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Peter Baumann *Epistemic Contextualism: A Defense*, Oxford University Press, 2016, ix + 265 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-875431-2, £45.00

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This is an intriguing and informed book defending contextualism in epistemology, i.e. the view, broadly speaking, that knowledge in some way depends on context. More specifically, Peter Baumann provides a detailed, sustained and original argument to the conclusion that the truth value of “S knows that p” depends on the context of the speaker and that it does so in numerous and complex ways. Objections are competently dealt with as they arise, and contextualism is finally contrasted with some alternative views.

The first part of the book is devoted to a detailed scrutiny of the arguments in the literature for contextualism, starting in Ch. 1 with the arguments from cases, such as Keith DeRose’s famous bank example. Generalizing from such examples, Baumann arrives at a number of plausible contextual parameters. They concern standards for, respectively, what alternatives are ruled out, evidence, reliability, degree of belief and epistemic position. Baumann, usefully, distinguishes between these contextual parameters themselves and their “determinants”, i.e. the things that determine their values. The latter are, he proposes, not only the stakes, as in the bank case, but also purposes and intentions, and norms and conventions. However, not all determinants affect all parameters, and Baumann presents a table (on p. 31) illustrating what determinants affect what contextual parameters. All in all, the chapter contributes considerable clarity to the debate.

Ch. 2 continues the argument for contextualism, but does so in a more theoretical spirit. Baumann himself thinks that theoretical arguments for contextualism are more important than arguments from cases (p. 33). Perhaps this attitude is related to his quick endorsement of rational reconstruction (“explication”) à la Carnap on p. 31. Carnap, we recall, thought that attaining theoretical fruitfulness and other values were as important as capturing ordinary use when introducing definitions of philosophical concepts. It is clear, though, that Baumann does not stringently follow Carnap’s method throughout the book. I believe that a more extensive methodological discussion would have contributed even greater clarity to Baumann’s argumentation, but he is arguably still clearer than most authors in the analytical tradition, making this point no more than a side remark.

At any rate, the focus in this chapter is on what Baumann refers to as the “argument from reliability”:

- (1) If “S knows that p” is true in C, then “S’s belief that p is reliable” is true in C.
- (2) The truth conditions of sentences of the form “S’s belief that p is reliable” can vary with the context of the speaker.

Hence,

(C) the truth conditions of sentences of the form “S knows that p” can vary with the context of the speaker.

The first premise expresses a minimal form of reliabilism according to which reliable belief acquisition is a necessary condition for knowledge. Baumann does not assume that it is also sufficient. Even an internalist has to acknowledge that the subject must not only have justification for her belief

but also reliably base her belief on the justifications, Baumann argues, indeed quite convincingly. Thus, even an internalist needs to invoke reliability as a necessary condition for knowledge.

The reason why Baumann thinks the second premise in the reliability argument is true has to do with the persistent so-called generality problem: the problem of identifying a unique type for a given process of belief acquisition. Examples show that the reliability of a process can vary with its type, and yet there seems to be no convincing rule for assigning types to processes. The problem has been advanced as a knockdown argument in the literature. In addition, Baumann notices, there is a generality problem concerning determining the topic of a belief forming method.

Baumann has a solution to both problems. “Like in the case of topic topics, however, there is a very attractive theoretical way out of the alleged theoretical mess: contextualism” (p. 51). He continues: “I cannot think of anything better (and it is, I think, good enough) than to assume that attributors typically type methods one way rather than another and that this guides their judgements about whether a given subject has a reliable belief in some proposition and knows the proposition” (ibid.).

In other words, Baumann assumes that there is considerable uniformity in how people type methods and topics and thereby arrive at reliability judgements. This assumed uniformity then underlies his proposal to view such types as contextually given parameters that we don’t have to bother with much, as it were. Still, whether or not there is uniformity is ultimately an empirical question, and it would have been nice here to have some empirical evidence to refer to.

In fact, two paragraphs before the two passages just quoted (p. 51), Baumann quickly refers to the experimental work on the generality problem reported in Jönsson (2013). The result of that unique study was indeed that people tend to type belief forming processes in the same way (even in the absence of linguistic indicators of a given type). Yet Baumann refers to this work only in connection with his remark that the fact that people tend to identify methods in the same way is no guarantee that they are right. He does not realize, it seems, that Jönsson’s work provides empirical evidence for his own contextualism. The bottom line here is of course the positive observation that there is such evidence at all, not that Baumann, mysteriously, fails to acknowledge it.

