

CRITICAL STUDY

DEFENDING THE UNITY OF KNOWLEDGE

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Value and Context: the Nature of Moral and Political Knowledge. BY ALAN THOMAS. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006. Pp. vii + 347. Price £47.00.)

A *semantic* contextualist, such as David Lewis or Keith DeRose, thinks that the meanings of words like 'know' vary across contexts, so that there are different senses of 'know' relevant, e.g., to philosophical knowing and to everyday knowing.¹ An *inferential* contextualist, such as Michael Williams, or Alan Thomas in his new book, thinks that the constitution of contexts varies from case to case, so that what counts as a legitimate epistemic problem in one context may not do so in another.² Plainly these first-pass characterizations of semantic contextualism (hereafter SC) and inferential contextualism (IC) are only first-pass, since both are really truisms. The bite of these contextualisms comes in what they say next. One of the things they say next is this: 'So we have an adequate answer to scepticism, because it turns out that the sceptic misuses words' [thus (SC)], or '... the sceptic misuses the notion of a legitimate epistemic problem' [thus (IC)]. Thomas' book defends (IC); here I consider the central moves in his defence.

Thomas' (IC) begins from a phenomenological and descriptive claim (p. 179): the contextualist appeals to a description of our ordinary epistemic practices, an unprejudiced examination of which reveals that we see knowledge-claims as framed by judgements which do not themselves come into question. Thomas calls these 'framework judgements' or 'framework beliefs' (pp. 176–8). Secondly, he has a more complex argument which draws on Bernard Williams' famous discussion of moral knowledge in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. That discussion begins, Thomas says (p. 172), with a 'poisoned pawn' gambit. Williams claims that the best-case scenario

¹ See, e.g., D.K. Lewis, 'Scorekeeping in a Language Game', *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 8 (1979), pp. 339–59; K. DeRose, 'Contextualism: an Explanation and Defense', in J. Greco and E. Sosa (eds), *Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 187–205.

² See M. Williams, *Unnatural Doubts* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); A. Thomas, *Value and Context: the Nature of Moral and Political Knowledge* (Oxford UP, 2006). On the contrasts between semantic contextualism and inferential contextualism, see D. Pritchard, 'Two Forms of Epistemological Contextualism', *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, 64 (2002), pp. 19–55.

for moral cognitivism is the scenario which he, Williams, calls 'a hypertraditional society'.³ In this scenario, there are agents who have everything a cognitivist could reasonably want: they are committed to a range of judgements using thick ethical concepts; they make judgements, argue for and against such judgements, and seem to be both classifying the world and also determining defensible reasons for action. The only thing the hypertraditionals do not do is have relativistic thoughts, and above all this particular very destabilizing thought, that their ethical *Handlungsweise* is just one amongst a range of equally valid alternatives. But, Williams insists, the hypertraditionals cannot have the rest of their moral-cognitivist Eden without this snake: the only way they can prevent this thought arising is by deliberately suppressing it. Once this bad faith is overcome and the relativist thought is allowed free rein, it destroys the hypertraditionals' moral knowledge. They lose their grip on their own thick concepts, and moral scepticism ensues.

Thomas' response is to refuse the poisoned pawn. No one, he argues, could have the hypertraditionals' sort of relativistic thought unless occupying a vantage-point from which they could survey the totality of their own moral knowledge. Contextualism, Thomas tells us, denies that there is any such vantage-point: it supplies a local model of justification, and its account of this local model is the basis for the general conclusion that knowledge cannot be surveyed – a conclusion which Thomas takes to apply to the particular case of Bernard Williams' hypertraditionalists. Thus Thomas' contextualism has the decisive advantage that it provides a model of moral knowledge which renders Williams-style scepticism impossible. This is his second argument for it.

First comment: I doubt that making scepticism impossible is an advantage. Certainly it would be an advantage if a position actually *disproved* scepticism. But most ways of making scepticism impossible to state seem to be no more than *ad hoc* restrictions of our own expressive powers, well deserving of Williams' hard words 'bad faith'.

Secondly, Thomas' argument, even if successful, shows at most that scepticism of Williams' sort is impossible. But Thomas can go from there to the conclusion that his (IC) shows the general impossibility of moral scepticism only via the claim that Williams' scepticism is the only plausible sort, or that if it fails, then *a fortiori* so does every other sort.

