

# Contextualism about Justified Belief

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In this paper, I shall defend a version of epistemological contextualism. Unlike almost all versions of epistemological contextualism that philosophers have defended so far, my version will be a contextualist account of terms like ‘justified belief’, rather than of terms like ‘knowledge’. So, according to this version of contextualism, traditional epistemologists were wrong to assume that there is a unique standard of justified belief.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, there are many different standards of justified belief; and it is the context in which we utter a sentence involving the term ‘justified belief’ that determines which of these many standards is relevant to the truth-value of the sentence in that context.

The general idea of contextualism about ‘justified belief’ is not completely new: it has clearly been endorsed by Stewart Cohen (1999, 60). However, my version of contextualism incorporates many new elements.

First, in Sections 2 and 3 of this paper, I offer a new argument for contextualism about justified belief, grounded in considerations about the nature of belief. Secondly, in Section 5, I provide a new account of the exact role that the many different standards of justified belief play in the thinking of a rational believer. Thirdly, in Section 6, I give a

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of traditional epistemologists who assumed that there is a unique standard of justified belief, see reliabilists like Alvin Goldman (1979), internalists like John Pollock and Joseph Cruz (1999), and evidentialists like Earl Conee and Richard Feldman (1985), among many others.

new account of the linguistic features of contexts that determine which of these standards of justified belief is relevant to the truth-value of sentences involving terms like ‘justified belief’. Finally, I differ from other contextualists in my assessment of why contextualism is an important truth for epistemology. The other contextualists have argued that the chief importance of contextualism lies in the way in which it helps to defuse the threat of scepticism, even while it preserves the “closure” of knowledge under known entailment. As I shall argue in Section 7, however, it is doubtful whether contextualism can help to defuse the threat of scepticism. In Section 8, I shall explain why, although contextualism does indeed preserve “single-premise closure”, it does *not* preserve “multi-premise closure”; but it can provide an explanation of why—although counter-examples to “multi-premise closure” must exist—such counter-examples are strangely elusive. In Section 9, I shall argue that the main reason why contextualism is important is that it helps to defend the idea that Jason Stanley (2005, 6) has called “intellectualism”—that is, the idea that each of the many standards of justified belief is sensitive only to purely *epistemic* considerations, and not to the *practical* considerations (such as the needs, values, costs and benefits) that are at stake in the believer’s situation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The point that contextualism could be invoked to defend intellectualism has been noted before, by Stanley (2005, 15)—although Stanley ultimately argues against both contextualism and intellectualism. As I shall argue in Section 9, however, my contextualist defence of intellectualism involves a significantly more detailed and precise account of the intuitions that seem to tell against intellectualism than Stanley’s.

## 1. ‘Justified’ as a gradable evaluative term

As practically all philosophers agree, some beliefs are *more* justified than others. For example, my belief that  $1 + 1 = 2$  is more justified than my belief that Dushanbe is the capital of Tajikistan. In this way, propositions can be put into an (at least partial) *ordering* with respect to *how much* justification one has for believing them. (Clearly, it is one of the central questions of epistemology what determines this ordering of propositions; but unfortunately, I shall not be able to address this question here.) To put it in another way, ‘justified belief’ is a *gradable* term. Many contextualists, such as Cohen (1999, 60), argue that the fact that ‘justified belief’ is a gradable term in this way supports a contextualist view of ‘justified belief’, because such a contextualist view is plausible about practically *all* gradable terms.

For example, the term ‘rich’ is a gradable term. That is, some people are *richer* than others. But most semanticists would agree that there is no context-independent answer to the question of precisely *how* rich someone needs to be for it to be true to say that they are “rich” *simpliciter*. In some contexts (say, in a conversation among jet-setting plutocrats), demanding standards apply, so that it would not be true to say that most philosophy professors are “rich”. In other contexts (say, in an impoverished village in Zimbabwe), less demanding standards apply, so that it *would* be true to say that most philosophy professors are “rich”. That is, a contextualist view of the term ‘rich’ seems overwhelmingly plausible.<sup>3</sup>

The same point seems to hold of gradable *evaluative* terms, like the term ‘good

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<sup>3</sup> For a useful discussion of gradable adjectives, see Blome-Tillmann (2008).

performance of Bach's C minor Toccata'. This clearly seems to be a gradable term: some performances of the Toccata are *better* than others (that is, performances of the Toccata can be at least partially *ordered*, with respect to how good they are as performances of that work). In some contexts, the term is used strictly, so that for it to be true to say that a performance is "good", the performance needs to be at least as good as any performance that might be heard anywhere in the world. In other contexts, the term is used in a less demanding way, so that for it to be true to say that a performance is "good", the performance only needs to be as good as any that one is likely to hear from a twelve-year-old child. Thus, we may truly say that a performance of the Toccata by a twelve-year-old at a school concert was "good", even though it would not be true for us to say that the performance was "good" if we heard it in an internationally renowned concert hall. This point seems to generalize to all uses of 'good'. To be truly describable as "good" is to be at least as good as the contextually relevant standard, whatever that standard may be.<sup>4</sup> In this way, contextualism about 'good' seems highly plausible.

If contextualism about 'good' is plausible, then surely contextualism about 'justified' is also plausible—since 'justified' is also a gradable evaluative term of broadly the same kind as 'good'. According to such a contextualist view, the extension of the term 'justified belief' varies with the context of use. In some "strict" contexts, very few beliefs can be truly described as "justified", whereas in other more "relaxed" contexts, many more beliefs can be truly described as "justified".

However, this argument can be resisted. According to Stanley (2005, 77): "the conclusion that 'justified' is context-sensitive does not follow from the premise that it is

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<sup>4</sup> For a defence of this point, see Broome (1999).

gradable.” Indeed, Stanley’s view is “that ‘justified’ is gradable but *not* context-sensitive.” According to Stanley, “for a belief to be justified means for it to be justified over the context-invariant degree of justification” (although he says almost nothing about what exactly this “context-invariant degree of justification” might be). In the following two sections, I shall present a new argument for Cohen’s (1999) claim, that there cannot be any non-arbitrary context-invariant standard of justification of this sort.

## 2. Degrees of confidence, full outright belief, and partial belief

My new argument for contextualism is based on a certain conception of the nature of *belief*. In this section, I shall outline the conception of belief that I have in mind.

As I said in the previous section, there is an *ordering* of the propositions that one is capable of believing, with respect to how much justification one has for believing them. The truth-value of statements about this ordering—for example, statements of the form ‘At  $t$ ,  $x$  has more justification for believing  $p$  than for believing  $q$ ’—seems *invariant* across contexts of utterance. In any context whatsoever, it seems true to say of me and of the present time that I now “have more justification for believing that  $1 + 1 = 2$  than for believing that Dushanbe is the capital of Tajikistan”.

Some philosophers will be tempted to think that these essentially *comparative* truths, about the ordering of propositions with respect to how much justification one has for believing them, are sufficient to capture all the truths that there are about what we are “justified” in believing. First, it seems plausible that this ordering of propositions with respect to how much justification one has for believing them corresponds to the ordering

of propositions with respect to *how confident it is rational for one to be* in those propositions. The more justification one has for a proposition, the more confident it is rational for one to be in that proposition. To stick with our earlier example, it is rational for me to be more confident that  $1 + 1 = 2$  than that Dushanbe is the capital of Tajikistan. Secondly, so long as this ordering meets certain conditions, it will be possible to represent it by means of a *probability* function: for any pair of propositions  $p$  and  $q$ ,  $p$  comes higher up in this ordering than  $q$  (that is, one has more justification for believing  $p$  than for believing  $q$ ) if and only if this probability function assigns a higher value to  $p$  than to  $q$ .<sup>5</sup> So why should we think that there are any *further* truths about what we are “justified” in believing that we need to capture?

In fact, whether or not there are indeed any such further truths that need to be captured depends on some controversial questions about the nature of *belief*. On some views of belief, there is no more to your belief state than a mere *ranking* of propositions with respect to the degree of confidence that you have in those propositions. On a second, rival conception of belief, there is a more fundamental difference between a *full outright belief* in a proposition, and a *mere partial belief* in that proposition.

