SKÉPSIS, ISSN 1981-4194, ANO VIII, Nº 15, 2017, p. 52-61.

A Non-contextual Rule for Epistemic Contextualism.[1]

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Abstract: Our idea here is to offer a version of epistemic contextualism that can respond to skeptical doubts. More precisely, we believe we can combine the theories of DeRose (1992) and Feldman (1988, 2004) in order to invert the burden of proof for the skeptical side. That is, what we call rule of reasonableness requires that the skeptic has to provide reasons why we should take into account your doubt, what we here calling relevant alternative. Thus, we claim that two clauses need to be reached, in order to such doubt be taken into account, namely, (i) S has evidence to believe R; and (ii) given the contextual standards of justification to which S is submitted, it is required that the possibility of R occurs remains excluded.

Key words: Contextualism; Evidence; Skeptical Doubt.

1 - Introduction

The following lines over this paper intend to discuss the possibility of an epistemic contextualism based on a non-contextual rule. Such strategy is not a new one and it was developed, for example, by Blome-Tillman (2014). However, I disagree with his development. In order to state the foundations for this disagreement and consequently state my proposal, I should have to establish the framework problem I am considering here, namely, the general skeptic argument (SA), which any epistemologist must dare to. SA, since Descartes (1641) at least, can be represented by the below formulation:

If one subject S knows P, then S knows that R is not the case (sKp → sK~r) because R implies not-P. No one can know that is not the case that R (~sK~r). So, no one can know P (~sKp), by *modus tollens*. Where K is the binary relation of knowing, P represents some

[1] I in debt with Eduardo de Siqueira, Marco Ruffino, Joshua Torpe and an anonymous refeere of this journal for the enlightening comments. This paper was conceived during an CNPq scholarship and finished during an another one from CAPES. I should thank both.

proposition and R represents some opposed proposition[2] of P. For example, P can be the proposition expressed by the sentence "I have hands" and R the proposition expressed by "I am a brain in a vat". If I know I have hands, then I should know I am not a brain in a vat. Otherwise, my sensory experience would delivery me qualitatively distinct sense data from that I think it delivers, albeit my sensory experience would be quantitatively the same if I was or I was not a brain in a vat.

According to Luz (2009) R is not necessarily contradictory to P. (i) R can be contrary to P, (ii) R can logically imply a contradictory or a contrary proposition to P, (iii) R can provide *prima facie* justification to a contradictory or a contrary proposition to P, (iv) and R can sustain something which undermine what provides justification for P. Thus, a relevant alternative may not be symmetrically incompatible with P, like in (iii) and (iv). In (iii) the relevant alternative could not logically imply ~P, inasmuch (iv) the relevant alternative may be a global skeptical hypothesis (brain in a vat hypothesis, for instance), after all it implies that our common beliefs about the external world should be revised and it is what provides justification for most part of daily uttered sentences. That is, it is not incompatible with P, but with what justifies P.

Now I ought to distinguish the global and local skeptical hypothesis[3]. The former denies the justification ascription in relation to specific type of belief, the later denies we could ascribe justification for an entire roll of beliefs. The distinction between these two forms of skepticism will be detected in these two ways for apply the aforementioned skeptical argument. Questioning about the possibility of seeing painted mules instead of zebras, casts doubt on the justification of a particular belief and in the case of the brain in a vat or malicious demon puts in doubt our empirical based beliefs in a generalized way. That is,

> (g)lobal objections call into question the totality of beliefs held at a certain time or a whole realm of beliefs whereas local objections call into question a specific belief. This is not to say that a real situation might not occur that would prompt a global objection. If having experienced the nuclear radiation of a third world war, there was a sudden and dramatic increase in the error rate of perceptual beliefs of the visual sort, we would be more hesitant about them as a class. (ANNIS, 1928, p. 214).

[2] What I call "relevant alternative"
[3] See Annis (1978)

If what distinguishes local and global skepticism is only the application of the skeptical argument, then if I give a good answer to logical form in which it is based, I will be responding to both. Yet, the argument could be placed with different logical forms, so my concern here will not follow this path, as Klein (1995) does, but I am focused on how to apply SA. Klein (2000) still denies that contextualism answers to local skepticism, notwithstanding it answers to the global kind. I argue here that the very reason for contextualism offering an escape from global skepticism owns to de fact it offers an escape from the local one. Moreover, Klein *(idem)* believes that the contextualist does not explain what alternatives should be counted as relevant. I provide such explanation.

