

teorema

Vol. XXXIV/2, 2015, pp. 7-28

ISSN: 0210-1602

[BIBLID 0210-1602 (2015) 34:2; pp. 7-28]

Appropriate Belief without Evidence

Natalie Alana Ashton

RESUMEN

En este artículo defiendo una versión del contextualismo wittgensteiniano. Se trata de un punto de vista sobre la justificación de acuerdo con el cual algunas creencias son epistémicamente apropiadas *puesto que* no puede aducirse evidencia a su favor. Rastreo la historia de este punto de vista desde Wittgenstein y Ortega hasta la actualidad, defiendo a una versión suya de la acusación de relativismo y sugiero algunas de sus aplicaciones dentro y fuera de la filosofía.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *justificación, evidencia, contextualismo wittgensteiniano, epistemología de las proposiciones-gozne, relativismo.*

ABSTRACT

In this paper I defend a version of Wittgensteinian contextualism. This is a view about justification on which some beliefs are epistemically appropriate *because* evidence cannot be adduced in their favour. I trace the history of the view from Wittgenstein and Ortega to the present day, defend one version from the charge of relativism, and suggest some applications of the view both within and without philosophy.

KEYWORDS: *Justification, Evidence, Wittgensteinian Contextualism, Hinge Epistemology, Relativism.*

INTRODUCTION

What makes a belief justified? There is little consensus on the answer to this question amongst contemporary epistemologists. Some think that a subject must have, and be able to cite, evidence or reasons in order for her belief to be justified; others think that features of her epistemic position which are not accessible by her are more important. One position which has received relatively little attention is that inspired by Wittgenstein. According to this view, not only can some beliefs be justified in spite of the fact that no evidence or reasons can be

adduced in their favour, but there is a sense in which some beliefs are justified specifically *because* no evidence or reasons can be adduced in their favour. My goal in this paper is to explain and defend a particular, *contextualist* version of this view.

Let's start by outlining some more common views of justification. A very general way of characterising epistemic justification is to say that a proposition is justified for a subject if the basis the subject has for that proposition makes her belief in it in some way *epistemically appropriate*.¹ This epistemic propriety is what separates mere true belief from knowledge. There are various ways of cashing out epistemic propriety; for example both the heights of the standards of propriety can vary,² as can what is considered capable of meeting these standards,³ but the general characterisation is uncontroversial.

Two senses of epistemic propriety will be useful for our purposes. The first I'll call 'subjective rational support':

SUBJECTIVE RATIONAL SUPPORT: A proposition *P* is epistemically appropriate for subject *S* when *S* believes *P* on a basis which provides her with rational support – that is, it provides her with reasons or evidence which she can (or could, with sufficient reflection) adduce in favour of her belief.

The idea here is that epistemic propriety is connected to what it is rational for us to believe given our epistemic position.⁴ Part of the appeal of basing justification on this understanding of epistemic propriety is that it requires the subject to be able to respond to challenges to her belief. Say I flick a phrase book open, pick a sentence at random and for no particular reason form a belief in the proposition that the sentence expresses. I now believe "The nearest train station is north of the town hall". If someone challenges this belief, by suggesting that the nearest station might in fact be south of the town hall, then I have nothing at my disposal with which to respond, even if the proposition is true. I can point out that the sentence expressing this proposition was in the phrasebook but, as I don't have any reason to think that the propositions in the phrase book are true, this does nothing to respond to the challenge.⁵ Intuitively this seems like the right result – I am not justified in believing this proposition.

Compare my spontaneous phrasebook belief to that of someone who forms the same belief after looking at a map. This subject is able

to respond to challenges by adducing reasons in favour of her belief (she could say, for example: “local maps generally represent the relative locations of nearby landmarks accurately”, and so on), and so for her the proposition is justified. Again, this seems like the right result.

However, there are cases where requiring a subject to be able to respond to challenges seems overly-demanding. There are subjects who are not inclined to reflect on their reasons for belief, or who are incapable of doing so (for example young children, or otherwise ‘unsophisticated’ subjects), and it’s not difficult to imagine that there are some domains in which almost all subjects will be unable to adduce reasons for their beliefs.⁶ Yet we intuitively want to attribute knowledge in these cases, and so (assuming that knowledge requires justification) we must think that these subjects are justified.

The second understanding of epistemic propriety avoids this problem. I’ll call it ‘truth-conducive support’:

TRUTH-CONDUCTIVE SUPPORT: A proposition *P* is epistemically appropriate for subject *S* when *S* believes *P* on a basis which is truth-conducive – that is, on a basis which is likely to lead her to form true beliefs.

On this understanding epistemic propriety isn’t ultimately concerned with our epistemic perspective, but rather is primarily concerned with epistemic success, even when this isn’t reflected in our epistemic perspective.⁷ Since the chance of a subject’s epistemic success can plausibly be thought to increase with the reliability of her basis, even if she isn’t aware of how reliable her basis is, then a belief which merely has such a basis can be justified. This means that as long as young children use generally reliable (or otherwise truth-conducive) belief-forming processes then their beliefs will be epistemically appropriate, and therefore justified, even if they are unable to access or articulate any reasons for them.