There are several different versions of this second conception. Some versions subscribe to the *threshold view*, according to which for  $x$  to have an *outright* belief in  $p$  is

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<sup>5</sup> For an account of the conditions that an ordering of propositions must meet in order to be representable by means of a probability function, see Joyce (1998, 601–2, and 1999, 256–7). Of course, it is unlikely that there will be a *unique* probability function that represents this fundamental ordering of propositions with respect to comparative justification. There will instead be a *set* of “eligible” probability functions that all represent this ordering equally well.

just for  $x$ 's degree of confidence in  $p$  to be no lower than a certain threshold  $r$ . But there are several telling objections to this threshold view (see Weatherson 2005, 420–1).

First, it seems clear that one can have an outright belief in a proposition even if one is not *maximally* confident of that proposition. For example, I am more confident that  $1 + 1 = 2$  than that Dushanbe is the capital of Tajikistan. In that sense, I am not maximally confident that Dushanbe is the capital of Tajikistan; I have greater confidence in at least one other proposition—the proposition that  $1 + 1 = 2$ . Nonetheless, I do not have a merely partial belief that Dushanbe is the capital of Tajikistan. I have a full outright belief in that proposition. But if the threshold  $r$  that divides mere partial beliefs from outright beliefs falls short of absolute certainty, it will seem completely arbitrary: why should the threshold be 85% (rather than 84% or 88.5%, say)?

Secondly, it seems plausible that it is an essential feature of outright beliefs that if one has an outright belief in each member of a pair of propositions, one is also disposed to have an outright belief in the *conjunction* of those propositions (at least if one consciously considers whether that conjunction is true). In most cases, however, if one is rational, one's degree of confidence in a conjunction will be *lower* than one's degree of confidence in either of the conjuncts. Thus, whatever the threshold  $r$  may be, it can easily happen that one's degree of confidence in a conjunction is lower than  $r$ , even though one's degree of confidence in each of the conjuncts is higher than  $r$ . So the threshold view cannot capture this essential feature of outright beliefs.

For this reason, the most plausible version of this second conception of belief rejects the threshold view, in favour of the view that the central difference between a mere partial belief and a full outright belief lies in their different *functional roles*. In

effect, the difference lies in the different kinds of reasoning that these two kinds of belief normally dispose one to perform.<sup>6</sup> If one has a full outright belief in a proposition  $p$ , one will simply take  $p$  for granted, and treat  $p$  as a starting point for further reasoning. For example, if you deduce a conclusion from a certain set of premises, and even after carrying out the deduction you still have an outright belief in each of those premises, then you will be disposed to acquire an outright belief in the conclusion as well. By contrast, when one has a mere partial belief in a proposition  $q$ , one will not take  $q$  for granted in this way, and one will not simply treat  $q$  as a starting point for further reasoning. Instead, one will “hedge one’s bets”, by placing some credence both in  $q$  and in certain other incompatible propositions as well. That is, one will consider, not only arguments that start from  $q$ , but also arguments that start from these other incompatible propositions; one will in a sense “weight” each of these arguments by the degree of partial belief that one has in the conjunction of its premises; and one’s overall response to these arguments will reflect the weights that one gives them.<sup>7</sup>

This then is the conception of belief that I shall assume in the discussion that follows. Unfortunately, I shall not be able to give any further defence of this conception of belief here. Instead, I shall simply assume, for the sake of argument, that this

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<sup>6</sup> Weatherson (2005) also suggests that the difference between outright belief and partial belief consists in the different functional role of these two kinds of belief. However, he postulates a slightly different functional role for outright belief than I do. Unfortunately, it would take too long to undertake a full comparison of my proposal with his at this point.

<sup>7</sup> If this proposal is correct, then reasoning with partial beliefs is clearly enormously more complicated than reasoning with full outright beliefs. As Harman (1986, chap. 3) suggests, it may not even be feasible for us to do all our reasoning with partial beliefs.



conception of belief is correct. This assumption is widely shared, and so even those who reject this conception should be interested in seeing how a theory of justified belief can be developed on the basis of this assumption.

### ***3. Believing the true vs. not believing the false***

Given this assumption that there is a distinctive state of having a full outright belief in a proposition, the question now arises: *How much* justification does one need to have for a proposition for it to be true to say that one is “justified” in having a full outright belief in the proposition? (And if one is not justified in having an outright belief either in a proposition or in its negation, when should one suspend judgment about the proposition, and when should one have a mere partial belief instead?) As I shall put it, what is the *standard* of justified belief?

It seems to me that there is a reason for doubting whether there can be a unique standard of justified belief of this kind. There are many ways in which the phrase ‘justified belief’ can be understood. However, many philosophers will agree that there is one notion of ‘justified belief’ that is a notion of purely *epistemic* justification; and it is this notion of justification that I am using here. In speaking of “purely epistemic justification”, I mean a sort of justification of which the principle that Jason Stanley (2005, 15) has called “intellectualism” is true. That is, this sort of justification is sensitive only to purely epistemic considerations, and not to any of the practical considerations—such as the values, costs, and benefits—that are at stake in the believer’s situation.

According to many epistemologists, the fundamental principles about the

*epistemic* justification of beliefs all have a feature that we can describe metaphorically by claiming that these principles are “oriented” towards the “goal” of having a *correct* belief about the relevant question—where, roughly, a belief counts as correct if and only if the proposition believed is *true*.<sup>8</sup> In this paper, I shall assume, for the sake of argument, that these epistemologists are right.

To take account of the fact that there are partial beliefs as well as full outright beliefs, we need to refine our account of when a belief counts as correct. If one has a full outright belief in a true proposition, one’s belief or “doxastic attitude” is simply correct; and if one has a full outright belief in a false proposition, one’s belief or “doxastic attitude” is simply incorrect. If one considers a proposition, but forms no opinion about it either way, then as I shall put it, one *suspends judgment* about the proposition, and one’s doxastic attitude towards the proposition is neither correct nor incorrect. If one has a merely partial belief in a proposition, then if the proposition is true, the higher one’s degree of belief the closer one’s doxastic attitude is to being correct, while if the proposition is false, the higher one’s degree of belief the closer one’s doxastic attitude is to being incorrect.<sup>9</sup> The principles of justified belief are all “oriented” towards the goal of having a correct belief or doxastic attitude, roughly in the sense that the principles of justified belief applying to a proposition *p* are precisely those principles that it is

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<sup>8</sup> According to this claim, there is a *separate* goal, for each particular proposition *p* that one actually considers—roughly, the goal of believing this proposition *p* if and only if *p* is true—not the *general* goal of amassing as many true beliefs as possible (for example, by memorizing trivial facts or the like). For a much more detailed discussion of this account of correct belief, and the sense in which all the principles of justified belief are “oriented” towards the goal of having correct belief, see Wedgwood (2002).

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed development of this idea of “degrees of correctness”, see Joyce (1998).

reasonable to follow in order to get as close as possible to the goal of having the correct doxastic attitude towards  $p$ .

If it is true that the principles of justified belief are all “oriented” towards the goal of having a correct belief in this way, then this would explain why information about the purely practical costs and benefits of believing  $p$  does not normally raise the level of epistemic justification that one has for believing  $p$ . Raising one’s degree of confidence in  $p$  solely because one has acquired the information that it will be highly beneficial for one to believe  $p$  does not seem to be a reasonable way of trying to get as close as possible to the goal of having the correct doxastic attitude towards  $p$ . (Indeed, not even the information that the costs of believing  $p$  if  $p$  is false are very low, while the benefits of believing  $p$  if  $p$  is true are enormously high, raises one’s justification for believing  $p$ . Otherwise, Pascal’s wager would succeed in raising the level of justification that one has for believing in God.)

Now, the “goal” of having the correct doxastic attitude towards  $p$  has a feature that seems to have been first noticed by William James (1979). This “goal” in fact involves *at least two* goals—the goal of having an outright belief in  $p$  if  $p$  is true, and the goal of *not* having an outright belief in  $p$  if  $p$  is false.<sup>10</sup> These goals are distinct: if  $p$  is true, then one can achieve the second goal, but not the first, by suspending judgment and

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<sup>10</sup> This is a rough statement, because it says nothing about *partial beliefs*. A more accurate statement would involve two infinite sets of goals: (i) having a partial belief higher than  $n\%$  in  $p$  if  $p$  is true, ... having a partial belief higher than  $m\%$  in  $p$  if  $p$  is true, ...; and (ii) *not* having a partial belief higher than  $n\%$  in  $p$  if  $p$  is false, ... *not* having a partial belief higher than  $m\%$  in  $p$  if  $p$  is false, .... I do not believe that there would be any fundamental difficulty in reformulating the underlying idea that I am proposing here in order to take account of this complication.

neither believing nor disbelieving  $p$  at all. But there does not seem to be any purely epistemic principle that can tell us how to balance these two goals against one another.

