entirely a function of his, rather than somebody else's, perspective on his epistemic situation. He is not going to be responsible for ignoring factors that lie beyond his ken. It seems that Cohen's notion of rationality is tied to the subject rather than the attributor context.

3. Principle of Charity and Contextualism. The preceding remark raises a deeper concern about the contextualist's central thesis that as far as knowledge (justification) is concerned it is the attributor context that counts. Of course, a great deal has been written about this (more recently by Hawthorne 2004), but I wish to pursue a different line of reasoning. Very roughly, the idea is that the nature of the principle of charity, or more accurately the gradual development of its formulation within the Davidsonian framework of radical interpretation, has underscored the importance of the subject, rather than the attributor, context for the rationality of belief. For, as Davidson himself says, the "methodology of interpretation [is] nothing but epistemology seen in the mirror of meaning" (Davidson 1984, p.169). According to Davidson, an adequate semantic theory for a language should be such that if a person comes to know the theory, he would, partially, understand the language. It is well known that for Davidson such a theory should take the form of a Tarski-style truth theory, and, consequently the bulk of his writings on this topic is taken up with enunciating the conditions of adequacy for such theories. Very roughly, he takes the evidence for the semantic theory to consist in the conditions under which speakers hold sentences true. The holding of a sentence to be true by a speaker turns out, however, to be a function of both what she means by that sentence as well as what she believes. This means that belief cannot be inferred without prior knowledge of the meaning, and meaning cannot be deduced without the belief. It is here that the principle of charity enters the scene. We can solve the problem of the interdependence of belief and meaning "by holding belief constant as far as possible while solving for meaning. This is accomplished by assigning truth conditions to alien sentences that make native speakers right when plausibly possible, according, of course, to *our own view of what is right*" (my italic, Ibid, p.137). The principle of charity, thus, requires the maximization of truth by the interpreter's own lights.

Now, if the process of charitable belief ascription is characterized by the aim of maximizing truth and minimizing falsity in the speaker's belief system, this would, in effect, be tantamount to representing the speaker as by and large rational. For this is actually how epistemic justification (rationality) is generally characterized. A belief is epistemically justified if and only if it serves the goal of believing what is true and not believing what is false. What is important to note is that the kind of rationality that results from the interpretive process is rationality-from-the-point-of-view-of-the-interpreter. It is a conception of rationality that emphasizes the interpreter's perspective and how things appear from that perspective as the following remark by Davidson clearly indicates: "If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behavior of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true *by our own standards*, we have no reason to count that

count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything” (Ibid, p. 137).

An early criticism of Davidson’s principle of charity was that its application leaves no room for error (or irrationality) on the part of the speaker. The critics took Davidson to require that speakers be found in conformity with one’s own views even when their circumstances would make us expect them to be led to mistaken or irrational beliefs. Richard Grandy (1973), for example, suggested that charity should be rejected in favor of the “principle of humanity” that recommends that we should prefer the interpretation that makes the speaker’s utterance explainable. Although some of Davidson’s early formulations did deserve to be criticized on this ground, he later acknowledged that the point of charity is intelligibility rather than agreement. Setting aside this exegetical and historical issue, the important point was the recognition that, rather than imposing his own perspective on the speaker, the interpreter should attribute to her beliefs he would have were he in her shoes, that is, the beliefs that speaker ought to hold given her circumstances. It seems to me that the shift of emphasis from the principle of charity to humanity as a condition of the possibility of interpretation actually reflects the primacy of the subject’s context over the attributor’s context not only in the process of belief attribution but also in the attribution of knowledge and rational belief.

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Ahmad Reza Hemmati Moghaddam
Institute for Research in Fundamental Sciences (IPM)
School of Analytic Philosophy, Niavaran
Tehran
Iran
e-mail: hmoghaddam@ipm.ir