The characterisations I offer here are only rough sketches (indeed, they may be closer to caricatures), but will serve well enough as a background against which we can explain the view this paper is concerned with. So far we have two, broad conceptions of justification which are in competition, and each has the theoretical benefit of respecting one of our intuitions; justification requiring subjective rational support looks plausible because we have the intuition that subjects

should be able to respond to challenges about their justified beliefs, whilst justification which merely requires truth-conduciveness looks plausible because it acknowledges that there are intuitive cases of justified belief where this isn't possible.

The conception of justification that I will defend operates within a space which these two views share. It will respect the intuition behind subjective rational support by requiring that subjects be able to respond to *legitimate* challenges to their beliefs, but will borrow from the motivation for truth-conducive rational support by denying that this always requires reasons to be adduced.⁸

This conception of justification has its roots in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*. In section I I'll begin by sketching out these roots. I'll then trace the history of the development of this conception in section II, before pulling out the key features of the view we'll focus on in section III. In section IV I'll introduce some objections to this view, and explore the possibilities for response. In section V I'll develop a 'cautious' strategy to the most pressing objection to Wittgensteinian contextualism by arguing for two crucial additions to the view. Finally I'll conclude in section VI by pointing towards some areas both within and without philosophy which could benefit from the adoption of Wittgensteinian contextualism.

I. WITTGENSTEINIAN ROOTS

The picture we are interested in has its roots in Wittgenstein's final notebooks, which were compiled in *On Certainty*. In this, Wittgenstein uses some innocuous observations about (subjective) rational support to make two, more startling, claims about justification. The first observation is that any basis that a subject offers in rational support of a proposition she believes must be more certain for her (or, the degree of confidence she has in it must be greater) than the proposition it supports. Call this the 'initial insight':

INITIAL INSIGHT: For a proposition P_1 to rationally support another proposition P_2 , the degree of confidence the relevant subject has in P_1 must be greater than the degree of confidence the relevant subject has in P_2 .

Imagine a subject attempting to support her belief in the proposition that she has two hands with the proposition that she sees them both before her. Something seems off about this, and Wittgenstein claims that it is a failure to acknowledge the initial insight. It's not clear which of the two propositions the subject has the greater degree of confidence in, and so it's not clear that she shouldn't instead test her eyes by looking to see whether she sees her two hands [Wittgenstein (1969), §125; §250]. The initial insight explains this oddness in a plausible way.

With this initial insight in place, something surprising follows; our most certain beliefs (those we have the greatest degree of confidence in) have no rational support. This is because, as we have acknowledged, (1) rational support for a particular proposition must inspire a greater degree of confidence than the proposition itself, but (2) by definition there are no propositions which inspire a greater degree of confidence than our most certain beliefs, and so it follows that (3) there are no propositions which could rationally support our most certain beliefs. We'll refer to this conclusion as 'lack of support':

LACK OF SUPPORT: A belief in proposition P which is optimally-certain cannot be rationally-supported.

The second observation is emphasised by Duncan Pritchard (*forthcoming_a*, *forthcoming_b*): any basis offered as rational grounds (or subjective reason) for doubting a proposition must inspire a greater degree of confidence than the proposition it calls into doubt. We can call this the Implicit Insight:

IMPLICIT INSIGHT: For a proposition P_1 to offer rational grounds for doubt of another proposition P_2 , P_1 must inspire a greater degree of confidence than P_2 .

This point is controversial – sceptical hypotheses, for example, operate on the assumption that all one need do to raise a sceptical doubt about those propositions which we have the greatest degree of confidence in is to point out the possibility of a contradictory scenario obtaining. This contradictory scenario needn't inspire a greater degree of confidence than the target proposition in order to provoke doubt, and in fact these scenarios are usually very far-fetched, and so are unlikely to inspire

much confidence at all. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein seems to rely on this insight, and others have defended this move in more detail.⁹

If we accept the implicit insight we can construct an argument similar to the one that utilises the initial insight. This time, as (1) rational grounds for doubting a particular proposition must inspire a greater degree of confidence than the proposition itself, and (2) by definition there are no propositions which inspire greater confidence than our most certain propositions, it follows that (3) there are no propositions which could rationally ground doubt in our most certain beliefs. Let's call this 'lack of doubt':

LACK OF DOUBT: A belief in proposition *P* which is optimally-certain cannot be rationally doubted.

The moral Wittgenstein takes from these points is that the practice of rational evaluation is necessarily limited. Not everything can be justified and not everything can be questioned, but this isn't due to psychological discomfort or the limits of human cognition. Rather, it's just a fact about rational justification (or epistemic propriety) that some propositions are beyond support or doubt. As Wittgenstein puts it; "[I]t isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption", rather it is part of the very logic of justification that some, optimally-certain propositions (now often referred to as 'hinge propositions') must remain fixed; "[i]f I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put" [Wittgenstein (1969) §343]. The result of this is that some beliefs are epistemically appropriate specifically *because* they cannot have evidence adduced in their favour.

The work of José Ortega y Gasset sheds further light on this idea. Ortega (2002), pp. 178-9, makes a distinction between two kinds of beliefs, which he calls 'IDEAS' and 'BELIEFS'. BELIEFS (sometimes 'ideas-beliefs') are those beliefs which are not arrived at through inference, but instead "form the container of our lives". He describes them as being our most "radical" beliefs, by which he means they are so integral to our thinking and our understanding that they can't be questioned or supported. Rather, he says *they* support *us*, as we "count on them, always, without interruption".