If the goal of not believing the proposition in question if it is false were weighted more heavily than the goal of believing the proposition if it is true, then presumably the most reasonable way of pursuing these goals would be by following a very demanding standard of justified belief—having an outright belief only in propositions for which one has a very high degree of justification, and otherwise suspending judgment or having a mere partial belief about all other propositions. If the goal of believing the proposition if it is true were weighted more heavily than the goal of not believing it if it is false, then the most reasonable way of pursuing these goals would be by following a more relaxed standard of justified belief—having an outright belief in all propositions for which one has at least a fairly low level of justification.

Suppose that it is true that no purely epistemic principle can tell us how to balance these two goals against each other, and that the principles of justified belief are all “oriented” towards these goals, in the way that I have described. Then it seems that there is a whole *range* of standards of justified belief—ranging from the most relaxed standards to the most demanding standards—where each of these standards represents a different way of balancing the goal of believing the proposition in question if it is true against the goal of not believing the proposition if it is false. We may perhaps assume that none of these standards will give either of these two goals *infinitely* greater weight than the other. If that is right, then none of these standards of justified belief will be so relaxed that it evaluates a belief as justified when one has less justification for the proposition than for its negation—otherwise, it would in effect be attaching no weight at all to the goal of not

believing the false. Equally, none of these standards of justified belief will be so demanding that it never evaluates any beliefs as justified at all—otherwise, it would in effect be attaching no weight at all to the goal of believing the true. But within these limits, there is a wide range of standards of justified belief. From a strictly epistemic point of view, none of these standards of justified belief will be any more legitimate than any other.

Intuitively, however, statements to the effect that a certain belief is “justified” *simpliciter* often seem to be determinately true or determinately false, even though the belief in question clearly meets some of these standards of justified belief but not others. This makes it plausible that something about the *context* of this statement determines that only some of these standards are *relevant* in the context: the statement is true if and only if the belief meets the *contextually relevant* standards. That is, it is plausible that some sort of *contextualism* about justified belief is true.

#### **4. Linguistic evidence for contextualism about justified belief?**

Some philosophers may object that contextualism about justified belief has a certain striking disadvantage compared to contextualism about knowledge. Contextualism about knowledge can be motivated by some intuitively compelling examples—such as Keith DeRose’s (1992) “bank cases” or Stewart Cohen’s (1999) “airport cases”—in which the truth conditions of sentences involving the term ‘know’ appear to change from one context to another. But it may seem harder to construct any such intuitively compelling cases for the term ‘justified belief’. For example, consider the following analogues of

DeRose's "bank cases":

*Bank Case A.* Chris and Joe are running errands around town on Friday afternoon, but they have not yet deposited their pay cheques in their bank account. It is not especially important that these pay cheques should be deposited right away. Joe feels like going home, and suggests to Chris that they should deposit their cheques on Saturday morning. Just then, Lisa calls Joe's mobile phone, and Joe asks Lisa whether the bank will be open on Saturday. Lisa says that it will be. Chris asks, "Is Lisa justified in believing that the bank will be open tomorrow?" Joe replies, "Yes. She was in the bank on Saturday just two weeks ago."

*Bank Case B.* As before, Chris and Joe are running errands around town on Friday afternoon; Chris suggests that they should deposit their pay cheques on Saturday morning. In this case, however, it is *tremendously* important that their pay cheques should be deposited in their bank account before Monday: if the cheques are not deposited by then, Chris and Joe will be in a *very* bad situation. As before, Lisa calls Joe's mobile phone, telling Joe that the bank will be open on Saturday, and Chris asks, "Is Lisa justified in believing that the bank will be open tomorrow?" This time, however, Joe replies, "I guess not. The last time Lisa was in the bank on a Saturday was two weeks ago. The bank might have changed its opening hours since then."

Some philosophers will feel that Joe's reply in this second conversation ('Lisa is not justified in believing that the bank will be open tomorrow') does not seem as clearly true as the corresponding statement involving 'know' ('Lisa does not know that the bank will be open tomorrow'). These philosophers may suggest that this is a serious objection to contextualism about justified belief.

The force of this objection should not be exaggerated. Even if it is true that we do not have a clear intuition that Joe's reply in the second conversation is true, we surely do not have the clear intuition that Joe's reply is *false*. It is only if we cannot offer any other explanation of why we lack such a clear intuition about this case that we should suspect that the real explanation is that contextualism about justified belief is not true at all.

Fortunately, there is another explanation of why our intuitions about these cases are not quite as clear-cut as our intuitions about the analogous cases involving 'know'. The term 'justified belief' is simply not in such common use as the term 'knowledge'. Unlike the terms 'knowledge' or 'belief', the term 'justified belief' is not heard every day on practically everyone's lips. It is primarily *philosophers* who use the term.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, philosophers have used the term to express many different notions.<sup>12</sup> For this reason, when philosophers use the term, they have to clarify exactly which of these many different notions they are using the term to express. Because the term is capable of

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<sup>11</sup> A Google search on the phrase 'justified belief' leads to thousands of uses in philosophical discussions, and (at least so far as I can see) to absolutely no other uses at all.

<sup>12</sup> For example, as James Pryor (2004, 352) points out, some philosophers use '*S* is justified in believing *p*' to mean merely that *S* is epistemically blameless for believing *p*, while others use it to mean that *S* has a reflective appreciation of *why p* is appropriate for him to believe. Like Pryor, I am not using the term in either of those ways.

expressing so many different notions, and is anyway chiefly used by philosophers rather than by ordinary speakers, it is not surprising that our intuitions relating to the term are less clear-cut than our intuitions relating to the term ‘know’.

Thus, my account can give a simple explanation of why on some occasions we may hear the statement ‘Lisa is justified in believing  $p$ ’ as having context-invariant truth conditions. On these occasions, we may be hearing this statement as meaning the same as ‘Lisa is *more* justified in believing  $p$  than in believing  $\neg p$ ’ or ‘Lisa has evidence that makes her *more* justified in believing  $p$  than she would be if she lacked that evidence’. According to my account, these statements *do* have context-invariant truth conditions—since these are *comparative* statements about the *context-independent ordering* of propositions with respect to how much justification one has for believing them.

Even though the term ‘justified belief’ is primarily used by philosophers, and not by ordinary speakers in the street, I am using the term here in order to capture notions that are expressed by several terms in common use—such as the everyday notions of having “sufficient reason” or “good reason” for a belief. If we change the example slightly, so that Chris asks Joe, “Does Lisa have sufficient reason for believing that the bank will be open tomorrow?”, we can imagine Joe replying, “I suppose that she doesn’t have sufficient reason for believing that”, or “I suppose that Lisa doesn’t have good reason for believing that.” We also seem to have the intuition that Joe could be speaking truly on these occasions. So it seems possible to generate “bank cases” for terms like ‘good reason for believing’. In short, when the term ‘justified belief’ is used in this way, there is no compelling reason for thinking that contextualism about ‘justified belief’ is any less intuitively plausible than contextualism about ‘knowledge’.



## 5. The standard that guides a rational believer

As I have pointed out, philosophers have used the term ‘justified belief’ to express many different notions, and in consequence, it is crucial for philosophers to clarify which out of these many different notions they are using the term to express on any given occasion. So it is clearly incumbent on me to explain how I am using the term ‘justified belief’ here.

I have already made some comments to clarify which notion I am expressing by my use of ‘justified belief’ — specifically, the term is being used here to express a notion of purely “epistemic” justification. (This is what justifies the assumption that the principles of justified belief applying to a proposition  $p$  are all “oriented” towards the “goal” of getting as close as possible to having the *correct* belief or doxastic attitude towards  $p$ .) But as I am using the term, there is also a second aspect of the notion that I am using the term to express: statements about which beliefs or doxastic attitudes are justified should capture something that *directly guides a rational believer* in forming and revising her beliefs. Intuitively, it seems that there could be a notion of justified belief that involves both of these two aspects. I am using the term ‘justified belief’ to express this sort of notion here.