The point can be generalized. A claim to the effect that a given feature relevant to the truth value of a knowledge claim is “contextually determined” raises an empirical question concerning the uniformity of subjects’ assessment of the feature in question in concrete cases. Without such uniformity there is little basis for contextualism vis-à-vis the feature. Baumann believes that there are a great many such features. For that reason, his brand of contextualism about knowledge can be viewed as a bold and far-reaching empirical hypothesis regarding the uniformity of people’s assessment of a great many epistemically relevant features. Perhaps he could have been even more explicit regarding the empirical content of his contextualism. Concerning the typing of belief forming processes we already have evidence in Jönsson’s work for such uniformity. But what about the other proposed contextual parameters – standards for evidence, for ruled out alternatives, and so on? A natural extension of Baumann’s work would to investigate, in an experimental setting, if it hasn’t already been done, how much subjects’ assessments of these other factors line up in concrete cases. It is a great virtue of Baumann’s contextualism that a considerable part of it is empirically testable.

The final, somewhat shorter chapter of Part I deals with a further argument for contextualism, that from luck. Baumann argues that knowledge is compatible with luck, and he claims to have identified a further parameter of the context-sensitivity of knowledge: descriptions of the epistemic situation of the subject on which the relevant probabilities “conditionalize” (p. 87). This parameter, moreover, is determined by attention as well as by purposes and intentions.

Part II focuses on various problems and extensions of Baumann's contextualism. Ch. 4 discusses contextualist solutions to skepticism and issues involving lotteries. Regarding the latter, one problem concerns whether or not one can be said to know that one's ticket won't win, assuming it won't, on the basis of probability alone. To say this seems odd, at least sometimes, and the problem is to explain when and why. Baumann rejects the standard contextualist view that oddity can be explained by reference to contexts being more or less demanding (section 4.5). Instead, he proposes that the context sometimes includes a principle about epistemic position (p. 115):

(EP) If S knows that p, then S's epistemic position with respect to p is not fixed and S can get into better or worse epistemic positions with respect to p.

In the lottery case the consequent of this principle is not satisfied. No matter what we do, we are in the same epistemic position with regard to a lottery proposition (i.e. that one's ticket won't win). Hence, if (EP) is in force, we don't know the lottery proposition. If (EP) is not in force, we know the lottery proposition (if it is true) (cf. p. 117). Unsurprisingly, Baumann belongs to those who believe that we can know lottery propositions based on probability alone (ibid.).

Baumann is not very specific about the determinants of (EP), i.e. about what makes it operative, writing only that (EP) is "determined by a variety of factors itself: stakes, intentions, and purposes of the attributor ..." (p. 119). Here is constructive suggestion. One might think that (EP) is in force in contexts in which the subject might intend to make an assertion. The rationale might be to avoid misleading assertions to be made. For instance, if you assert that your ticket won't win, others will, by familiar Gricean conversational rules, falsely take your assertion to imply that you are in a privileged epistemic position vis-à-vis the proposition, which would be problematic. However, if it is unlikely that you will ever assert the lottery proposition, there is no reason for (EP) to be in force, and you can be granted knowledge of that proposition. It seems likely that this crude suggestion is compatible with Baumann's claim that (EP) is determined by, among other things, intentions. If there is, or might be, an intention to assert, (EP) is in force; else it is not. No doubt, further details are needed to turn this suggestion, if tenable at all, into a theory.

Space does not permit an extended discussion of the rest of Baumann's thought-provoking and inspiring essay. Ch. 5 investigates various reasons for thinking that contextualism is a contradictory position. As Baumann explains, already in the introduction, "[a] contextualist could find herself in a context where she would have to deny that she 'knows' a given proposition but at the same time, qua contextualist, would have to admit that some other subject does 'know' the same proposition" (p. 5). The proposed solution involves, among other things, viewing knowledge as a ternary relation between a subject, a proposition and a contextual parameter. Ch. 6 argues that knowledge is not the only philosophically interesting concept that is context-dependent. In particular, "responsibility" is context-sensitive as well – in a way that in several respects mirrors that in which knowledge is.

The third and final part of the book is devoted entirely to objections. Ch. 7 focuses on core objections to contextualism, and Ch. 8 discusses three major alternatives: subject-sensitive invariantism, epistemic contrastivism, and semantic relativism about knowledge. Baumann concludes that these three "variantist" accounts of knowledge do worse than contextualism and have to face much more severe problems. In Baumann's own words, "if one does not want to embrace classical invariantism (see the arguments against that especially in Chapters 1-3), then the version of contextualism defended here does better than the three main "variantist" alternatives ..." (p. 230).

Baumann has succeeded in producing a systematic and, in several respects, strikingly original defense of contextualism bringing together a lot of work he has published elsewhere. The result is a

convincing, well-argued and readable book which is also highly useful as an overview because it covers a lot of ground and contains extensive references to, and in-depth discussions of, a considerable portion of the relevant literature, as evidence by the extensive (25-page!) bibliography.

References

Jönsson, M.L. (2013), "A Reliabilism Built on Cognitive Convergence: An Empirically Grounded Solution to the Generality Problem", *Episteme* 10: 241-268.