This corroborates Wittgenstein's claim that certain (hinge-like) propositions are subject to Lack of Support and Lack of Doubt, and

makes it clearer that this idea isn't epistemically problematic. These propositions aren't *merely* unsupported, but are *necessarily unsupported* because of the integral supporting role that they play.

In contrast, Ortega talks about IDEAS (or ideas-occurrences) which we "come upon", by discovering or inferring them. On the Wittgensteinian picture these would be non-hinge propositions. Because there is a clear period during which we don't have these beliefs (the period up until we discover or infer them), we don't rely on them to border rational evaluation, and so are in a position to support and question them. As we will see, the theme of this contrast has been picked up by a number of authors since Wittgenstein and Ortega, and has the potential to allow for progress in a number of areas of epistemology, as well as other areas both within and without philosophy.

The stage is now set for the alternative conception of justification that I will defend. Although this conception can still be called a minority view, some epistemologists have seen merit in it, and have attempted to develop it further. In the next section I'll explore some of these attempts to develop Wittgenstein's view, and draw out some common threads running through them, before arguing that we can, and should, follow Wittgenstein's lead.

II. TRACING THE PICTURE'S DEVELOPMENT

A key step in the development of this view is the move towards making it contextualist. Most basically this idea is that which propositions are optimally-certain, and so act as the limits on rational evaluation, is a function of some contextually-sensitive factor. The first, and most concise, defence of this view comes from David Annis (1978), who cites *On Certainty* as an example of a text which contains early hints towards a contextualist theory.

In contrast with the prevailing views at the time, Annis argued that whether or not a speaker is justified in believing a proposition depends on whether or not they are able to meet appropriate objections to it.¹⁰ The contextualist aspect is in what determines whether an objection is appropriate and thus needs to be responded to. According to Annis "[f]or S to be held accountable for answering an objection, [and thus for the objection to pose a threat to justification] it must be a manifestation of a real doubt where the doubt is occasioned by a real life situation".

Understanding what ‘situation’ the subject is in will be important then. Annis refers to this as the subject’s *issue context*, and in explaining this idea refers to a number of factors; the social position occupied by the subject (eg. that of a medical student compared to that of a lay-person), the importance attached to correctly handling objections (say in medical trials on animals and in those on humans), and the relevant ‘objector-group’ (made up of those attributing and withholding justification to and from the subject).

It seems plausible that different subjects in these different contexts could be equally justified, despite being able to only to respond to some (varying) subset of challenges to the believed proposition. Here we can see how this conception of justification might be able to draw out common ground between the two conceptions already considered. The requirement that subjects be able to respond to at least some challenges goes someway to respecting the intuition behind justification based on subjective rational support, whilst the acknowledgement that some subjects might not have to meet *all* challenges plays up to the intuition that a stronger requirement would be overly-demanding.

At this point it’s worth noting a view that shares some similarities with the idea we are developing. Fred Dretske’s (1970) theory of relevant alternatives is another way to spell out the difference between answering all challenges and just some important sub-set. Rather than focusing on challenges which are situationally appropriate, however, it focuses on those which are *relevant*.¹¹

Traditionally, it was thought that if a subject knew a proposition *P* she must also know that all alternatives that entail $\neg P$ are false. But, as Dretske [(1970), pp. 1015-6] claims, such a condition is rarely met. In his famous example an ordinary subject on an ordinary day out at the zoo claims to know that the animal in the pen in front of her is a zebra. However, the subject doesn’t know that the animal before her isn’t a cleverly-disguised mule, and so on the traditional view she doesn’t know that it is a zebra.

This is a counter-intuitive result. One way to avoid it is to modify the traditional understanding of knowledge; instead of entailing that the denials of *all* alternatives are known, perhaps knowledge only entails that the subject knows the denial of all *relevant* alternatives [Dretske (1981), p. 367]. This view lends itself readily to a contextualist interpretation of knowledge – what counts as ‘relevant’ could, of

course, be sensitive to context. On an ordinary day out at the zoo the cleverly-disguised mule alternative isn't relevant, but if the subject is a zoo-inspector charged with ensuring that the zoo authorities are not misleading the public then the cleverly-disguised mule alternative is relevant.

Although on the surface this view is compatible with Wittgensteinian contextualism, and so stands as an option for cashing out the idea of issue contexts, it is most commonly associated with a different view, also described as contextualist, which is importantly different to the one we are interested in. It will be useful to distinguish these two views.

According to semantic contextualists like Stewart Cohen (1992) and Keith DeRose (1995), (1999), the proposition expressed by sentences containing 'knows' is what changes with context; effectively the meaning of the word 'knows' is different in different contexts. Wittgensteinian contextualism does not share this feature; instead the variable that is sensitive to context (and so the one which would be determined by the relevant alternatives) is the very justificatory status of propositions.

Semantic contextualist views have a number of problems [as catalogued by Pritchard (2002)] in virtue of their being semantic theories. If the relevant alternatives theory were used to supplement the contextualist view that we are developing then it would be important for this to stay true to the Wittgensteinian contextualist strategy and not fall into the same traps as semantic theses. There may be a way to do this, but let's put this issue to one side and focus on one of the most thorough-going attempts to defend a Wittgensteinian contextualist picture of the structure of justification.

