

A Contextualist Theory of Epistemic Justification

DAVID B. ANNIS

I. FOUNDATIONALISM, COHERENTISM, AND CONTEXTUALISM

Foundationalism is the theory that every empirical statement which is justified ultimately must derive at least some degree of justification independent of the support such statements may derive from other statements. Such *minimal* foundationalism does not require certainty or incorrigibility; it does not deny the revisability of *all* statements, and it allows an important role for intrasystematic justification or coherence.¹ The main objections to foundationalism have been (a) the denial of the existence of basic statements and (b) the claim that even if such statements were not mythical, such an impoverished basis would never justify all the various statements we normally take to be justified.

Opposed to foundationalism has been the coherence theory of justification. According to coherentism a statement is justified if and only if it coheres with a certain kind of system of statements. Although there has been disagreement among coherentists in explaining what coherence is and specifying the special system of statements, the key elements in these explanations have been consistency, connectedness, and comprehensiveness. The chief objection to the theory has been that coherence within a consistent and comprehensive set of statements is not sufficient for justification.² Theorists of epistemic justification have tended to stress foundationalism and coherentism and in general have overlooked or ignored a third kind of theory, namely,

contextualism. The contextualist denies that there are basic statements in the foundationalist's sense and that coherence is sufficient for justification. According to contextualism both theories overlook contextual parameters essential to justification. In what follows I develop a version of a contextualist theory.³

II. THE BASIC MODEL—MEETING OBJECTIONS

The basic model of justification to be developed here is that of a person's being able to meet certain objections. The objections one must meet and whether or not they are met are relative to certain goals. Since the issue is that of epistemic justification, the goals are epistemic in nature. With respect to one epistemic goal, accepting some statement may be reasonable, whereas relative to a different goal it may not be. Two of our epistemic goals are having true beliefs and avoiding having false beliefs. Other epistemic goals such as simplicity, conservation of existing beliefs, and maximization of explanatory power will be assumed to be subsidiary to the goals of truth and the avoidance of error.⁴

Given these goals, if a person *S* claims that some statement *h* is true, we may object (A) that *S* is not in a position to know that *h* or (B) that *h* is false. Consider (A). Suppose we ask *S* how he knows that *h* and he responds by giving us various reasons e_1, e_2, \dots, e_n for the truth of *h*. We may object that one of his reasons e_1-e_n is false, e_1-e_n does not provide adequate support for *h*, *S*'s specific reasoning from e_1-e_n to *h* is fallacious, or that there is evidence *i* such that the conjunction of e_1-

e_n and i does not provide adequate support for h . These objections may be raised to his reasons for e_1-e_n as well as to his responses to our objections.

There are also cases where a person is not required to give reasons for his claim that h is true. If S claims to see a brown book across the room, we usually do not require reasons. But we may still object that the person is not in a position to know by arguing, for example, that the person is not reliable in such situations. So even in cases where we do not in general require reasons, objections falling into categories (A) or (B) can be raised.

But it would be too strong a condition to require a person to be able to meet all *possible* objections falling into these categories. In some distant time new evidence may be discovered as the result of advances in our scientific knowledge which would call into question the truth of some statement h . Even though we do not in fact have that evidence now, it is logically possible that we have it, so it is a possible objection to h now. If the person had to meet the objection, he would have to be in a different and better epistemic position than the one he is presently in, that is, he would have to have new evidence in order to respond to the objection. The objectors also would have to be in a better position to raise the objection. But the objections to be raised and answered should not require the participants to be in a new epistemic position. What is being asked is whether the person in his present position is justified in believing h . Thus the person only has to answer *current* objections, that is, objections based on the current evidence available.