Other previous point I should clarify is the lack of incompatibility between a rule which must be applied independently of the context and a contextualist view over knowledge. There is only an apparent contradiction, since we can imagine a rule which must be applied in every context but the degree of its exigence varies from one context to another. In soccer the rules say that any action which endangers the safety of another player will be punished with a red card, nonetheless in a derby, for example, where this kind of conduct may be more frequent, the referee usually decides to loose the concept of action which endangers the safety of another player. That is, the red card rule has a contextual sensible application, although it is a rule applied to every soccer context.

Lastly, I have to point out that the reasonability rule stands for the context sensitivity of a justification attribution; the knowledge attribution is just a collateral effect of the proposal sketched here, considering I can not conceive truth, one of the necessary conditions for knowledge, as context sensible. Hence, I am dealing here only with a theory of justification.

2 – Elements for the Reasonability Rule

I have said, in last paragraph, that my proposal covers up a theory of justification. This fact due to accepting knowledge as justified true belief[4]. On one hand, I take for granted a simple definition of belief, like accepting something as true. On the other hand, I take for granted the correspondence theory of truth which do not permits context sensitivity. Thus, justification is the leftover of a proficuous context dependence analysis. Comparing with Lewis (1996) for the sake of clarity, I should say he rejects justification, belief, and even truth, qua necessary elements for one definition of knowledge. His account of knowledge, nestling seven rules, considers the

[4] Gettier counterexamples are brilliant but the propositions believed there are actually false.

context even though he does not accept the context-dependence of knowledge because his context-dependence presupposes justification as a necessary condition for it. In my view what Lewis (i*dem*, p. 551) called ways to gain knowledge are ways to acquire justification.

2.1 - *Contextualism*

Now, after I have said how, in first section, I can start to say why relevant alternatives are aroused in contexts. At this point I follow DeRose (1992), even if his idea produces a lack about what alternatives should be considered relevant[5]. The theoretician of relevant alternatives says that when we assert a proposition, we are enunciating something about an incompatible alternative framework to our statement and to be counted as someone who knows this proposition, we must exclude such alternatives, *e.g.*, If one person claims to see a red chair and another one raises the possibility of the chair only being red lightened, the first person probably may have to exclude she is in the lightning extraneous framework. In order not to confuse the contextualist theoretician with the invariantist, DeRose distinguished the types of factors which can change the inventory of relevant alternatives. The invariantist can be a follower of the relevant alternatives if she admits that only subject factors can exert influence on the inventory of relevant alternatives, on the other hand, the contextualist admits attributor factors of knowledge also doing this role as well.

When the possibility of seeing a painted mule instead of a zebra is raised and how this alternative becomes part of the context, can or can not change the meaning of an knowledge attribution. If the way in which it becomes an alternative is due to subjective factors, the content of "x knows that p" does not change. If zoos are lacking zebras and therefore decide to paint mules to deceive your visitors and the speaker does not know it. What she means by "I know I see zebras" remains content unchanged because this change is not part of the putative knower conversational situation. In other words, subject factors only alter the truth value and not the truth conditions of an knowledge attribution; in the case in which zoos are being honest with visitors, it is true. If the possibility of painted mules appears in the conversation, then the meaning of her statement can pass to have the following content: "I know I see zebras instead of painted mules". Thus, she may need to exclude this incompatible alternative in order to be counted as a knower. This means that the truth conditions of the proposition expressed have changed.

[5] DeRose (1999, footnote 22) admits his definitions is vague at this determination.

According to DeRose (1999) factors which alters the truth conditions - content - of an knowledge ascription, are of three types. The first contextual factor which affects the truth conditions is the importance of being right. For example, if I'm talking to friends about pets and say (C) The Persian cat breed is prone to have kidney problems. So my friend who has one, should take care and buy a special type of feed. My justification comes from the research I did on the internet when I was thinking of having a cat. In this context the evidence appears to be sufficient. But if I'm doing a test in a course of veterinary medicine, the justification for state (C) could not be the same. Even if I am right in both cases, in the second my justification must have to be stronger than in the first, since it is more important to be right in the context involving the exercise of a profession than in an everyday conversation with a friend.