Michael Williams (1991) endorses something equivalent to Wittgenstein's Lack of Support and Lack of Doubt claims above, as well as the idea of rational evaluation being limited by optimally-certain hinge propositions. Like Annis, he adopts a contextualist understanding of the structure of justification, noting that what is 'optimally-certain' (and so what limits evaluation and what counts as an appropriate challenge) can vary with context. Also like Annis, Williams is interested in the idea of certainty being sensitive to something like the 'issues', or 'subjects', with which we are concerned.¹² His usual terminology for this thought is that different *contexts of inquiry* require different *methodological necessities* in order to go ahead.

Williams typically explains these terms with reference to the context in which historical inquiry goes on. Within this context of in-

quiry some propositions are necessary for the relevant methodology to take place: a historian must not question, for example, whether the world has really existed for more than five minutes. If she does then she is no longer undertaking historical inquiry, and the propositions which lack support and doubt for her are not sufficient to draw historical conclusions from. Instead, she has moved into a sceptical, philosophical context. The proposition that the world has existed for more than five minutes is, then, a methodological necessity of a historical context of inquiry, but not of a sceptical one.

In light of this, a clarification of the optimally-certain propositions that border (or act as ‘hinges’ for) rational evaluation is required. Whilst there must always be *some* propositions held fixed for an enquiry to go ahead, it need not be the same propositions each time. We shouldn’t think of propositions as existing within a permanent justificatory structure, possessing an inherent, unchanging epistemic status; epistemic propriety is sensitive to context. Whilst some hinges must be in place in order for the door to turn, the location of the hinges can be changed; the door doesn’t always have to turn in the same direction.

There are other, more controversial features of Williams’ view, which I won’t discuss here.¹³ The important thing to take from his work is the sense in which a challenge must be situationally-appropriate. A challenge to a proposition that completely undermines the form of inquiry the proposition is made within is inappropriate in the strongest sense – it prevents the form of inquiry, and thus any justificatory evaluations – from going ahead altogether. We now have the basic outline for a new view of the structure of justification. I’ll summarise this in the next section, before filling in the details in response to an objection I’ll explain in section IV.

III. THE EMERGING PICTURE

As we saw in the introduction, a very general way of characterising epistemic justification is to say that a belief is justified for a subject if the basis the subject has for that belief makes it in some way epistemically appropriate. We briefly looked at two broad ways of cashing out epistemic propriety: subjective rational support, which respected the intuition that a subject should be in some sense able to respond to challenges to her belief; and truth-conducive support, which

didn't require this, and was appealing in making fewer intellectual demands of the subject.

The emerging contextualist picture walks a tightrope between these two broad views. It requires that some *situationally-appropriate* subset of challenges to the subject's belief must be (in some sense) answerable, but it doesn't make un-intuitively high demands on the subject because there are other, situationally-inappropriate challenges which can be ignored. The key features of this picture are as follows:

1. Justification takes place relative to an epistemic context (where an epistemic context is a set of propositions that are used to determine whether or not further propositions are justified).
2. There are limits to these contexts: some optimally-certain propositions can't be questioned or justified (at least within the context in question), as characterised by Lack of Doubt and Lack of Support.
3. Which propositions are optimally-certain for a particular epistemic context depends on something like the methodological necessities associated with that context, and so which propositions can be appropriately challenged (in a particular context) is also sensitive to this.
4. Thus, for a proposition P to be justified for a subject S, S must be able to answer all and only those challenges which are legitimate given (something like) her methodological necessities.

These four claims offer an outline of a Wittgensteinian contextualist picture of justification, but the picture is not yet complete. There are areas that need clarification, and objections that will need to be dealt with.

One point which should be immediately obvious is that we are yet to pin down exactly what determines contexts – at the moment we are just relying on the placeholder of '(something like) methodological necessities'. I mentioned earlier that Annis' explanation of context determiners is wanting. Williams' account involving methodological necessities has been challenged too, by Sarah Wright (2010) who suggests 'social roles' as an alternative. Part of the issue here is just to spell out a contentious detail which is crucial to the view, and of course this is important to do, but more interestingly this will help us in responding to a more serious objection in the next section.

The problem with Williams's context determiners is that they seem to be dependent on something like our interests, but, as Wright points out, these change fairly easily and quickly, whereas the methodologies that we rely upon (and the justification supposed to depend on them) don't. The example Wright gives is of a historian with a headache – despite her interests being in the pacification of her headache, and this not being optimised by the painstaking expense of time and effort to verify the age of historical documents, the historian's rigorous methodology does not change. Wright concludes from this that epistemic contexts are not determined by methodological necessities.

She goes on to supplement Williams's view with the idea of 'social roles' which she takes from virtue theory. The key idea is to understand epistemic propriety in terms of what beliefs are epistemically virtuous in the same way that we might understand moral justification, or propriety, in terms of what actions are morally virtuous. She argues that what is morally virtuous can vary between subjects, depending on the roles they have taken on in society; what actions are courageous for a civilian witness to a crime will be different to what actions are courageous for a police officer in the same situation. Likewise, we can cash out the idea of methodological contextualism using social roles; what is epistemically appropriate for a doctor to believe on the basis of a newspaper article will be different to what is epistemically appropriate for someone with no medical training or medical responsibilities to believe.