This second aspect of the notion that the term ‘justified belief’ is being used to express here may seem to be seriously in tension with contextualism. If a believer is looking for guidance about whether to believe a given proposition, it is hardly helpful just to tell her that according to some standards she is justified, while according to other standards, she is not!<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For a version of this objection to contextualism, see Williamson (2005a, §4).

I do not know of any contextualists who have explicitly addressed this objection. In fact, however, there is a simple way of responding to this objection. Suppose that a rational believer is concerned with making up her mind about a proposition  $p$ , and this concern motivates her to ask herself the first-person present-tensed question ‘Am I justified in believing  $p$  now?’ There may be a unique true answer to the question that the believer is asking in this context; and it is the believer’s answer to *that* question that will guide her in forming and revising her belief in  $p$ .

This connection, between the answer to the first-person question ‘Am I justified in believing  $p$  now?’ and what guides a rational believer in forming and revising her beliefs, should be a constraint on any acceptable form of contextualism. I have still not said much about *how exactly* the context in which the term ‘justified belief’ is used determines which of its many possible extensions the term has in that context. It will help me to say more about this to see which versions of contextualism can accommodate this constraint. In other words, to develop my version of contextualism in more detail, I need to investigate what guides a rational believer in forming and revising her beliefs.

Presumably, whenever a rational believer forms or revises her beliefs, she is guided by one of the many standards of justified belief that I have described. But precisely *which* of these many standards will she be guided by? When will she be guided by a more demanding standard, and when by a more relaxed, undemanding standard?

It would clearly be wrong to suggest that a rational believer must always first answer the question ‘Am I justified in believing  $p$ ?’ before she actually forms any belief about  $p$ . That suggestion leads to an obvious infinite regress. It seems inevitable, then, that a rational believer will ultimately just be guided by her *habits* or *dispositions* to

follow certain standards when forming or revising her beliefs in certain propositions.

These habits or dispositions may have a *default standard* for each kind of proposition—a standard of justified belief that these habits will lead the believer to be guided by with respect to propositions of that kind, in the absence of any special factors that lead her to be guided by a different standard in the particular situation at hand. (From a purely epistemic point of view, there can be no grounds for objecting to these default standards, since as I explained in Section 3, from a purely epistemic point of view, none of these standards is any less legitimate than any other.)

However, it also seems plausible that a rational believer may depart from this default standard in response to her beliefs about the *needs, purposes and values*—more broadly, the *practical considerations*—that are at stake in her current situation. That is, even without explicitly deliberating about which standard to use, the believer may just immediately and directly respond to certain beliefs about her situation by following a more demanding standard than she usually would (or by following a less demanding standard than she usually would).

We can illustrate how a rational believer will respond to such beliefs about the practical considerations that are at stake in her situation by focusing on the following cases. Suppose that a rational believer is consciously considering a proposition  $p$ . Suppose, moreover, that this proposition  $p$  comes higher up in the ordering of comparative justification than  $\neg p$ : that is, the believer has more justification for believing  $p$  than for believing  $\neg p$ . In that case, it clearly cannot be rational for the believer to have an outright *disbelief* in  $p$  (that is, an outright belief in  $\neg p$ ), or to have a partial belief in  $p$  that is between 0 and 50%. The only rational “doxastic options” will be the following: to

have an outright belief in  $p$ ; to suspend judgment about  $p$  altogether; or to have a partial belief in  $p$ , where this partial belief is between 50% and 100%.<sup>14</sup> But which of these three options will the rational believer go for?

As I have suggested above, it seems that in forming and revising her belief in a proposition  $p$ , a rational believer will be guided by a *purely epistemic* standard of justified belief; and I am assuming here that all the principles about such epistemic justification are oriented towards the fundamental goal of having a correct belief about the question at hand. This fundamental goal of correct belief ranks these three options in the following way: of the three options, the best—that is, the one that is closest to being correct—is to have an outright belief in  $p$  if  $p$  is true; the second-best option is having a partial belief between 50% and 100% in  $p$  if  $p$  is true; suspending judgment about  $p$  altogether has an intermediate or neutral value; the second-worst option is having a partial belief between 50% and 100% in  $p$  if  $p$  is false; and the very worst option is to have a full outright belief in  $p$  if  $p$  is false.

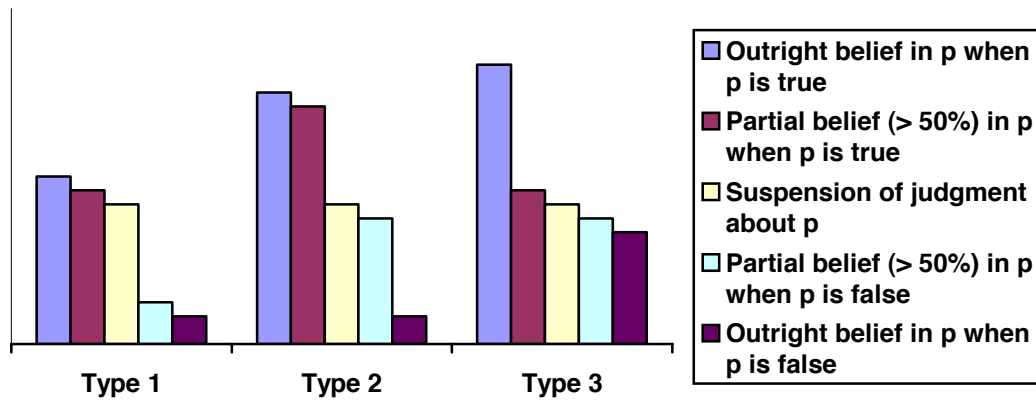
If the believer does depart from her default standards in forming her doxastic attitude with respect to  $p$ , it is plausible that in so doing she will be influenced, at least implicitly, by some sort of *comparison* of these three “doxastic options” that she could take with respect to  $p$ —where this comparison of these three options will in some way

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<sup>14</sup> Where exactly between 50% and 100% will this partial degree of belief lie? Much more investigation is needed to answer this question. But to fix ideas, suppose that (as I suggested in Section 2) the fundamental ordering of comparative justification can be represented by a probability function. Then the relevant partial degree of belief in  $p$  may correspond to the *conditional* probability of  $p$  given by this probability function—conditional on the conjunction of all propositions in which one rationally has an *outright* (non-partial) belief in the relevant occasion.

reflect the relevant practical considerations (such as the needs, purposes, values, and so on) that are at stake in her situation. However, since the rational believer is being guided by a purely epistemic standard of justified belief, the comparison of these three options that is influencing her must respect the ranking of these options that is given by the fundamental goal of correct belief. (For example, this comparison cannot rank believing  $p$  when  $p$  is false higher than suspending judgment about  $p$ .) Thus, the relevant comparison of these options cannot be a comparison in terms of their *overall utility* (since if one were offered £1 million for believing  $p$ , believing  $p$  even if it is false might have a higher utility than suspending judgment about  $p$ ). Instead, the relevant comparison of these options must be in terms of what we might call the “*practically modulated epistemic value*” —or for short, the “*practical epistemic value*” —of these options.

Even if the comparison of these doxastic options in terms of their “practical epistemic value” must respect the ranking that is given by the fundamental goal of correct belief, it could still be that the various practical considerations (such as the needs, purposes, values, and so on) at stake in the situation make a difference to *how much* better or worse each of these doxastic options is than the others, in terms of the “practical epistemic value” of these options. Then a comparison of these doxastic options in terms of this sort of “practical epistemic value” may in some cases definitely favour one of these three options—outright belief in  $p$ , partial belief in  $p$  (between 50% and 100%), and suspension of belief about  $p$ —over the other two. There are three main types of case here, which can be illustrated by the following bar chart. (In this chart, each vertical bar represents a different sort of belief, while the height of the bar represents its “practical epistemic value”.)