The second factor is the mention of an incompatible alternative that perhaps the subject should exclude to be counted as a knower. Note that this alternative is not always relevant and should be excluded, it only creates pressure for it entry in the list of relevant alternatives. The third is the consideration of some incompatible possibility. When a possibility that contradicts our knowing claim is mentioned, we can keep in mind this possibility and maybe we should exclude it in order to have knowledge attributed to us.

I believe DeRose can explain the importance of conceding that attributive factors exert influence on the relevant alternatives inventory, but that we should consider these factors is not sufficient to eschew the skeptical argument. After all, he can not explain why we do not need to exclude incompatible alternatives mentioned by the skeptic, i.e., he only explains that there is a type of factor that alters the truth conditions of an knowledge ascription, but not by which way a alternative becomes relevant.

I intend to explain what alternative should be counted as relevant. DeRose can not answer to skepticism because he can not explain such problem. So I seek to fill such gap through what I want to call reasonability rule, without escape a contextual approach, using the notions of epistemic obligations and evidence.

2.2 - *Epistemic Obligations*

At the present subsection explore the role played by the epistemic obligations inside the reasonability rule, but before that I must give a general idea of such obligations. Since Descartes, it has been established that our epistemological commitment is to attempt to have true beliefs and avoid having the false ones. That distinction may seem strange at first glance, but it is

necessary because if we only want to reach truth, we could believe indiscriminately in all propositions that are presented to us in some way. But this attitude would lead us to believe in falsehoods also. Therefore, we must seek to have true beliefs and avoid false beliefs. That is, we must try to believe only in true propositions.

According to Feldman (1988), being epistemically responsible means not having power of choice about our beliefs, because the idea of responsibility is not necessarily linked to the idea of choice. There are cases in which one assumes commitments she can not accomplish. Yet she has a responsibility to satisfy them. As is the case of a person who takes a loan which can not afford. The incapacity of fulfilling her commitment (pay your debt) do not exempt her from the responsibility. Of course epistemic obligations are not equal to the financial obligations, but the analogy between the two types is relevant. It shows that we have not obligations always related to voluntary actions.

One could raise an objection against the above example of the relationship between willingness and obligation saying that to commit loan the person acted freely. I could say, then, that when we engage the epistemic game (when we intend to be justified) we also make a choice voluntarily. However this kind of discussion about the freedom of action is not what I want here. I want to defend only that we need to achieve truth and avoid error. Even if the doxastic voluntarism still a very interesting problem, I can argue that we have epistemic obligations without confrontation with it.

I mean that those obligations do not require a power of choice through beliefs, but they are linked to a behavior, which consists in believing a proposition according to evidence we have in a given context, i.e., given the objective to believe in true propositions and avoid believing in false ones, Feldman builds a method that requires us to believe only in propositions that are supported by evidence without forgetting that the suspension of judgment is a possible attitude toward a proposition, because when faced with a situation in which the evidence seem to be insufficient to form a justified belief, we can suspend the judgment looking for error avoidance. Hereupon, I have to emphasize that the rule presented in next subsection does not permit us assume the brain in a vat hypothesis is false neither true, hence, probably, the best belief attitude regarding it is the judgment suspension because apparently we have no evidence to believe or not which we are brain in a vat. Therefore, such hypothesis must not be considered in normal contexts.

For me here, being epistemically responsible involves the belief according to evidence and also doubt propositions only in accordance to available evidence. Therefore, when the skeptic raises the possibility of an incompatible alternative with a proposition P, it should (and usually does not) act according to the obligations that we have when we talk about epistemological terms, *viz.*, given our epistemic goal of believing only in true propositions, we should raise only objections for which we have some evidence; if there is no evidence to believe we are brains in a vat or we are seeing a painted mule instead of a zebra, then we should not put into question our belief, otherwise we would be epistemically irresponsible.

Of course some questions arise from this formulation of epistemic obligations. I dedicate myself to answer how to determine what should be counted as evidence. My answer is that contextualism does this role and transforms the idea of Feldman's epistemic obligation in a way to preclude skepticism. Moreover I build a method for determining when a person is justified to assert a proposition P. Let's call that aggregate: reasonability rule.