Wright integrates this account into the methodological framework very convincingly, and there are a number of subtle ways in which the virtue account improves upon methodological contextualism. I don't think the view is entirely without problems, but it has clear merits, and is a definite contender for context determiners. In section V I will show how scrutinising this account can illuminate the way in which Wittgensteinian contextualism should be developed.

For now, let's now turn our attention to one of the most pressing objections made against Wittgensteinian contextualism: the charge of relativism. In section IV I'll distinguish two sets of worries that someone making this objection could have in mind. I'll recommend that the first set could be allayed by drawing lessons from Stephen Hales' (1997) approach to relativism, and suggest two approaches to responding to the second set of worries; a general, 'temerarious' strategy, which I think is promising, but which I don't have the space to defend

fully, and a ‘cautious’ strategy, which I think is less satisfying, but effective nonetheless. I’ll develop the cautious strategy more fully in section V, drawing on insights from Wright’s virtue account.

IV. WITTGENSTEINIAN CONTEXTUALISM AND EPISTEMIC RELATIVISM

The principal objection to Wittgensteinian contextualism is the charge of epistemic relativism. This is because the view allows for the possibility of two people (or groups) that inhabit entirely different contexts with entirely different optimally-certain propositions, and so are each entirely justified in believing contradictory propositions. I think there are two kinds of worries which this relativist objection is grounded in: first, there are worries about whether epistemic relativism is consistent;¹⁴ and second, some of the practical reasons we have for caring about epistemic justification (such as solving disputes)¹⁵ look difficult to solve with a view that allows for contradictions.

We could, of course, deal with both sets of worries simultaneously by denying that the view is relativist. Williams took this approach in a (2007) paper appropriately titled “Why (Wittgensteinian) Contextualism is not Relativism”. I don’t think this argument is wholly convincing, for reasons that space prevents me elaborating on here, and what’s more Williams himself has retracted (in conversation) the conclusion of this argument. A refined argument for this conclusion would be useful then, but there is a second kind of response to consider too: we could accept that the view is a form of epistemic relativism, but deny that this is an objectionable position to hold.

A number of recent attempts to defend relativism could be helpful here, but one which stands out is Steven Hales’ (1997) argument that (truth) relativism can be made consistent by likening it to modality. A number of features of the relativism which Hales defends are shared by the Wittgensteinian contextualism that I describe, and so I think applying this response to epistemic relativism is a promising option. If we can successfully defend a consistent version of epistemic relativism then this would deal with the first set of worries mentioned above.

The second group of worries about epistemic relativism are rooted in a meta-philosophical view about what we want from a view of justification or, perhaps more accurately, about what features a view of justification should have if it is to meet the goals which we want it to meet. One possibility, then, is to argue that (at least some of) the

goals we have are not goals we *should* have. Call this the *temerarious strategy* – this is as opposed to a *cautious strategy*, which would argue that the relativist’s worries can be allayed even if we allow the goals we have for justification to remain unchanged.

It’s beyond the scope of this paper to argue for the temerarious conclusion, but I think there is reason to be optimistic about the prospects for such a response. In the philosophy of science a contextualist view of scientific knowledge has been defended based on the idea that there are multiple goals and values to scientific enquiry [Longino (1990)]. Further, Intemann (2010) notes that a number of authors have gone beyond this, arguing that science should change to reflect these multiple goals.¹⁶ If a similar argument could be made about the aims and practices of epistemology, then this would go some way to responding to the second set of worries about epistemic relativism. Although I am tempted by the suggestion that being more liberal about our goals would be good for epistemology, I don’t have room to defend such a line in this paper.

Instead, I will focus on a cautious strategy. Although I find this response less satisfying overall, it is still capable of meeting the most important issues that arise from the second set of worries about epistemic relativism.

V. FILLING IN THE DETAILS

In this section I’ll develop a cautious strategy for responding to the anti-relativist’s worries, drawing on Wright’s virtue account which I discussed above. This cautious response is less general than the temerarious one and so, I think, less satisfying. However, it shows that the Wittgensteinian contextualist can avoid these worries even without changing the goals of epistemology. I will focus on two specific problems that arise for an epistemic relativist who shares the current goals of epistemology, and argue that the Wittgensteinian contextualist can resolve both by making two additions to her view.

The first problem is that, on a relativist understanding of justification, any belief in any proposition can at most be justified *relative to some context*. There can be no ‘extra-contextual’ justification. This apparently means that we can’t be (non-circularly) justified in propositions which make up our own context, and neither can we meaningfully criticise (nor praise) propositions which make up other contexts.

Take the fundamental propositions of a context in which belief in homeopathy is justified – all those who are anti-homeopathy can say is that *relative to their anti-homeopathy context* they are not justified, which is disappointingly trivial. Both of these results make the lack of extra-contextual justification which is part of a relativist understanding of Wittgensteinian contextualism look problematic.

We can deal with this problem by making room for our first addition to Wittgensteinian contextualism. This is the possibility of *overlapping contexts*; contexts such that subjects can occupy more than one at a time. First, let's look at how this feature is beneficial to Wright's view.

Generally the examples used to illustrate the idea of contextual justification (eg. by Annis or Williams) involve a subject with a single, clear epistemic role or methodology (such as a historian who is authenticating documents). Although this keeps things usefully simple, it also glosses over some details which are important to developing an account of Wittgensteinian contextualism which is immune to the anti-relativist's worries.