In the first type of case (Type 1), these practical considerations make it the case that, if  $p$  is true, having either an outright belief or a partial belief between 50% and 100% in  $p$  is *not much* better than suspending judgment about  $p$  altogether, while if  $p$  is false, suspending judgment about  $p$  altogether is *significantly* better than having any such belief in  $p$ . (This could be the case for several reasons. For example,  $p$  might be a very boring proposition of no importance whatsoever, so that the costs of suspending judgment are low, compared to the costs of having either an outright belief or a partial belief between 50% and 100% in  $p$  if  $p$  false.) If a rational believer believes that this is how things are with respect to the needs, purposes and values that are at stake in her current situation, then, I suggest, the standards that will guide her will be fairly *strict* standards that require suspension of judgment about all propositions that do not come fairly high up in the ordering of comparative justification. In this case, I shall say that the believer's conception of the practical considerations at stake in her situation "favours" these strict standards of justified belief.

In the second type of case (Type 2), these practical considerations make it the case that if  $p$  is true, having an outright belief in  $p$  is only *slightly* better than having a partial

belief between 50% and 100% in  $p$ , while having a partial belief is *much* better than suspending judgment about  $p$ ; but if  $p$  is false, having a mere partial belief between 50% and 100% in  $p$  is only *slightly* worse than suspending judgment about  $p$  altogether, while having an outright belief in  $p$  is *much* worse than having a mere partial belief. For example, this will be the case when  $p$  is a very important proposition that you crucially need to have some opinion about—so that the costs of suspending judgment about  $p$  are relatively high—but if  $p$  is false, having an outright belief in  $p$  will involve significant costs that are not involved in having a mere partial belief in  $p$ . If a rational believer believes that this is how things are in her current situation, then, I suggest, she will tend to respond to this belief about her situation by having a mere partial belief in  $p$ , rather than either outright belief or complete suspension of judgment about  $p$ . In that case, the standards of justified belief “favoured” by her conception of the practical considerations at stake in her situation will be standards that heavily favour partial beliefs, over both outright beliefs and suspension of judgment.

In the third type of case (Type 3), these practical considerations make it the case that if  $p$  is true, having an outright belief in  $p$  is *much* better than having either a mere partial belief in  $p$  or suspending judgment about  $p$ ; whereas if  $p$  is false, having an outright belief in  $p$  is *not* much worse than having either a mere partial belief or suspending judgment about  $p$ . This will be the case when  $p$  is an important proposition in which one needs to have some opinion—so that the costs of suspending judgment about  $p$  are again relatively high—but there are also considerable benefits in having an outright belief in  $p$ , and relatively significant disadvantages in having a mere partial belief in  $p$ . If a rational believer believes that this is how things are in her current situation, then, I

suggest, the standards that will guide her—the standards “favoured” by her conception of her situation—will be relaxed and undemanding standards that permit one to have an outright belief in a large number of propositions.<sup>15</sup>

So far, I have only *illustrated* the way in which a rational believer’s conception of the practical stakes in her situation may influence which standard she is guided by, with my description of these three types of case. A more general account is called for. This is the account that I propose. Suppose that, as I suggested in Section 2, the fundamental ordering of comparative justification can indeed be represented by a probability function. Then it may be that in all cases a rational believer will form a doxastic attitude that maximizes *expected* “practical epistemic value”—where the “expected” value is defined in terms of such a probability function, in the way that is familiar from classical decision theory. It is easily verified that, given plausible measurements of “practical epistemic value” in these three types of case, this general account will imply that the suggestions that I have made about these three types of case are correct.

Some philosophers may object to this account of the standard that guides the rational believer. It may sound too reminiscent of Pascal’s wager, and of the implausible idea that one can form a belief at will. But this is a misinterpretation of this account.

According to this account, in forming the belief in  $p$ , a rational believer is always guided

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<sup>15</sup> In addition to these “univocal” cases, in which the believer’s conception of her situation definitely favours one of these three doxastic options over the other two, there may also be cases in which the believer’s conception of her situation favours two or even all three of these options equally. In this case, only the believer’s habits and dispositions can determine what standard she will be guided by—whether by a strict standard that demands suspension of judgment, by a relaxed standard that permits outright belief, or by a standard that recommends partial belief, in the case at hand.



by one of the standards of justified belief that I discussed in Section 3. None of these standards permits forming a belief purely because one believes that it is in one's interest to do so (as Pascal seems to be doing in his famous wager). Each of these standards is focused on the goals of believing the truth and not believing what is false: the main difference between these standards is that each standard represents a different way of balancing these two goals against each other (the only other difference between them is that in the absence of outright beliefs, some of these standards call for partial beliefs whereas others call for suspension of judgment). From a purely epistemic point of view, all of these standards of justified belief are equally legitimate. Moreover, I am also not suggesting that the believer decides or chooses at will which of these standards of justified belief to follow. I am suggesting that without any explicit deliberation about which standard to follow, a rational believer may sometimes respond directly to her beliefs about her practical situation by following a slightly different standard of justified belief from the standard that she would normally follow. There does not seem to me to be anything puzzling or unintelligible about this account of how practical considerations affect the thinking of a rational believer.

## **6. 'Justified' in context**

As I suggested in the previous section, any acceptable form of contextualism must imply that in a context in which a rational believer is primarily concerned with making up her mind about a proposition  $p$ , and that concern motivates her to ask herself 'Am I justified in believing  $p$  now?', it is the believer's answer to this question that will guide her in

forming and revising her belief in *p*. As I have just argued, the rational believer will be guided by the standards of justified belief that are favoured by her conception of the practical considerations that are at stake in her situation. So if, in a context of this kind, a rational believer *accepts* ‘I am justified in believing *p* now’, the standards of justified belief that are favoured by her *conception* of her situation must permit her to believe *p*. This makes it plausible that the proposition expressed by ‘I am justified in believing *p* now’ in this context will be *true* if and only if belief in *p* is permitted by the standards of justified belief that are favoured by a *correct* conception of the believer’s situation.

How could a contextualist account of the term ‘justified belief’ imply that this is the right interpretation of this question? Contextualists have offered many different accounts of how the context of utterance determines which proposition a sentence involving a term like ‘know’ or ‘justified belief’ expresses.<sup>16</sup> But it seems to me that the simplest and most plausible account is one that, to my knowledge, no contextualist has proposed so far—namely, an account that simply appeals to the *communicative intention* behind an utterance. Suppose that a speaker intends his utterance of a certain sentence to communicate his attitude towards a certain proposition to his audience. As I shall put it, the objects, properties, and relations referred to in this proposition are the *focus* of the speaker’s communicative intention. If these objects, properties, and relations can be referred to by the terms that are used in that sentence, and the speaker’s execution of his

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<sup>16</sup> Lewis’s (1996, 559–61) account is centred on what he calls the “Rule of Attention”; DeRose’s (1995, 35–9) account is centred on what he calls the “Rule of Sensitivity”; Cohen (1999, 61) states candidly, “I certainly have no general theory of how precisely the context determines the standard.” In this way, all of these accounts are different from the simple proposal that I make here.

communicative intention is sufficiently competent, then—we could say—it really is these objects, properties, and relations that feature in the truth conditions of the utterance.

We can use this idea as the basis for a more precise account of the meaning of the term ‘justified’—as it appears in phrases like ‘justified belief’—in the following way. In many contexts in which a term like ‘justified belief’ is used, there is a *degree of justification* that is the focus of the speaker’s competently executed communicative intention; we may call this the “contextually relevant degree of justification”.<sup>17</sup> (A “degree of justification” is simply a point on the fundamental ordering of propositions with respect to comparative justification.) For any context *c* of this kind, a sentence of the form ‘*x* is justified in believing *p*’ is true in *c* if and only if the degree of justification that *x* has for believing *p* is at least as high as this contextually relevant degree of justification.

There are many ways in which the speakers in a context might focus on a particular degree of justification. In highly sophisticated contexts such as scientific discussions, the speakers might focus on this degree of justification by thinking of it in relatively precise statistical terms. But another common way of thinking about a degree of justification is to think of it as the degree that is called for by a certain practical situation *S*, in which the agent of *S* might act on a full outright belief in a certain proposition *p*.