However, thirdly, Williams' argument does not look like the best argument for moral scepticism. The problem with it is not, as is sometimes said, the claim that the hypertraditionals have moral knowledge and then lose it. Williams' point is not that someone could know p at t_1 and know not- p at t_2 – given the factivity of knowledge, that is indeed a contradiction. The point is instead that someone could know p at t_1 and not-know p at t_2 , which is no contradiction. The problem, rather, is this: it just is not true that it *must* be bad faith to reject the relativistic thought that the ways in which other societies go on ethically speaking are *just other ways to go on*. For there are cases and cases; and Williams' thought seems true for some such ways and false for others. Other societies' *mores* in respect of greeting people (a kiss on the cheek? a

³ B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 146.

handshake? a rubbing of noses? a bow?) are indeed 'just other ways to go on'. But this thought seems entirely unthreatening to our core moral beliefs. Contrast mass human sacrifice as practised in Aztec Mexico. If we can bear to, we should look closely for a moment at what this 'way of going on' actually involved. If we do, we shall not, I think (I hope), be tempted by the thought that *this* is just another way to go on. So we can reply to Williams that where his 'key relativistic thought' is correct, it does not support any alarming sort of relativism; whereas in cases where it *would* be alarming to take seriously the possibility that a given practice was 'just another way of going on', such as human sacrifice, there simply is no reason why we *should* take that possibility seriously.

Thomas sometimes makes similar moves, e.g., in his discussion of Williams' 'relativism of distance' (pp. 248–9). At other times, Thomas develops a different line, a critique of 'knowledge as a whole' (pp. 184–9). Here he argues that the relativistic thought is confused anyway. For (a) Williams' hypertraditionalists, to have the relativistic thought, must adopt a vantage-point from which they can survey all their moral knowledge; but (b) no such vantage-point is possible.

But why (a) must Williams' hypertraditionalists, or others relevantly like them, have to be capable of surveying '[moral] knowledge as a whole' to be capable of having the relativistic thought, and hence reaching scepticism? This thought can arise in many ways of which Williams' own description of the thought ('a very general kind of judgement' arising from 'reflection') seems true, but which yet fall well short of 'total surveys of moral knowledge'. Historically, the relativistic thought has arisen in many people who, though reflective enough, had no such wide-ranging ambition as to survey the whole of their own moral knowledge. The Mozart who wrote *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* was plainly captivated by the stark differences in human societies, as was the Herodotus who wrote the *Histories*. Yet neither of them was bound by the nature of his intellectual preoccupations to take an overall view of his own knowledge.

More generally, standard sceptical arguments, whether for moral or for epistemic scepticism, do not *have* to involve the sort of total survey that Thomas thinks impossible. A familiar example is

1. If I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat, then I do not know that I do not have hands
2. I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat
3. So I do not know that I do not have hands.

Where in this argument is the appeal to a total survey which according to Thomas is the taproot of scepticism? There seems to be nothing general or total at all in this argument. Or is one of these claims somehow *implicitly* total? If so, which one, and why?

Even if the sceptic is bound to perform a total survey, I do not see either why (b) it should be impossible to survey knowledge as a whole. The objection to this claim ('the unsurveyability claim', UC for short) is a dilemma. (UC) has readings on which it comes out clearly true. But these are not proprietary to the contextualist: everyone will accept them. It also has readings that are distinctively contextualist; but on these

interpretations, (UC) seems false, and I do not know how to get to it without a *non sequitur*.

The sense in which (UC) seems true is this: it is impossible to compile a list of all the things you know, and review that list in conscious reflection. For a start, since you do not have access to the truth of your beliefs or the soundness of your justifications independently of your accepting them, you cannot usually tell what you *know* and what you only *believe*. Then there are many areas where there is no clear fact of the matter what anyone's beliefs are: I may have a relevant epistemic disposition, but have never exercised it. (Do I know what the successor of 3,943,201 is? Yes, because I can do the sum; no, because I have never done it.) Then there is the fact that as soon as you form the belief that some set *s* is the set of all your true beliefs, you will also (potentially? actually?) form further beliefs, such as that you have this belief, that it is true, and so on indefinitely. Indeed there seems to be a Russellesque paradox about the very idea of knowing, of a complete list of your own beliefs, that this is what it is.