Real subjects are simultaneously embedded in a number of contexts, which may be complementary or conflicting. As well as operating within a context concerned with history, our historian might also be a parent, a religious believer, a person with strong political views, and have any number of other interests, all of which come with their own social roles (according to Wright) or methodological necessities (according to Williams). We need to make room for a notion of overlapping contexts to reflect this.

Wright's account of social roles does this, and it is this feature which enables her to stabilise epistemic contexts: as well as occupying a context relevant to historical work, the historian occupies other contexts with other, conflicting interests, but as her standards for historical inquiry are set by her historical context, they don't change with her other, non-historical interests.

How does this help with the problem of the relativist's lack of extra-contextual justification? If a subject can 'be in' multiple contexts at once then they have a number of sets of propositions at their disposal. This means they can question the propositions which make up one of their own contexts by partially relying on the propositions of other contexts. This opens up the possibility for subjects who are anti-homeopathy to make meaningful and interesting criticisms about con-

texts in which homeopathy is justified; as long as there is *some* context I am in that is shared by supporters of homeopathy too, then I can say, if it is true, that some fundamental propositions of the context we don't share are not justified *relative to the context that we do share*.

So far, overlapping contexts have proven very useful to the Wittgensteinian contextualist: they stabilise epistemic contexts whilst making them more realistic, and can also compensate for the absence of extra-contextual justification. As we shall see, they can also make room for a second general feature of context determiners which helps respond to the second of the anti-relativist's worries.

The second problem is about the normativity of justification – explaining why the sense of epistemic propriety that we settle on gives us reason to believe certain propositions over others. In section III, we characterised epistemic justification on the emerging picture as follows:

For a proposition P to be justified for a subject S, S must be able to answer all and only those challenges which are legitimate given (something like) her methodological necessities.

Notice that here justification is a matter of being appropriately related to the optimally-certain propositions (however we decide to characterise these). The optimally-certain propositions themselves can't be justified – they are the measure against which justification happens, and can't themselves be measured. They give us reason to believe the less-than-optimally-certain propositions then, but what reason do we have for believing the optimally-certain propositions?

It's important that whatever reasons we have (even if we are usually not aware of them) are *epistemic*. It would be easy to show that as a matter of practicality some propositions need to be held fixed, and that we therefore have *pragmatic* reasons for our beliefs, but only epistemic reasons will give us the normativity required to allay this first concern. Wittgenstein was careful to address this point, emphasising, as we have seen, that the limits of rational evaluation are not just descriptive, but are part of the logic of justification.

Overlapping contexts become useful again here, as they help us to make this idea more concrete. By embracing contexts that overlap we also open up the possibility of there being contexts which have different levels of scope. In addition to very specific contexts, like those involving particular jobs or academic disciplines, we can also think

about contexts related to things like membership of a wider community (again, I'm taking inspiration here from Wright), or even a broad background context which all (or nearly all) epistemic agents occupy at all times.

This supports Wittgenstein's argument for securing epistemic normativity. If the background context is a general epistemic, or rational, one, then the propositions it requires are needed specifically for *epistemic evaluation* to go ahead. Our reasons for holding these beliefs would be more than merely pragmatic, as they would have a specifically epistemic goal. The optimally-certain propositions are not 'justified' in the sense described above then, but they are clearly epistemically appropriate in an important sense.

By determining contexts in a way which allows them to overlap, and incorporates a broad background context, we are able to solve multiple problems for the cautious Wittgensteinian contextualist. We can stabilise epistemic contexts, provide a space for something functionally equivalent to extra-contextual justification, and secure the normativity of contextual justification.

Of course there is still more to be done. Most pressingly we require a full defence of the consistency of a relativistic Wittgensteinian contextualism. However, I hope the additions I have defended show that there is reason to be optimistic about defending a version of Wittgensteinian contextualism, and that they will guide any further discussion of the view. In the next section I will briefly make the case for committing time and effort to this further discussion by exploring some benefits of developing a Wittgensteinian contextualist view of justification.

VI. APPLICATIONS

Wittgensteinian contextualism is controversial because it involves developing a whole new view of the structure of justification. Some intellectual incentive for carrying out this work may be useful then. Fortunately, a Wittgensteinian contextualist view of justification could have beneficial impacts not just within epistemology, but in other areas of philosophy and beyond.

First, the area of epistemology which Wittgenstein was (purportedly) attempting to address: scepticism. The notes in *On Certainty* can be read as an attempt to make sense of the problem with Moore's

‘common sense’ response to scepticism, yet Wittgenstein didn’t appear to think of the view that emerged as a sceptical one. Since then, Williams and others have developed fully-fledged anti-sceptical views based on these Wittgensteinian insights.¹⁷ These authors disagree over the details of their views, but there is over-arching agreement that some sort of Wittgensteinian contextualism will make headway in what is one of the fundamental debates of both historical and contemporary epistemology.

Other areas of epistemology could benefit too. Daniel Greco has argued that a Williams/Annis style account of justification could resolve tensions between Bayesian accounts of belief updating and holist claims about defeasibility, as well as shedding light on new ways to defend epistemological internalism [Greco (*MS*)]. The right kind of Wittgensteinian contextualism has the potential to impact on these debates as well.