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<sup>17</sup> My ascription to the speaker of a communicative intention that focuses on a particular degree of justification is to be read *de re*, not *de dicto*: the speaker need not be thinking of this degree of justification by deploying the *concept* of a “degree of justification”. According to my semantics for ‘justified’, it does not matter exactly how speakers think of this degree of justification; all that matters is that there is some degree of justification that is the focus of the relevant communicative intention.

Suppose that one focuses on the degree of justification that is called for by a certain practical situation *S* in this way, while uttering a sentence of the form ‘*x* is justified in believing *p*’. (Let us assume that, in this context, as in many contexts, the term ‘belief’ refers to *outright belief*, rather than to partial belief.) Then, so long as one executes one’s communicative intention competently, the contextually relevant degree of justification is the degree that is required for outright belief by the standard that is favoured by a correct conception of that situation *S*. So in this context, the sentence ‘*x* is justified in believing *p*’ is true if and only if the degree of justification that *x* has for *p* is at least as high as the degree that is required for outright belief by the standard of justified belief that is “favoured” by a correct conception of that situation *S*.<sup>18</sup>

This approach allows us to explain why a rational believer will be guided, in forming and revising her belief in *p*, by her answer to the question ‘Am I justified in believing *p*?’ In a context in which one’s primary concern is with forming or revising one’s own belief in *p*, one is in effect thinking of the relevant degree of justification as the degree that is called for by *one’s own current situation*. So the contextually relevant degree of justification is the degree that is required for outright belief by the standard that

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<sup>18</sup> Stanley (2005, 117) claims that “the intention-based view of context-sensitive expressions” implies that whether a context is a “low-stakes context” or a “high-stakes context” must depend exclusively on the “mental states” of the speakers, and not on the actual facts about the relevant situation. But this claim is mistaken. Our intentions typically concern the external world, not our own mental states. If we think of a certain degree of justification as what is called for by a certain situation (in which the relevant agent might act on an outright belief in *p*), this degree of justification is fixed by the *facts* of that situation, not by our *beliefs* about the situation. This is why in these contexts the truth-value of ‘*x* is justified in believing *p*’ depends on which standard of justified belief is favoured by a *correct* conception of the relevant situation.

is favoured by a correct conception of that situation. Thus, the proposition expressed by one's answer to this question is precisely the proposition that the degree of justification that one has for  $p$  is at least as high as the degree required for outright belief by the standard that is favoured by a correct conception of one's own current situation.

In some of the other contexts in which one utters a sentence of the form ' $x$  is justified in believing  $p$  at time  $t$ ', one may be focusing on the degree of justification that is called for by  $x$ 's situation at  $t$ . (This will typically be the case where one's primary concern is with understanding  $x$ , rather than merely with using  $x$  as a potential informant about whether  $p$  is true.) Then the focus of one's communicative intention will be the degree of justification that is required for outright belief by the standard that is favoured by a correct conception of  $x$ 's situation. In such contexts, the statement ' $x$  is justified in believing  $p$ ' would have the same truth value as the first-person statement that  $x$  could make about himself, in a context in which his primary concern is to make up his mind about  $p$ , 'I am justified in believing  $p$ '. For example, suppose that we are wondering why Josh is reluctant to believe a proposition  $p$  that seems obviously true to us. Then we realize that if  $p$  is false, it would be so disastrous for Josh to believe  $p$  that, given that our primary interest in this context is in understanding Josh, it is true for us to say 'Josh would not be justified in believing  $p$ '.<sup>19</sup>

Sometimes, however, in making the statement ' $x$  is justified in believing  $p$ ', one may be focusing on the degree of justification that is called for, not by  $x$ 's situation, but

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<sup>19</sup> In effect, this is precisely the case that Stanley calls "Low Attributor – High Subject Stakes". As what I say here makes clear, Stanley's (2005, 24) claim that contextualists must give the wrong verdict on this case is mistaken.

by some *other* situation. For example, one might be focusing on the degree of justification that is called for by *one's own* practical situation. (This will typically be the case when one's primary interest in  $x$  is merely as a potential informant about whether  $p$  is true.) Then the contextually relevant degree of justification would be the degree required for outright belief by the standard that is favoured by a correct conception of *one's own situation*. In such a context, the statement ' $x$  is justified in believing  $p$ ' may well *not* have the same truth value as the first-person statement that  $x$  could make about himself 'I am justified in believing  $p$ '. For example, suppose that I ask you, 'Is anyone in the department justified in believing that Alice has accepted our job offer?' Suppose that, although it is of no great importance to either of us whether or not Alice has accepted the offer, our primary concern in asking this question is just to make up our own minds about whether Alice has accepted the offer. Then you might reply: 'John is: he heard from a friend of his that Alice has accepted.' In this case, your reply might be perfectly true, even though for John, a false belief about whether or not Alice has accepted the offer would be so disastrous that it would not be true for John to say of himself 'I am justified in believing that Alice has accepted the offer.'<sup>20</sup>

As I have already indicated, there are other ways in which the speakers can focus on a particular degree of justification besides by thinking of it as the degree that is called for by a certain practical situation. For example, one way in which they may focus on a certain degree of justification is by thinking of it as the degree of justification that they have for certain propositions that count as the *contextually salient paradigms*. For

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<sup>20</sup> This is why my version of contextualism yields the same verdicts about the "bank cases" and "airport cases" as the theories of Cohen (1999) and DeRose (1992 and 2005).

example, in a context in which one has been talking about one's justification for believing provable mathematical truths, one is focusing on the very high degree of justification that one has for those mathematical truths. This degree of justification may remain the contextually relevant degree, so that one can truly say 'We are not justified in believing that Elvis is dead' — where what one means by this is just that we have *less* justification for believing that Elvis is dead than we have for believing those mathematical truths.

This then is the version of contextualism that I am advocating here. To sum up: It is a fundamental context-independent fact that one has *more* justification for some propositions than for others. A "standard" of justified belief specifies *how much* justification one must have for a proposition  $p$  if outright belief in  $p$  (as opposed to mere partial belief in  $p$  or suspension of judgment about  $p$ ) is to count as "justified" *simpliciter*. There is a range of such standards, some more strict and demanding, and others more relaxed and permissive, each corresponding to a different way of balancing the "goal" of believing the truth against the "goal" of not believing what is false. From a purely epistemic point of view, none of these standards is any less legitimate than any other. A rational believer will sometimes be guided by a strict standard, sometimes by a relaxed standard, depending on her conception of the practical considerations that are at stake in her situation. In that sense, a conception of the practical considerations at stake in a given situation may "favour" some of these standards of justified belief over the others. This is reflected in the truth conditions of statements of the form ' $x$  is justified in believing  $p$ '. When we make such a statement, focusing on the degree of justification that is called for by some particular situation (which may be  $x$ 's situation, or our own situation, or indeed any other situation), our statement is true if and only if the degree of justification that  $x$

has for  $p$  is at least as high as the degree required for outright belief by the standard that is “favoured” by a correct conception of *that* situation.

## 7. An answer to scepticism?

The version of contextualism that I am advocating here is importantly different from the versions that have become familiar from the works of Stewart Cohen (1991 and 1999), Keith DeRose (1995), and David Lewis (1996). The main difference is simply that my version of contextualism is an account of terms like ‘justified’ (as it occurs in phrases like ‘justified belief’), whereas those more familiar versions are accounts of terms like ‘knowledge’. This difference may help my version to escape some of the objections that have been directed against those more familiar versions.<sup>21</sup>

In this section, I shall emphasize another difference between my version of contextualism and those more familiar versions, which also makes it likely that my version will be immune to many of the objections that have been targeted at those more familiar versions. Specifically, unlike those other versions of contextualism, my version *is not designed to provide an answer to scepticism*.

Most contextualists have claimed that their contextualist account of the term ‘know’ can explain why certain sceptical claims, such as the claim that we do not “know” that we are not being deceived by an evil demon, often seem to be true—because there

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<sup>21</sup> For example, my account is clearly immune to Stanley’s (2004) objection that the term ‘know’ is not a gradable term, since ‘justified’, unlike ‘know’, obviously *is* a gradable term. (In saying this, I do not mean to endorse any of Stanley’s objections to the more familiar versions of contextualism.)



are some possible contexts in which these claims really *are* true. However, when we understand the features of those contexts that make such claims true, we also see that the truth of those claims in those contexts leaves the truth of our ordinary knowledge-attributions untouched.

