Lewis' Theory Concerning Contextualism

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Introduction

In this paper, I will defend Lewis' theory of contextualism. First, I explain that Lewis' motivation for contextualism is to avoid fallibilism and skepticism. Next, I define contextualism and illustrate Lewis' rules of inclusion and exclusion. After, I engage Lewis' contextualism with Vogel's objection concerning "retraction". I conclude that "retraction" is not an objection to Lewis' contextualism and that contextualism is an important and accurate theory of knowledge.

Contextualism

Lewis was motivated for the idea of contextualism in order to avoid both fallibilism and skepticism. Fallibilism states that there is no evidence or justification that is enough to rule out every possibility for a belief, therefore it is possible to have knowledge without ruling out all other possibilities.[1] Skepticism states that it is impossible to have knowledge. Both of these ideas, according to Lewis, "are mad!"[2] Lewis lacks the motivation to ascribe to either one of these approaches to knowledge and in order to avoid the "rock of fallibilism and the whirlpool of skepticism," Lewis proposes his theory of contextualism.[3]

Lewis' contextualism states that "S knows proposition P iff P holds in every possibility left uneliminated by S's evidence; equivalently, iff S's evidence eliminates every possibility in which not-P."[4] However, Lewis asserts that we don't have to eliminate all possibilities in a

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[1] Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Fallibilism.
[2] Lewis, 550.
[3] Lewis, 550.
[4] Lewis, 551.

restated definition that, "S knows that P iff S's evidence eliminates every possibility in which not P - Psst! - except for those possibilities that conflict with our proper presuppositions."[5] In other words, Lewis would say that S only has knowledge of P after "every" possibility of not P is eliminated by evidence for S. [6] By "every" possibility Lewis is referring to the possibilities that are within the Rules of Inclusion.[7] Lewis goes on to explain what possibilities we can and cannot ignore in his Rules of Inclusion and Exclusion.

The Rules of Inclusion

The Rules of Inclusion provide a guide for the possibilities we are not allowed to ignore when we are eliminating possibilities of not P. There are four Rules of Inclusion. The first rule is the Rule of Actuality. The Rule of Actuality states that we cannot ignore the "actual world" of S.[8] The actual world of S is this world, it includes you and me and S and there is only "one actual world."[9] Any possibilities that exist in the actual world should be included when defining knowledge.

The second rule is the Rule of Belief. The Rule of Belief states that if S believes, or should believe a possibility, then that possibility cannot be ignored.[10] Lewis defines "should believe" in that S should believe P if there is "evidence and arguments" that provide a justified belief for P.[11] Regardless of whether or not S believes the possibility, S should still view it as a possibility.[12]

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[5] Lewis, 554.
[6] Lewis, 553.
[7] Lewis, 553.
[8] Lewis, 555.
[9] Lewis, 555.
[10] Lewis, 555.
[11] Lewis, 555.
[12] Lewis, 555.

The Rule of Resemblance states that if possibilities are similar and if one of them can't "be properly ignored" then the other cannot be ignored either.[13] For example, in the actual world, you believe that you saw an airplane flying above you. It would not be too bizarre that in another world, close to the actual world in which you saw a plane, that it was actually a bird instead of a plane. Lewis states that this rule solves any Gettier-type problems, problems where there are "other cases of justified true belief that are not knowledge."[14]

The final Rule of Inclusion is the Rule of Attention. The Rule of Attention states that if we are thinking of a possibility, "no matter how far-fetched", we cannot ignore it because if we can imagine it then it could be a possibility.[15] Perhaps, you are looking at the plane and you think that it resembles the shape of a person. You start thinking that maybe it is not a plane, but instead, it is Superman. While a flying man seems like a possibility that you can eliminate because it is so absurd, the Rule of Attention states that as long as you are entertaining that possibility, it cannot be ignored because you are not ignoring it.[16]