Some of the ways of developing this view which I only gestured towards are particularly interesting because of their potential to affect debates in social epistemology. Both embracing (consistent) epistemic relativism and acknowledging a plurality of epistemic goals could provide interesting results in the disagreement debate, as this debate centres on how we should react to apparent contradictions. Given the wide-ranging impacts of the disagreement debate, if Wittgensteinian contextualism can make a difference here it will also have impacts in a wide variety of other areas too. It could lead to a fresh perspective on the disagreements that philosophers themselves become embroiled in, and result in progress within other areas of philosophy, and with the meta-philosophical picture of how these debates should be understood.

Even further afield, outside of philosophy, a proper understanding of what it means for a subject to be justified in her beliefs could help with conflict resolution in matters like religion and politics. Ortega has already used his Wittgensteinian thoughts on belief as the basis for extensive work on social and political philosophy¹⁸ and so there is a precedent for such a move.

Clearly there is a wide-ranging set of issues which could be affected by adopting the Wittgensteinian contextualist picture of justification which I defend. I hope I have gone some way to showing that the costs of developing what is currently a radical, minority view are not as great as they may seem, and that the potential benefits of this are numerous and important. If so, then we should devote more time

to developing a Wittgenstenian contextualist picture of the structure of justification, and to refining the idea of epistemically appropriate belief without evidence.

*Department of Philosophy
University of Edinburgh
Dugald Stewart Building
3 Charles Street, Edinburgh EH8 9AD, UK
E-mail: N.A.Ashton@sms.ed.ac.uk*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Duncan Pritchard, Jesper Kallestrup, Benjamin Matheson, and Daniel Greco for reading earlier versions of this paper; to Anna Ortin Nadal and Jorge Sanchez Perez for discussing it with me; and to the judges of the 2014 **teorema** Young Scholars Essay Prize (María José Frápolli, Tobies Grimaltos and Daniel Quesada) for selecting it.

NOTES

¹ By epistemic appropriateness I don't intend to refer to deontological justification – this (broad) definition is supposed to be uncontroversial for both internalists and externalists.

² For example infallibilists think a belief is only epistemically appropriate if it has a conclusive epistemic basis, whereas fallibilists have lower standards.

³ On one understanding of internalism the features of epistemic appropriateness must be reflectively accessible by the subject, but for the corresponding kind of externalism they don't.

⁴ For views of justification which could be loosely described as requiring subjective rational support, see Bonjour (1985), Ch.2, Chisholm (1988) and Fumerton (1988).

⁵ It may be that the 'propositions' in the phrasebook should not really be considered to be propositions in the usual sense, since there's no reason to think they refer to any particular train station or any particular town hall. However, I think we can ignore this issue; the example makes the point clearly enough.

⁶ For example the domain of perceptual beliefs – what reasons can we offer for believing that we are experiencing a red thing? If there are reasons they are not ones which the majority of people can be expected to adduce.

⁷ Views that might be described in this way include that of Goldman (1979), Sosa [Sosa & Bonjour (2003)] and Bergman (2006).

⁸ I am not the first to present the view as a solution to this problem; Williams's paper 'Responsibility and Reliability' (2008) takes the same approach.

⁹ See Brandom (1998) on the "default and challenge structure of entitlement", and Williams' discussion of the "claimant-challenger asymmetry" [Williams (2011), (2013)].

¹⁰ Before Annis the main options for a picture of the structure of justification were foundationalism and coherentism. The regress argument for scepticism, which goes back to Sextus Empiricus (2000), challenged those who thought that justified, rational belief was possible to explain the source of this justification. They thought the only options were either (foundational) self-justifying beliefs, a justificatory loop (which gave rise to coherentism), or an infinite chain of new beliefs. The sceptical claim was that none of these is satisfactory, and so justification is impossible. Much of epistemology since has been devoted to denying this conclusion by making one of the first two options look plausible.

¹¹ Depending on how situational appropriateness and relevance are spelled out there is likely to be a lot of overlap between the challenges which these two views considered necessary to respond to, but other details of the view, as we will see, are different.

¹² Sometimes Williams even adopts the name 'issue contextualism' for his view [Williams (2004); (2007), footnote 2].

¹³ For a critical discussion of these see Pritchard [*forthcoming_b*].

¹⁴ This kind of objection is most commonly made against truth-relativism, eg. Putnam (1981) and Rorty (1991), but applies similarly to epistemic relativism [see Boghossian (2006)].

¹⁵ Pritchard (2010) considers this kind of objection (which he refers to as a problem about 'epistemic incommensurability'). Interestingly, Hales (2014) treats this issue as a way of *motivating* relativism (though again, this is truth relativism not epistemic relativism).

¹⁶ She refers to Longino (1990), (2002); Anderson (2006); and Solomon (2006) who all argue that scientific communities should strive to have more diverse enquirers, in response to the diverse aims of scientific enquiry.

¹⁷ See Crispin Wright (2004) and Pritchard [*forthcoming_b*]

¹⁸ For a detailed overview of how Ortega's philosophy and politics relate, see Dobson (1989).

REFERENCES

- ANDERSON, E. (2006), 'The Epistemology of Democracy'; *Episteme* 3,1, pp. 8-22.
 ANNIS, D. B. (1978) 'A Contextualist Theory of Epistemic Justification', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15(3), pp.213-9.
 BERGMANN, M. (2006), *Justification Without Awareness: A Defense of Epistemic Externalism*; Oxford, OUP.