Merely uttering a question that falls into one of our categories does not make it an objection S must answer. To demand a response the objection must be an expression of a *real* doubt. According to Pierce, doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves. Such doubt is the result of "some surprising phenomenon, some experience which either disappoints an expectation, or breaks in upon

some habit of expectation."⁵ As Dewey puts it, it is only when "jars, hitches, breaks, blocks, . . . incidents occasioning an interruption of the smooth straightforward course of behavior" occur that doubt arises.⁶ Thus for S to be held accountable for answering an objection, it must be a manifestation of a real doubt where the doubt is occasioned by a real life situation. Assuming that the subjective probabilities a person assigns reflect the person's actual epistemic attitudes and that these are the product of his confrontation with the world, the above point may be expressed as follows. S is not required to respond to an objection if *in general* it would be assigned a low probability by the people questioning S .

If an objection must be the expression of a real doubt caused by the jars of a real life situation, then such objections will be primarily *local* as opposed to *global*. Global 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 were 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.

It must be assumed that the objecting audience has the epistemic goals of truth and the avoidance of error. If they were not critical truth seekers, they would not raise appropriate objections. To meet an objection i , S must respond in such a way as to produce within the objecting group a general but not necessarily universal rejection of i or at least the general recognition of the diminished status of i as an objection. In the latter case S may, for example, point out that although i might be true, it only decreases the support of e_i (one of his reasons for believing h) a very small amount, and hence he is still justified in believing h . There are of course many ways in which S can handle an objection. He might indicate that it is not of the type (A) or (B) and so is not relevant. He may re-

spond that it is just an *idle* remark not prompted by real doubt; that is, there is no reason for thinking that it is true. He may ask the objector for his reasons, and he can raise any of the objections of the type (A) or (B) in response. Again the give and take is based on real objections and responses.

III. THE SOCIAL NATURE OF JUSTIFICATION

When asking whether *S* is justified in believing *h*, this has to be considered relative to an *issue-context*. Suppose we are interested in whether Jones, an ordinary non-medically trained person, has the general information that polio is caused by a virus. If his response to our question is that he remembers the paper reporting that Salk said it was, then this is good enough. He has performed adequately given the issue-context. But suppose the context is an examination for the M.D. degree. Here we expect a lot more. If the candidate simply said what Jones did, we would take him as being very deficient in knowledge. Thus relative to one issue-context a person may be justified in believing *h* but not justified relative to another context.

The issue-context is what specific issue involving *h* is being raised. It determines the level of understanding and knowledge that *S* must exhibit, and it determines an appropriate objector-group. For example in the context of the examination for the M.D. degree, the appropriate group is not the class of ordinary non-medically trained people, but qualified medical examiners.

The importance (value or utility) attached to the outcome of accepting *h* when it is false or rejecting *h* when it is true is a component of the issue-context. Suppose the issue is whether a certain drug will help cure a disease in humans without harmful effects. In such a situation we are much more demanding than if the question were whether it would help in the case of animals. In both cases the appropriate objector-group would be the same, namely, qualified researchers. But they would require quite a bit more

proof in the former case. Researchers do in fact strengthen or weaken the justificatory conditions in relation to the importance of the issue. If accepting *h* when *h* is false would have critical consequences, the researcher may increase the required significance level in testing *h*.

Man is a social animal, and yet when it comes to the justification of beliefs philosophers tend to ignore this fact. But this is one contextual parameter that no adequate theory of justification can overlook. According to the contextualist model of justification sketched above, when asking whether some person *S* is justified in believing *h*, we must consider this relative to some specific issue-context which determines the level of understanding and knowledge required. This in turn determines the appropriate objector-group. For *S* to be justified in believing *h* relative to the issue-context, *S* must be able to meet all current objections falling into (A) and (B) which express a real doubt of the qualified objector-group where the objectors are critical truth seekers. Thus social information—the beliefs, information, and theories of others—plays an important part in justification, for it in part determines what objections will be raised, how a person will respond to them, and what responses the objectors will accept.