So any sense of (UC) that commits me to compiling and reviewing a list of all the things I know is one in which (UC) is false; but the arguments for this have nothing particular to do with debates about contextualism, and should be accepted by anyone. If, on the other hand, the contextualist is denying that I can in self-reflective mode say to myself 'This, broadly speaking, is my overall epistemic situation, so far as I understand it', I cannot see any good reason to deny this possibility. Thomas appeals to phenomenology when arguing for (IC); but if phenomenology teaches us anything, it surely teaches us that this sort of reflective stepping-back is possible.

So what is the argument for (UC)? I am unsure. But I do know that the following argument will not do the trick:

1. All moral thinking is done within some context
2. Therefore there is no such thing as contextless moral thinking
3. Therefore there can be no total survey of moral thinking.

(1) and (2) are true, but (3) is false, and it is obvious why the move from (2) to (3) is a *non sequitur*: there is no reason why very broad and general surveys of moral thinking, perhaps deserving the word 'total', should not happen within some context.

Nor will this next argument give us reason to believe (UC):

4. In any context of enquiry there are some propositions which are beyond doubt ('hinge propositions')
5. So there are some propositions which are beyond doubt in any context.

(4) is true. But the inference of (5) from (4) is a familiar scope fallacy. Besides, the fact that something is *beyond doubt* in some (or any) context does not make it *true*. (It does not even make it *true in that context*: 'Phlogiston can be isolated by some method' was perhaps a hinge proposition in the pre-Lavoisier chemist's context, but not true even there.) Thirdly, the truth of (4) says nothing against scepticism; given that Thomas individuates contexts by their 'hinge propositions', by what is not taken to be in doubt in them, there is no reason why any sceptical enquiry which takes *something* to be beyond doubt should not count as a context in his sense. Scepticism can acquire

its teeth without being ‘pure enquiry’ in the sense of presupposing nothing. Perhaps not even Cartesian enquiry is *that* pure. More modestly, a scepticism which questions no more than whether there is anything behind the data of appearance is a real enough scepticism. (Compare the ‘hands’ argument above.)

It looks as if it would help the anti-sceptic here to be *less* contextualist, not more. Perhaps the anti-sceptic’s line should be that the whole of life is one great *ur*-context of enquiry, and that it is in this *ur*-context that sceptical doubts are ruled out by the nature of the *ur*-context’s hinge propositions. But this is not Thomas’ line, apparently. Rather, his argument seems to be this (see, e.g., pp. 182–3):

6. A belief is justified if it is legitimized in a context of enquiry via the elimination of competing alternatives
7. So there is no guarantee that one can find a context in which one can make claims about knowledge as a whole.

First, I do not see how (7) follows from (6). Secondly, (7), given its words ‘there is no guarantee’, is too weak to conflict even with the possibility of scepticism based on a total survey. *A fortiori*, then, there is no conflict between (7) and the possibility which I introduced above, that scepticism should be a context of enquiry in which only some doubts are raised.

Thirdly, there is a question about how much can be achieved in any enquiry by eliminating competing alternatives. There is the old problem facing reliabilist views like Dretske’s, why sceptical alternatives are not live ones. Another problem for the suggestion is an analogue of a problem I have raised in ethics:⁴ since there are always indefinitely many competing alternatives to eliminate, it can never be known that the alternative you pick is the best one. Epistemic maximizing seems as impossible as moral maximizing.

My fourth comment on (6)–(7) is about the picture of moral (and other) knowledge which Thomas offers us. Thomas’ picture is of knowledge as (his metaphor, p. 188) a crazy quilt of different contexts, as opposed to the hierarchical view which goes with ‘traditional epistemology’: on his picture we move from one context to another without ever needing a way of *ordering* those contexts relative to one another. Hence his claim, above, that justification is context-relative. Confronted with the question how a Wittgensteinian phenomenology of ordinary moral belief-formation can pose a problem for a sceptic who accepts the appearances, but who argues that our ordinary epistemic context implicitly commits us to its own transcendence, Thomas replies (pp. 178–9):

The answer is that the traditional object of epistemological enquiry has been dissolved. From the contextualist perspective, there are a variety of appropriate stand-points each shaped by the multiple interests of enquiry, and all we can pick out is a multiply realized functional kind – the class of ‘taken for granted’ statements that are fixed by the direction of the enquiry at hand.