The Rules of Exclusion

There are three Rules of Exclusion that encompass the possibilities that Lewis allows us to ignore when assigning knowledge. In the Rule of Reliability, Lewis states what we are allowed to ignore possibilities where things that normally present themselves as reliable, actually turn out to be false, things like "perception, memory, and testimony."[17] It is a possibility that you suddenly cannot distinguish muffins from babies or that your memory fails you and you cannot

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[13] Lewis, 556.
[14] Lewis, 557.
[15] Lewis, 559.
[16] Lewis, 559.
[17] Lewis, 558.

remember your own name. However, Lewis allows us to ignore possibilities like these. While they "can never be eliminated" they can be "properly ignored."[18]

The next Rule of Exclusion is the Rule of Method. This rule states that we can dismiss possibilities where a sample is not "representative" and where "the best explanation of our evidence" is not true.[19] In a possibility where the simplest explanation is false, Lewis states that we can ignore that possibility.

The final Rule of Exclusion is the Rule of Conservativism. The Rule of Conservativism states that we can ignore possibilities where "it is common knowledge" to do so.[20] If everyone else is ignoring certain possibilities, in order to have knowledge, you are allowed to ignore those possibilities as well.

While the Rules of Exclusion guide us towards possibilities that can generally be ignored, they are not steadfast rules and can be altered.[21] In order to determine that S has knowledge of P, it is important to identify all of the possibilities of not P using the Rules of Inclusion. After all possibilities of not P are identified, the Rules of Exclusion determine which possibilities we can properly ignore.[22]

Determining Knowledge

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[18] Lewis, 558.
[19] Lewis, 558.
[20] Lewis, 559.
[21] Lewis, 558.
[22] Lewis, 562.

The core of contextualism is that knowledge changes with context. This means that it is "closed under implication."[23] While you might have knowledge in one context, the same knowledge can easily disappear in another context. For example, daily, I have knowledge that I am a student at Macalester College and that I live in St. Paul. However, when my epistemology class starts at 3:00 pm on Tuesday, I cannot say that I have knowledge of attending Macalester College or living in St. Paul because of the Rule of Attention. The possibilities that I am a brain in a vat or that I am being deceived by an evil demon are very possible in the context of my epistemology class. No matter how outlandish the thought, if it is called to my attention, then I must not exclude it as a possibility. When I wake up in the morning I have knowledge that I am living in St. Paul and that I am a student at Macalester College, I am not constantly thinking that perhaps I am just a brain in a vat. However, as soon as I open my laptop to start working on my epistemology paper, I can no longer ignore the possibility that I am being deceived of those things because they are possibilities that are constantly discussed in class. Therefore, they are brought to my attention in the context of my epistemology class or epistemology paper. The context changes when I open my laptop and begin to think about epistemology.[24]

Vogel's "Retraction" Objection to Contextualism

One dilemma that Lewis' theory runs into is Vogel's objection of "retraction".[25] This objection addresses a common habit that most people have when they realize that they do not know something. The "retraction" objection highlights the occurrence that people retract or pull away their statement of knowledge. For example, your friend says, "I know that I turned my

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[23] Lewis, 564.
[24] Lewis, 564.
[25] Theories of Knowledge: Internalist Theories.

paper in because I put it in my professor's mailbox." However, you are very skeptical and say "How do you know that you turned your paper in?" One counter possibility that you offer is that the mailroom caught on fire. However, that doesn't seem like a very simple or plausible explanation, so we can rule out fire through the Rule of Method. Another possibility is that someone cleared out the professor's mailbox or maybe instead of Professor Jones' mailbox your friend put their paper in Professor Jons' mailbox. A world in which those might happen does not sound too far away, therefore you cannot rule out those possibilities. Your friend, realizing that these possibilities could be true, retracts his statement and instead says, "I guess I don't know that I turned my paper in." Most people retract their claim of knowledge and rarely say, "I knew that I turned my paper in then, but now that you present me with these other possibilities, I don't know that I turned my paper in."[26] In a case like this, most people withdraw any claim of knowledge, and this is the problem for Vogel.[27] Lewis' theory states that, in practice, we should not retract our knowledge because when we originally made the statement, we did have knowledge, given the context. However, in most cases, we do retract our previous knowledge.