- BOGHOSSIAN, P. (2006), *Fear of Knowledge*. Oxford: OUP.
- BONJOUR, L. (1985), *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- BRANDOM, R. (1994), *Making it Explicit*; London, Harvard University Press.
- CHISHOLM, R. (1988); 'The Indispensability of Internal Justification'; *Synthese* 74(3); pp. 285-96
- COHEN, S. (1992), "Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions"; *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52, pp. 913-29.
- DEROSE, K. (1995), 'Solving the Sceptical Problem'; *Philosophical Review*, 104, pp. 1-52.
- (1999), 'Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense'; in *Epistemology* J. Greco & E. Sosa (eds.), Basil Blackwell, Oxford, pp. 187-205.
- DOBSON, A. (1989), *An Introduction to the Politics and Philosophy of José Ortega y Gasset*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- DRETSKE, F. (1970), 'Epistemic Operators'; *The Journal of Philosophy* 67(24), pp. 1007-23.
- (1981), 'The Pragmatic Dimension of Knowledge'; *Philosophical Studies* 40(3), pp. 363-78.
- FUMERTON, R. (2006), 'Epistemic Internalism, Philosophical Assurance, and the Skeptical Predicament'; in T. Crisp, M. Davidson, and D. Vander Laan (Eds.), *Knowledge and Reality: Essays in Honor of Alvin Plantinga*. Dordrecht, Springer, pp. 179-192.
- GOLDMAN, A. (1979), 'What is Justified Belief?,' in George S. Pappas (ed.), *Justification and Knowledge*; Dordrecht, D. Reidel Publishing, pp. 1-23.
- GRECO, D. (MS), 'Cognitive Mobile Homes'.
- HALES, S. (1997), 'A Consistent Relativism', *Mind* 106(421), pp. 33-52.
- (2014), 'Motivations for Relativism as a Solution to Disagreements', *Philosophy*, 89(1), pp. 63-82.
- INTEMANN, K., (2010), '25 Years of Feminist Empiricism and Standpoint Theory: Where Are We Now?'; *Hypatia*. 25(4), pp. 778-796.
- LONGINO, H. (1990), *Science as Social Knowledge*; Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- (2002), *The Fate of Knowledge*; Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- MOORE, G. E. (1939), 'Proof of an External World'; *Proceedings of the British Academy* 25, pp. 273-300.
- ORTEGA Y GASSET, J. (1940), 'Beliefs and Ideas'; in J. García-Gómez (ed. and tr.) (2002), *What is Knowledge?* New York, SUNY Press, pp. 175-204.
- PRITCHARD, D. (2002), 'Two Forms of Epistemological Contextualism'; *Grazer Philosophische Studien*. 64(1), pp. 19-55.
- (2010) 'Epistemic Relativism, Epistemic Incommensurability and Wittgensteinian Epistemology'; in: *The Blackwell Companion to Relativism*, (ed.) S. Hales, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 266-285.

- (2012), ‘Wittgenstein and the Groundlessness of Our Believing’; *Synthese* 189(2), pp. 255-272.
- (forthcoming_a), ‘Wittgenstein on Hinges and Radical Scepticism’; in *On Certainty*, in: *Blackwell Companion to Wittgenstein*, (eds.) H.-J. Glock & J. Hyman, Oxford: Blackwell.
- (forthcoming_b), *Epistemic Angst*; Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- PUTNAM, H., (1981), *Reason, Truth, and History*; Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- RORTY, R., (1991). ‘Solidarity or Objectivity’, in his *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, vol. 1*; Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 21-34.
- SEXTUS EMPIRICUS (2000), *Outlines of Scepticism*; edited by Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- SOLOMON, M. (2006), ‘Norms of Epistemic Diversity’; *Episteme* 3(1), pp. 23-36.
- SOSA, E. and BONJOUR, L. (2003); *Epistemic Justification: Internalism vs. Externalism, Foundations vs. Virtues*; Malden, MA, Blackwell.
- WILLIAMS, M. (1991), *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism*; Oxford, Blackwell.
- (2004), ‘Knowledge, Reflection and Sceptical Hypotheses’; *Erkenntnis* 61, pp. 315-43.
- (2007), ‘Why (Wittgensteinian) Contextualism is not Relativism’; *Episteme* 4, pp. 93-114.
- (2008), ‘Responsibility and Reliability’; *Philosophical Papers* 37(1), pp. 1-26.
- (2011), ‘External World Skepticism and the Structure of Epistemic Entitlement’; in *The Possibility of Philosophical Understanding*, (eds.) J. Bridges, N. Kolodny, and W. Wong, pp. 43-61
- (2013), ‘Skepticism, Evidence and Entitlement’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 87(1), pp. 36-71.
- WITTGENSTEIN, L. (1969), *On Certainty*; (eds.) G. E. M. Anscombe & G. H. von Wright, (tr.) D. Paul & G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford, Blackwell.
- WRIGHT, C. (2004), ‘Warrant for Nothing (And Foundations for Free?)’; *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 78, pp. 167-212.
- WRIGHT, S. (2010), ‘Virtues, Social Roles, and Contextualism’; *Metaphilosophy* 41 (1), pp. 95-114.