The version of contextualism that I am advocating here concerns terms like ‘justified’, not ‘knowledge’. But of course there are sceptical arguments that attack the possibility of justified belief, as well as sceptical arguments that attack the possibility of knowledge. So we might wonder whether my version of contextualism provides an answer to the sceptical arguments that attack justified belief.

In fact, it is doubtful whether my version of contextualism can do this. My version of contextualism contains no analogue of Lewis’s (1996, 559–61) Rule of Attention: the mere fact that we are *attending* to a possibility in which all our experiences and memories would be the same, but our beliefs would be false, is not enough to make the context a demanding context in which few beliefs can truly be called ‘justified’. In this way, my version of contextualism is immune to all the objections that have been directed against the Rule of Attention—such as the objection that according to this Rule, a scholar studying Descartes’ First *Meditation* would be in such a demanding context that it would not be true for her to say that she is justified in believing that Descartes ever wrote the *Meditations*.<sup>22</sup> Equally, my version of contextualism contains no analogue of DeRose’s (1995, 35–9) Rule of Sensitivity. So again, my version of contextualism is also immune to all the objections that have been directed against DeRose’s Rule of Sensitivity.<sup>23</sup> For

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<sup>22</sup> For this sort of objection, compare Hawthorne (2004, 64).

<sup>23</sup> For some of these objections, see Williamson (2000, chap. 7).

similar reasons, my view also does not support Cohen's (1999, 65) claim that standards are liable to "shift" whenever "the chance of error becomes salient", which will occur whenever "we are confronted with sceptical arguments".

On my version of contextualism, the only way in which the context can raise the relevant standard of justified belief is, in effect, if the parties to the conversation are actually *focusing* on an unusually demanding standard of justified belief. But the claim that the participants in conversations about sceptical arguments are typically focusing on an unusually demanding standard in this way seems at best a highly debatable empirical proposition, which I shall attempt to evaluate here.

At all events, it is not an objection to my version of contextualism if it cannot provide an answer to scepticism. Contextualism can at best only answer one specific kind of sceptical argument. This is the kind of sceptical argument that starts from the *premise* that one does not know that a certain sceptical hypothesis obtains (such as the premise 'I do not know that I am not being deceived by a demon'), without offering any further defence of that premise. It is true that we can easily feel inclined to accept this premise (although it is not obvious that contextualists have given the correct explanation of why we feel this way). But it is striking that we feel much less inclined to accept the parallel claim about justified belief: 'I am not justified in believing that I am not being deceived by a demon'. This is why the sceptical arguments that attack the possibility of justified belief typically include an *argument* for this claim, and do not just take it as an unargued premise of the argument.

There are several arguments that might be given in support of this premise.<sup>24</sup> But

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<sup>24</sup> For example, see the arguments that are discussed by Pryor (2000) and Williamson (2005).

for our purposes we do not need to examine these arguments here. The important point is just that my version of contextualism about justified belief cannot help us to answer these arguments, for the following simple reason. As I explained in the Section 2, my version of contextualism about justified belief presupposes that there is a *context-independent ordering* of propositions with respect to how much justification one has for believing them. But these sceptical arguments are in effect arguments about this ordering. If *sh* is a sceptical hypothesis (such as the hypothesis that one is dreaming, or being deceived by a demon), then these arguments start by arguing that we have *no more* justification for believing  $\neg sh$  than for believing *sh*; and then they infer from this that for a much wider range of propositions, we have *no more* justification for believing those propositions than for believing their negations. If I am right that this ordering is entirely context-independent, then given that these sceptical arguments concern this ordering of propositions, contextualism has nothing to say to answer these sceptical arguments.

For these reasons, then, there seems to be no reason to think my contextualist account of the term ‘justified’ will help to provide an answer to scepticism, but that this is not in any way an objection to my account. After all, a philosophical thesis can be true even if it does not help to answer every philosophical problem. The chief importance of contextualism, it seems to me, lies not in its ability to answer sceptical arguments, but in its contribution to solving some other difficult problems in epistemology. I shall explain how contextualism helps us to solve these problems in the last two sections of this paper.

## 8. Contextualism and multi-premise closure

Contextualists have repeatedly claimed that it is a great advantage of their view that it preserves the closure principle—that is, the principle that knowledge is closed under competent deduction.<sup>25</sup>

My version of contextualism certainly does support *single-premise closure*. In every context it will true to say: ‘If at time  $t$  you competently deduce  $q$  from  $p$ , and you are justified in believing  $p$  at  $t$ , then you are also justified in believing  $q$  at  $t$ .’ If you competently deduce  $q$  from  $p$ , then you must surely have at least as high a degree of justification for  $q$  as for  $p$ . So whatever standard of justified belief is relevant in the context, the principle of *single-premise closure* will hold.

The situation is quite different, however, with *multi-premise closure*. Suppose that you competently deduce a conclusion  $q$  from a set of premises  $P$ . If  $P$  has more than one member, then the degree of justification that you have for  $q$  can easily be *lower* than the degree of justification that you have for any single member of  $P$ . (This is particularly clear where  $q$  is the *conjunction* of the members of  $P$ , since conjunctions are often less probable than any of their conjuncts.) In general, for every degree of justification lower than the maximum possible degree, the property of being justified to that degree is *not* closed under competent logical deduction: being justified to that degree is not “preserved” from the premises to the conclusion of every logically valid argument.

Still, it is hard to escape the feeling that multi-premise closure ought to hold. My version of contextualism provides an elegant explanation of this. Consider a situation in

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<sup>25</sup> For example, see Cohen (1999, 66), DeRose (1995, 31–32, note 33) and Lewis (1996, 563).

which you competently deduce a conclusion  $q$  from a certain set of premises  $P$ . Now consider any standard of justified belief that permits outright belief in each of these premises but *not* in the conclusion  $q$ . It is easy to see that if you are a rational believer, you cannot actually be guided by this standard in this situation. If you were guided by this standard of justified belief, you would have an outright belief in each of the premises, but not in the conclusion. But given the claims that I made in Section 2 about the essential functional role of outright belief, this is impossible. It is part of the essential functional role of outright belief that if you have an outright belief in each member of a certain set of premises, and you deduce a certain conclusion from that set of premises, then you must either have an outright belief in that conclusion, or else *retreat* from having a full outright belief in every member of that set of premises. So, in general, if a rational believer competently deduces a conclusion from a set of premises, she cannot then be guided by any standard that permits outright belief in each of the premises but not in the conclusion.

Now suppose that in this situation, you explicitly ask yourself the first-person question, ‘Am I justified in believing each member of this set of premises  $P$ , and in believing  $q$ ?’ In this context, you are attending to your own current situation.<sup>26</sup> So in effect, you are focusing on the degree of justification that is called for by your own current situation. Presumably, this degree of justification is the degree required for

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<sup>26</sup> According to my account, it is only in contexts in which the speaker is focusing on *his own* situation that counter-examples to multi-premise closure that will be “elusive” in this way. Third-person counter-examples, uttered in a context where the speaker is focusing on *someone else’s* situation, need not be elusive in the same way. But the elusiveness of counter-examples in contexts where the speaker is focusing on his own situation seems enough to explain the intuitive pull of multi-premise closure.

outright belief by a standard that *could appropriately guide a rational believer* in your situation. As we have seen, however, given that you are in a situation in which you have just deduced  $q$  from  $P$ , no standard that permits belief in each member of  $P$  but *not* in  $q$  could guide a rational believer in your current situation. *A fortiori*, no such standard could appropriately guide a rational believer in your situation.

So, it seems, the degree of justification that is required for outright belief by a standard of this kind cannot be the contextually relevant degree in this context. That is, in this context, no degree of justification that is *higher* than the degree that you have for the conclusion  $q$ , but *not* higher than the degree that you have for each of the premises, can be the contextually relevant degree. Either the contextually degree is so high that the sentence ‘I am justified in believing each member of the set of premises  $P$ ’ is *not* true; or else it is so low that the sentence ‘I am justified in believing the conclusion  $q$ ’ is true. In this context, the contextually relevant degree cannot lie in the intermediate interval between these two points.