Perhaps the most neglected component in justification theory is the *actual* social practices and norms of justification of a culture or community of people. Philosophers have looked for universal and a priori principles of justification. But consider this in the context of scientific inquiry. There certainly has been refinement in the methods and techniques of discovery and testing in science. Suppose that at a time *t* in accordance with the best methods then developed for discovery and testing in a scientific domain by critical truth seekers, *S* accepts theory *T*. It is absurd to say that *S* is not justified in accepting *T* since at a later time a refinement of those techniques would lead to the acceptance of a different theory. Thus relative to the standards at *t*, *S* is justified in accepting *T*.

The same conclusion follows if we consider a case involving two different groups existing at the same time instead of two different times as in the above example. Suppose *S* is an Earth physicist and accepts *T* on the basis of the best methods developed by Earth physicists at *t*. Unknown to us the more advanced physicists on Twin Earth reject *T*. *S* is still justified in accepting *T*.

To determine whether *S* is justified in believing *h* we must consider the actual standards of justification of the community of people to which he belongs. More specifically we determine whether *S* is justified in believing *h* by specifying an issue-context raised within a community of people *G* with certain social practices and norms of justification. This determines the level of understanding and knowledge *S* is expected to have and the standards he is to satisfy. The appropriate objector-group is a subset of *G*. To be justified in believing *h*, *S* must be able to meet their objections in a way that satisfies their practices and norms.

It follows that justification theory must be *naturalized*. In considering the justification of beliefs we cannot neglect the actual social practices and norms of justification of a group. Psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists have started this study, but much more work is necessary.⁷

The need to naturalize justification theory has been recognized in recent philosophy of science. Positivists stressed the *logic* of science—the structure of theories, confirmation, explanation—in abstraction from science as actually carried on. But much of the main thrust of recent philosophy of science is that such an approach is inadequate. Science as *practiced* yields justified beliefs about the world. Thus the study of the actual practices, which have changed through time, cannot be neglected. The present tenor in the philosophy of science is thus toward a historical and methodological realism.⁸

From the fact that justification is relative to the social practices and norms of a group, it does not follow that they cannot be criticized nor that justification is somehow subjective. The practices and norms are

epistemic and hence have as their goals truth and the avoidance of error. Insofar as they fail to achieve these goals they can be criticized. For example the Kpelle people of Africa rely more on the authority of the elders than we do. But this authority could be questioned if they found it led to too many false perceptual beliefs. An objection to a practice must of course be real; that is, the doubt must be the result of some jar or hitch in our experience of the world. Furthermore such objections will always be local as opposed to global. Some practice or norm and our experiences of the world yield the result that another practice is problematic. A real objection presupposes some other accepted practice. This however does not commit us to some form of subjectivism. Just as there is no theory-neutral observation language in science, so there is no standard-neutral epistemic position that one can adopt. But in neither case does it follow that objectivity and rational criticism are lost.⁹

IV. THE REGRESS ARGUMENT

Philosophers who have accepted foundationalism have generally offered a version of the infinite regress argument in support of it. Two key premises in the argument are the denial of a coherence theory of justification and the denial that an infinite sequence of reasons is sufficient to justify a belief. But there is another option to the conclusion of the argument besides foundationalism. A contextualist theory of the sort offered above stops the regress and yet does not require basic statements in the foundationalist's sense.

Suppose that the Joneses are looking for a red chair to replace a broken one in their house. The issue-context is thus not whether they can discern subtle shades of color. Nor is it an examination in physics where the person is expected to have detailed knowledge of the transmission of light and color perception. Furthermore nothing of great importance hinges on a correct identification. Mr. Jones, who has the necessary per-

ceptual concepts and normal vision, points at a red chair a few feet in front of him and says "here is a red one." The appropriate objector-group consists of normal perceivers who have general knowledge about the standard conditions of perception and perceptual error. In such situations which we are all familiar with, generally, there will be no objections. His claim is accepted as justified. But imagine that someone objects that there is a red light shining on the chair so it may not be red. If Jones cannot respond to this objection when it is real, then he is not in an adequate cognitive position. But suppose he is in a position to reply that he knows about the light and the chair is still red since he saw it yesterday in normal light. Then we will accept his claim.