Argument for Contextualism

I do not agree that Vogel's "retraction" is an objection to Lewis. Vogel's objection is solely a comment on the way that we speak and it does not affect the theory behind contextualism. Vogel is correct that in most cases we retract our knowledge, but this is not a problem for Lewis. Our immediate response when we are proven wrong is something along the lines of "I guess, I don't know" but that doesn't mean that we never had knowledge. It is much

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[26] Theories of Knowledge: Internalist Theories.
[27] Theories of Knowledge: Internalist Theories.

simpler to say "I don't know" than to say, "I did know but now I don't know." It is only a form of speech that you retract, you don't literally retract your knowledge.

However, there is a difference in retracting knowledge when using "I know" statements. If I say "the dog is smart" someone might reply, "he's not smart, he didn't graduate from Macalester." In this case, you would not retract your claim that the dog is smart. It would be worth it to argue and explain your statement. You could explain that the dog is smart because he rings a bell when he needs to use the bathroom outside. There is no risk in this statement. In this context, it is worth it to argue that compared to other dogs, the dog is smart because not all dogs learn to ring a bell when they need to use the bathroom. However, I will explain why things change when we make a claim using "I know."

"I know" claims a sense of ownership and responsibility for a statement. People argue for the statement "the dog is smart" when someone questions them but they retract their knowledge for a statement like, "I know the dog is smart." The statement, "I know the dog is smart" after he rings a bell to use the bathroom means something different than "the dog is smart." I assert that people become ashamed or embarrassed when someone points out a flaw in an "I know" statement or accuses them of being wrong.

There is a distinctive personal shame that follows from being wrong about the claim, "I know the dog is smart" that doesn't follow from being wrong about the claim "the dog is smart." When someone objects to a personal statement, the natural response is to retract your claim to knowledge. It is easier and safer to retract our entire claim than to make up an excuse as to why we didn't think of the alternate possibilities. However, this withdrawal is solely the removal of a sentence and not the removal of knowledge.

In using the words "I have knowledge" you are making a claim about yourself. Someone might be embarrassed that they did not think of all of the possibilities and made a statement that is now false, given more evidence. If your friend was to go back and check the mailboxes and see that they did accidentally put their paper in the mailbox of Professor Jons instead of Professor Jones, then they can save themselves the humiliation of being wrong by retracting their entire statement. However, that does not change the fact that when they originally made the claim "I know that I turned my paper in because I put it in my professor's mailbox" that they knew that they turned their paper in because they put it in their professor's mailbox. I believe that people solely retract the words of their claim, but not the knowledge behind those words as a way of protecting themselves from taking ownership of a statement if it turns out to be wrong.

Conclusion

I agree with Lewis, that the best way to approach whether or not we have knowledge is within context. Given all of the evidence and possibilities that we are not ignoring in a certain context, I believe that knowledge is what you can gather from that. For example, I state that many many years ago people had knowledge that Earth was flat. In their context, it would be a very far away world where the Earth could be round. Their evidence did not support that claim so they could ignore the possibility that Earth was anything but flat. Flat Earthers today cannot rule out the possibility that the world is not round so they cannot say that they know that Earth is flat. There is too much evidence today that the world is round. However, if a person from many years ago time-traveled to the future, they would now know that Earth is round. Therefore, they could say that "I knew the Earth was flat but now I know that the Earth is round." Their context has changed so they can have different knowledge about the same thing in different contexts. If

many many years in the future we were to discover evidence that suggests that the world is not round but something else that I cannot even conceive, I argue that it is correct to say that I had knowledge in the past that the Earth was round but now I do not have knowledge. My context and evidence have changed.

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