2.3 - *Reasonability Rule*

As I have said, the Reasonability Rule aims to establish a non-variable evaluation criteria within a contextualist theory. My intention is to think of a way to determine the character of the term "know". I tried to explain in the introduction the lack of conflict between determine that a term must be used in a way and contextualism, but now with contextualism explained I can add another reason for the plausibility of my proposal, namely, the notion of relevant alternatives. Relevant alternatives are also a context-independent criterion, after all the necessity to exclude only those alternatives that are relevant depends on the attribution context. The idea of context-dependency regards, precisely, limiting the inventory of relevant alternatives that a subject needs to exclude in order to be counted as justified.

Let's take for granted that relevant alternatives inventory are considered having in mind contextual epistemic responsibility, which I prefer to call reasonability. DeRose sensitivity rule says that P is reasonably believed if and only if P is the case. If non-P were the case, S would not believe P. What is being put here is something different. Instead of describing what are the factors that influence the relevant alternatives inventory. I created a standard for determining what alternatives should be counted as relevant. Precisely, an alternative is relevant if and only if (i) S has evidence to believe R; and (ii) given the contextual standards of justification to which S is submitted, it is required that the possibility of R occurs remains excluded.

So when someone suggests that I can not know I see zebras at the zoo by spreading in the air the possibility of being painted mules (without having any evidence to raise such objection), he is not acting in accordance with the reasonability rule. That is, she is trying to make that incompatible alternative (R) became relevant without following (i) and (ii). She intends to demand an answer which the context of a normal visit to the zoo does not require. If the context had required a refinement of reasons and she had evidence, she could raise objections characterized by a reasonable attribution. A justification is reasonable if it is based on the exclusion of all relevant alternatives and whether it conforms to the epistemic rationality, viz., I have no obligation to exclude all alternatives that are presented to me in a context because it will only be relevant if and only if, such alternative is supported by evidence.

Now I can respond to Klein when he says once the local skeptical objections is placed, alternatives that were irrelevant to the context, become relevant, i.e., what I call being epistemically unreasonable. Raise a doubt of any kind whatsoever (skeptical or not), with the intention that it becomes an alternative that we must exclude, is an attitude that has contextual limits given under reasonability rule. Therefore, the rule proposed here is not related to pragmatic presuppositions[6] at all, because if one evidence for one incompatible alternative to someone justification appears in the context, she would not be counted as knower even if the negation of such incompatible alternative was taken as common ground (pragmatically pressuposed).

We can not raise objections to a justification without this objection being reasonable and without it has the goal of reaching the truth and avoid error in the context-dependency molds. So when I talk about a reasonable attitude, I am talking about an attitude which involve the search for contextually required evidence. It puts a (contextual) limit for SA application, either in its local or global form. With this I do not want to say that local or global objections must not considered anyway. Regardless of it, I should point out before conclusion that the global form of skepticism

Conclusion

The idea I advocate had two intentions, one was to find a way to face the skeptical argument and the other was to formulate a rule that could give us a criterion to determine how alternative to incompatible P become relevant. I think I can succeed in both.

[6] As Blome-Tillman (2011) argue for.

The way I find, then, was to combine epistemic responsibility idea, the notion of context-dependence, and evidence as a criterion forming the reasonability rule. My proposal aims to foreclose the doubts raised by skeptics. The idea here is to require it to be reasonable, i.e., require that their objections has some contextually established evidence. Thus, when the possibility of not knowing P, because we can not exclude r - as in the case of mules painted – is raised, we do not need to exclude this possibility, it is who raised that possibility which have to show us the necessity to exclude them.

I claim that there are rules for justification ascription which does not vary with the context, but that the degree of requirement of these rules is contextually dependent. This raises the question: should I create another rule to resolve when evidence is relevant? The idea of a contextualist proposal is precisely delegate to context certain determinations. For me, DeRose did it in a way that his theory does not seem strong enough against skepticism, so I try to make things more accurate. Hence, in introduction I explain why an alternative became relevant and in section 2.1 and 2.3 I explain when and for what motif, respectively, an alternative became relevant.

I believe if the skeptical follow the rule regarding a epistemically rational action (according to my terminology: act according to the reasonability rule) no matter how much the logic formulation of his argument is strong, she (almost always) can not raise objections to our everyday claims of knowledge or at least of justification. Therefore, the burden of proof is reversed and now it is he who must have to justify your question in accordance with the mentioned rule, which turns my confrontation in direction to the premise 1 of SA.

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