A belief is *contextually basic* if, given an issue-context, the appropriate objector-group does not require the person to have reasons for the belief in order to be in a position to have knowledge. If the objector-group requires reasons, then it is not basic in the context. Thus in the first situation above Jones's belief that there is a red chair here is contextually-basic, whereas it is not basic in the second situation.

Consider the case either where the objector-group does not require *S* to have reasons for his belief that *h* in order to be in a position to have knowledge and where they accept his claim, or the case where they require reasons and accept his claim. In either case there is no regress of reasons. If an appropriate objector-group, the members of which are critical truth seekers, have no real doubts in the specific issue-context, then the person's belief is justified. The belief has withstood the test of verifiably motivated objectors.

V. OBJECTIONS TO THE THEORY

There are several objections to the contextualist theory offered, and their main thrust is that the conditions for justification imposed are too stringent. The objections are as fol-

lows. First according to the theory offered, to be justified in believing *h* one must be able to meet a restricted class of objections falling into categories (A) and (B). But this ignores the distinction between *being* justified and *showing* that one is justified. To be justified is just to satisfy the principles of justification. To show that one is justified is to demonstrate that one satisfies these principles, and this is much more demanding.¹⁰ For example *S* might have evidence that justifies his belief that *h* even though he is not able to articulate the evidence. In this case *S* would not be able to show that he was justified.

Second, if to be justified in believing *h* requires that one be able to meet the objection that *h* is false, then the theory ignores the distinction between truth and justification. A person can be justified in believing a statement even though it is false.

Finally the theory requires *S* to be in a position to answer all sorts of objections from a variety of perspectives. But this again is to require too much. For example assume that two scientists in different countries unaware of each other's work perform a certain experiment. The first scientist, *S*₁, gets one result and concludes that *h*. The second scientist, *S*₂, does not get the result (due to incorrect measurements). To require of *S*₁ that he be aware of *S*₂'s experiment and be able to refute it is to impose an unrealistic burden on him in order for his belief to be justified. It is to build a *defeasibility* requirement into the justification condition. One approach to handling the Gettier problem has been to add the condition that in order to have knowledge, besides having justified true belief, the justification must not be defeated. Although there have been different characterizations of defeasibility, a core component or unrestricted version has been that a statement *i* defeats the justification evidence *e* provides *h* just in case *i* is true and the conjunction of *i* and *e* does not provide adequate support for *h*.¹¹ But according to the contextualist theory presented, in order for *S* to be justified in believing *h*, he must be able to meet the objection that there is defeating evidence.

In reply to the first objection, the theory offered does not ignore the distinction between being justified and showing that one is justified. It is not required of *S* that he be able to state the standards of justification and demonstrate that he satisfies them. What is required is that he be able to meet real objections. This may *sometimes* require him to discuss standards, but not always. Furthermore the example given is not a counterexample since it is not a case of justified belief. Consider a case where relative to an issue-context we would expect *S* to have reasons for his belief that *h*. Suppose when asked how he knows or what his reasons are he is not able to say anything. We certainly would not take him as justified in his belief. We may not be able to articulate all our evidence for *h*, but we are required to do it for some of the evidence. It is not enough that we have evidence for *h*; it must be *taken* by us as evidence, and this places us "in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says."¹²

The first point in response to the next objection is that *epistemic* justification makes a claim to knowledge. To be *epistemically* justified in believing *h* is to be in a position to know *h*. Furthermore if the goals of epistemic justification are truth and the avoidance of error, then one *ought not* accept false statements. From an epistemic point of view to do so is objectionable. Hence the falsity of *h* at least counts against the person's being justified.

However, the contextualist account offered does not ignore the distinction between truth and justification. Meeting an objection does not entail showing the objection is false. It only requires general agreement on the response. So the objection may still be true. Thus *S* may be justified in believing *h* since he can meet the objection when *h* is in fact false. Furthermore an objection in order to require a response has to be the expression of a real doubt. Since it is possible for verifiably motivated objectors not to be aware of the falsity of *h*, this objection will not be raised, so *S* may be justified in believing *h* even though it is false.