Here I have a worry about the notion of context-relative justification. The worry is

⁴ T. Chappell, ‘Option Ranges’, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 18 (2001), pp. 107–18.

an open-question sort of worry. A justification of the proposition p , we think, is something that gives us at least *prima facie* reason to believe p ; as I would put it, justification is an *essentially reason-giving property* (the reason in question being epistemic). That is, from

J. The proposition p is justified

we are right to infer

R. There is reason to believe p .

Now what about contextualist justification? If this takes the form

CJ. The proposition p is justified-in- c

then what reason is there to infer (R)? To put it another way, given (CJ), is it not an open question whether (R)? If contextualism is the claim that justification is relative to contexts, then it now looks as if contextualism is simply a form of relativism. But relativism is generally uninteresting precisely because it does not give us *reasons*. This is, apparently, so here.

I see two possible responses to this. First, it could be said that (CJ) gives reasons to those who know they are in c . But then what about the judgement 'I am in c '? Is this contextual or not? If it is not contextual, then it is apparently a judgement which is made as part of the kind of 'total survey' that Thomas deems impossible. But if it is contextual, then we need to hear more about the context in which this judgement occurs; a regress looms.

Secondly, it could be said that contextualism is not a relativism because what it claims is not (CJ) but rather that utterances of (J) are always made in some context. But then the same question arises about this claim: is it contextual or not?

One more comment about contextualism in general, both semantic and contextualist. One can make a contrast between philosophical knowing (knowing_p) and everyday knowing (knowing_e), and assume that something like this contrast can be drawn by both the semantic and the inferential contextualist. Then the philosophical and everyday arguments (P) and (E) can be compared:

P. *Philosophical argument*

1. If I do not know_p that I am not a brain in a vat, then I do not know_p that I do not have hands
2. I do not know_p that I am not a brain in a vat
3. So I do not know_p that I do not have hands.

E. *Everyday argument*

1. If I do not know_e that I am not a brain in a vat, then I do not know_e that I do not have hands
2. I do not know_e that I am not a brain in a vat
3. So I do not know_e that I do not have hands.

Many people's instinct, confronted with these arguments, is likely to be that (E) fails,

because (E2) is false: I *do* know_e that I am not a brain in a vat. (P) by contrast – people often say – is sound, but only threatening if the following principle holds:

LINK. If I do not know_p p then I do not know_e p .

To avoid contradiction, we must either deny (LINK) or (E2). If we deny (LINK), then scepticism is avoided. But denying (LINK) has exorbitantly high costs: what is the point of philosophy, what can it teach us, if it never gives us everyday knowledge? Compare the impact of arithmetic on everyday knowledge. What would be the point of arithmetic if, say, ‘ $2 + 2 = 4$ ’ were only an arithmetical and not also an everyday truth – or if, more generally, it were not true that ‘I know_m p iff I know_e p ’?

If knowledge is one, then it is easy to see the role of the different specific areas of knowledge in the overall economy of knowledge. But apparently the unity of knowledge is precisely what Thomas’ sort of contextualist denies in affirming the ‘autonomy’ of different sorts of local contexts (see, e.g., pp. 183–4). This prompts the question why and how, for any two contexts c_1 and c_2 , it turns out that what I know _{c_1} is of use, interest or relevance to what I know _{c_2} ; or how either sort of knowing_{subscript} relates to *knowing*.

Not that I am saying that there cannot be contextual knowing; obviously there can be. My point is rather that contextual knowing cannot be epistemically reasoning unless we can get straight knowing out of it. Contextual knowing is only interesting because and in so far as we can lose the contextual suffixes, and get from it to *straight* knowing – knowing *period*.⁵

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⁵ I am grateful to Peter Baumann and Martijn Blaauw for discussion, and also to Alan Thomas for his cheerful efforts to close some of the gaps between his views and mine.