This point will generalize to any statement of an alleged counter-example to closure—that is, to any statement of the form ‘ $x$  is justified in believing each member of this set of premises  $P$ , but not in believing the conclusion  $q$ ’. Any context in which the speaker is focusing on his own situation, and considers a statement of an alleged counterexample to closure, is a context in which that statement is not true. That is, in contexts of this kind, counterexamples to closure are—as Lewis (1996) would put it—elusive. In this way, my approach helps to explain why it *feels* as though multi-premise closure should hold unrestrictedly, even though in fact it does not.

## 9. Contextualism as a way of defending intellectualism

Another difficult problem in epistemology concerns the relation between justified belief and the *practical considerations*—such as the needs, values, purposes, and so on—that are at stake in the believer’s situation. On the one hand, there is the intuition that there is a notion of purely *epistemic* justification, and that this notion captures something that actually guides the rational believer in forming and revising her beliefs. This intuition seems to demand a strictly intellectualist account, according to which the principles of epistemic justification take no account of such practical considerations, but are all in a sense “oriented” towards the austere truth-focused “goal” of having the correct doxastic attitude towards the proposition in question. On the other hand, there is the intuition that the way in which a normal rational believer forms and revises her beliefs may well be influenced by her conception of the practical considerations that are at stake in her situation; and such practical considerations may make a difference to when it is true to say that someone is “justified” in believing a given proposition. This intuition may seem to call for a “subject-sensitive invariantist” (SSI) account of justified belief, according to which the practical considerations that are at stake in the believer’s situation are actually built into the semantics of the term ‘justified belief’ itself. But this SSI approach is flatly incompatible with the first intuition that the relevant notion of “justified belief” is a notion of purely *epistemic* justification.<sup>27</sup>

My version of contextualism about justified belief can reconcile these two intuitions with each other. In my account, the fundamental ordering of propositions with

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<sup>27</sup> For discussion of this SSI approach, see Hawthorne (2004, chap. 4), and Stanley (2005, chap. 5).

respect to how much justification one has for believing them is completely independent of the practical considerations that are at stake in the believer's situation. Moreover, each of the many standards of justified belief consists simply in a requirement about how high up in this ordering a proposition  $p$  needs to be, if one is to count as "justified" in having an outright belief in  $p$  (along with a requirement about whether one should suspend judgment or have a partial belief in  $p$  if one has no outright belief either in  $p$  or in  $\neg p$ ). Thus, each of these standards also takes no account of the specific practical considerations that are at stake in the believer's situation.

However, as I have explained in Section 5 above, it is perfectly compatible with this intellectualist interpretation of the relevant notion of justified belief that a rational believer's conception of the practical considerations that are at stake in her situation may make a difference to *which* of these standards she is guided by. This approach can then also explain why the truth value of sentences of the form ' $x$  is justified in believing  $p$ ' often seems to vary with the practical considerations that are at stake in the situation that the speakers are focusing on. However, according to this contextualist approach, these practical considerations are not part of the semantics of 'justified belief' itself; they are merely part of the contextual factors that determine which of the many possible extensions that the term 'justified belief' can have is in play in this context.

This point—that contextualism can help to defend the intellectualist view that "knowledge" and "justified belief" are purely *epistemic* notions, in spite of the intuitions that seem to pose serious problems for this view—has already been noted before, by Stanley (2005, 15). However, as I shall now argue, my approach gives a significantly more explicit and precise account of these intuitions than Stanley's (2005).



As we have seen, there are two main intuitions that seem to pose problems for intellectualism. First, it seems that believers who are rational, and believers who are effective at acquiring knowledge, will often be guided by more demanding standards when they believe that the costs of being wrong about the proposition in question are higher. Secondly, the truth value of statements about one “knows” or “is justified in believing” often seems sensitive to the practical considerations that are at stake in one’s situation. I shall focus on the first of these intuitions here (given my contextualist account of the term ‘justified’, my account of the second intuition is a fairly straightforward consequence of my account of the first).

In effect, Stanley (2005, 89) deals with this intuition by means of his account of knowledge. According to his account, when a proposition  $p$  is a “serious practical question” for an agent  $x$ ,  $x$  knows  $p$  only if “ $\neg p$  has a sufficiently low epistemic probability, given  $x$ ’s total evidence”. As Stanley (2005, 94) explains later, a proposition  $p$  is “practically irrelevant” for an agent  $x$  if and only if whether or not  $p$  is true “has no effect (or only a minimal effect) on the warranted expected utilities of the actions” that are available to  $x$  (and a proposition is a “serious practical question” if and only if it is not “practically irrelevant” in this way).

Strikingly, however, Stanley says nothing about *how* low the probability of  $\neg p$  has to be if  $x$  is to know  $p$ . He implies that the required threshold will be more demanding when  $p$  is a “serious practical question” than when  $p$  is “practically irrelevant”; but otherwise, an extraordinarily wide range of views seem compatible with what Stanley says—including both the extreme view that when  $p$  is a serious practical question,  $\neg p$  must have *zero* probability if  $x$  is to know  $p$ , and the equally extreme view that *any*

probability below 50% is sufficiently low for  $x$  to know  $p$  (even when  $p$  is an extraordinarily serious practical question).

My account of this intuition was given in Section 5, where I proposed that out of the three doxastic options that are eligible when one has more justification for  $p$  than for  $\neg p$  (namely, outright belief in  $p$ , partial belief in  $p$ , and complete suspension of judgment about  $p$ ) the rational believer will take an option that maximizes “expected practical epistemic value”—where this “expected value” is defined by a probability function that represents the fundamental context-independent ranking of propositions in terms of comparative justification. It is clear that this is a significantly more precise and detailed account than Stanley’s. For example, according to my account, it is only when a rational believer’s conception of her situation implies that the costs of having a false outright belief in  $p$  (compared to suspension of judgment) are *infinitely greater* than the benefits of having a true outright belief in  $p$  that the rational believer will be guided by the extreme standard that permits believing  $p$  only when  $\neg p$  has *zero* probability—that is, when one has the maximum possible degree of justification for  $p$ .

In this way, then, my form of contextualism gives an informative account that can reconcile the intellectualist intuition with our intuitions about the relevance of practical stakes. Anyone who accepts that both of these intuitions have some force should regard this as in itself an advantage of the contextualist account over the rival SSI account. This is because the SSI account, unlike its contextualist rival, simply jettisons the intellectualist intuition that the relevant use of ‘justified belief’ expresses as a notion of purely epistemic evaluation.

In addition, my account can avoid some counter-intuitive implications of the SSI

account. As some recent critics, such as Blome-Tillmann (forthcoming), have emphasized, the SSI account seems to predict that some rather strange statements will be true. For example, consider two thinkers, Arthur and Beatrice. Suppose that for Arthur the cost of incorrectly believing  $p$  is much higher than it is for Beatrice. Then the SSI account implies that the following statement is true: ‘Arthur has more justification for believing  $p$  than Beatrice has, but Beatrice is justified in believing  $p$  and Arthur is not’. The SSI account would also imply the truth of ‘Beatrice is justified in believing  $p$ , but if the cost of being wrong had been higher, then (even if she still believed  $p$  on the basis of exactly the same evidence) she wouldn’t have been justified in believing  $p$ ’. The fact that we find these statements so strange seems to me best explained precisely by our intuitive sense that the relevant notion of “justified belief” is a purely epistemic notion, of the sort that I have described. For these reasons, the sort of contextualist account that I have advocated here seems to me to have decisive advantages over the rival SSI account.

In general, there seem to be strong reasons in favour of the sort of contextualism about justified belief that I have advocated here. The chief importance of this sort of contextualism is not, however, as an answer to scepticism, but in its role in solving some other epistemological problems—about the closure of justified belief under competent deduction, and the role of practical considerations in rational thinking.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> A remote ancestor of this paper was presented at a conference on Epistemological Contextualism at the University of Stirling in March 2004; more recent versions were presented to the Cambridge Moral Sciences Club, the Philosophy Department at McGill University, and two informal discussion groups in Oxford. I am extremely grateful to the members of all those groups (and especially to my commentator at the Stirling conference, Michael Brady) for their helpful comments. I should also like to thank Robert Adams, Keith DeRose, Jonathan Kvanvig, Nicholas Silins, and especially the two

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