The situation is complex, however, since there are cases where the falsity of *h* implies *S* is not justified in believing *h*. Suppose that Jones is at a party and wonders whether his friend Smith is there. Nothing of great importance hinges on his presence; he simply wonders whether he is there. Perhaps he would not mind a chat with Smith. He looks about and asks a few guests. They have not seen him there. In such a situation Jones is justified in believing Smith is not there.

Imagine now that Jones is a police officer looking for Smith, a suspected assassin, at the party. Merely looking about casually and checking with a few guests is certainly not adequate. If Smith turns out to be hiding in one of the closets, we will not conclude that Jones was justified in his belief only it turned out false. He displayed gross negligence in not checking more thoroughly. There are cases where relative to an issue-context we require the person *S* to put himself in such an epistemic position that *h* will not turn out to be false. In this case the falsity of *h* is *non-excusable*. To be justified in believing *h* in non-excusable cases, *S* must be able to meet the objection that *h* is false. This is not required in excusable cases.

Assume that *h* is some very complicated scientific theory and *S* puts himself in the very best evidential position at the time. Even if the truth of *h* is very important, the falsity of *h* is excusable. The complexity of the issue and the fact that *S* put himself in the best position possible excuses *S* from the falsity of *h*, so he is still justified. But not all excusable cases involve a complex *h* nor being in the best position possible. Suppose that Smith has an identical twin brother but the only living person who knows this is the brother. Furthermore there are no records that there was a twin brother. If Jones returns a book to Smith's house and mistakenly gives it to the brother (where the issue-context is simply whether he returned the borrowed book and nothing of great importance hinges on to whom he gave it), he is still justified in his belief that he gave it to his friend Smith. Although Jones could have put himself in a better position (by asking

questions about their friendship), there was no reason for him in the context to check further. People did not generally know about the twin brother, and Smith did not notice any peculiar behavior. Given the issue-context, members of the appropriate objector-group would not *expect* Jones to check further. So he evinces no culpability when his belief turns out to be false. Excusability thus depends on the issue-context and what the appropriate objector-group, given their standards of justification and the information available, expect of *S*.

Part of assimilating our epistemic standards, as is the case with both legal and moral standards, is learning the conditions of excusability. Such conditions are highly context-dependent, and it would be extremely difficult if not impossible to formulate rules to express them. In general we learn the conditions of excusability case by case. One need only consider moral and legal negligence to realize the full complexity of excuses, an area still to be studied despite Austin's well-known plea a number of years ago.

In response to the third objection it should be noted that epistemic justification is not to be taken lightly. Accepting *h* in part determines what other things I will believe and do. Furthermore I can infect the minds of others with my falsehoods and thus affect their further beliefs and actions. So to be epistemically justified requires that our claims pass the test of criticism. This point has motivated some philosophers to build a defeasibility requirement into the conditions of justification.¹³

The contextualist theory presented above, however, does not do this. There may be a defeating statement *i*, but *S* need meet this objection only if the objector-group raises it. For them to raise it, *i* must be the expression of real doubt. But it is perfectly possible for verifiably motivated people to be unaware of *i*.

Furthermore the concept of epistemic excusability applies to defeating evidence. Suppose there is defeating evidence *i*. *S* may still be justified in his belief that *h* in the issue-

context, even though he is unable to meet the objection. Relative to the issue-context, the appropriate objector-group with their standards of justification and available information may not expect of *S* that he be aware of *i*. Perhaps the issue involving *h* is very complicated. Thus his failure to meet the defeating evidence is excusable.

In the experiment case we can imagine issue-contexts where we would expect the first scientist to know of the experiment of the other scientist. But not all issue-contexts demand this. Nevertheless we may still require that he be in a position to say something about the other experiment if informed about it. For example he might indicate that he knows the area well, has performed the experiment a number of times and gotten similar results, it was performed under carefully controlled conditions, so he has every reason for believing that the experiment is replicable with similar results. Thus there must be something wrong with the other experiment. Requiring the scientist to be able to respond in the *minimal* way seems not to be overly demanding.

VI. SUMMARY

Contextualism is an alternative to the traditional theories of foundationalism and coherentism. It denies the existence of basic statements in the foundationalist's sense (although it allows contextually basic statements), and it denies that coherence as it traditionally has been explained is sufficient for justification. Both theories overlook contextual parameters essential to justification, such as the issue-context and thus the value of *h*, social information, and social practices and norms of justification. In particular, the social nature of justification cannot be ignored.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of minimal foundationalism see William P. Alston, "Has Foundationalism Been Refuted?" [Pp. 42-53 in this volume.]; James W. Corn-

man, "Foundationalism versus Nonfoundational Theories of Empirical Justification," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (1977), 287-297; David B. Annis, "Epistemic Foundationalism," *Philosophical Studies* 31 (1977), 345-352.

2. Recent discussions of coherentism are found in Keith Lehrer, *Knowledge*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), chaps. 7-8; Nicholas Rescher, "Foundationalism, Coherentism, and the Idea of Cognitive Systematization," *The Journal of Philosophy* 71 (1974), 695-708; and his *The Coherence Theory of Truth* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) [Chapter 2 is reprinted in this volume. Ed.]. Criticism of Lehrer's coherence theory is to be found in Cornman, "Foundational Versus Nonfoundational Theories of Empirical Justification," and in my review of Lehrer in *Philosophia* 6 (1976): 209-13. Criticism of Rescher's version is found in Mark Pastin's "Foundationalism Redux," unpublished, an abstract of which appears in the *The Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1974): 709-10.

3. Historically the key contextualists have been Peirce, Dewey, and Popper. But contextualist hints, suggestions, and theories are also to be found in Robert Ackermann, *Belief and Knowledge* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1972); Bruce Aune, *Knowledge, Mind and Nature* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1967); John Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (London, 1962); Isaac Levi, *Gambling with Truth* (New York, 1967); Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (London, 1958) and *Human Understanding* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1972); Carl Wellman, *Challenge and Response: Justification in Ethics* (Carbondale, Illinois, 1971); F. L. Will, *Induction and Justification* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York, 1953) and *On Certainty* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969).

4. For a discussion of epistemic goals see Levi, *Gambling with Truth*.

5. C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, vol. 6, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Harvard, 1965), p. 469.

6. John Dewey, *Knowing and the Known* (Boston, 1949), p. 315. See also Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*.

7. See, for example, Michael Cole et al., *The Cultural Context of Learning and Thinking* (New York, 1971).

8. For a discussion of the need to naturalize justification theory in the philosophy of science, see Frederick Suppe, "Afterword—1976" in the 2nd edition of his *The Structure of Scientific Theories* (Urbana, Illinois, 1977).

9. See Frederick Suppe's "The Search for Philosophical Understanding of Scientific Theories" and his "Afterword—1976" in *The Structure of Scientific Theories* for a discussion of objectivity in science and the lack of a theory-neutral observation language.

10. Alston discusses this distinction in "Has Foundationalism Been Refuted?" [Pp. 42-53 in this volume. Ed.] See also his "Two Types of Foundationalism," *The Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976), 165-185; and "Self-Warrant: A Neglected Form of Privileged Access," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 13 (1976), 257-272.

11. The best discussion of defeasibility is Marshall Swain's "Epistemic Defeasibility," *Essays on Knowledge*

and *Justification*, ed. G. Pappas and M. Swain (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 160-183.

12. Wilfrid Sellars, *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 169.

13. Carl Ginet, "What Must Be Added to Knowing to Obtain Knowing That One Knows?," *Synthese* 21 (1970): 163-86.

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