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Philosophy 243 Essay

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The Relevance of Objector-Groups to the Justification of Beliefs

In A Contextualist Theory of Epistemic Justification, David B. Annis advocates a version of the Contextualist theory to be a viable alternative to foundationalism and coherentism.¹ Annis demonstrates that his contextualist theory avoids some of the major pitfalls² of foundationalism and coherentism, and further argues that coherentism accounts for essential contextual parameters that the two competing theories overlook.³ However, in formulating contextualism, Annis introduces several new problems regarding epistemic justification that plague his theory. In this essay, I aim to describe Annis' main thesis regarding contextualism and provide reasons that pose problems for his account of epistemic justification. More specifically, I aim to demonstrate that contrary to Annis' thesis, external feedback from objector-groups⁴ about the justificatory status of a belief do not necessarily hold relevance to epistemic justification.

Annis' main thesis of contextualism is palpably very dense. I will, therefore, analyze the building blocks of his theory before evaluating the entirety of his account of contextualism. I will start with his discussion on the importance of context to epistemic justification. Annis affirms that contextualism's main advantage is that it accounts for context, an important feature

¹ Annis, David. *American Philosophical Quarterly*. Volume 15, Number 3, July 1978. Page 213.

² Ibid, 213.

³ Ibid, 213.

⁴ Ibid, 215. The objector-group is a group of qualified objectors that are determined by the issue-context.

conventionally overlooked by foundationalism and coherentism.⁵ The significance of context with regards to epistemic justification is compelling. Annis uses an example like the following scenario⁶ to demonstrate this: Suppose we are interested to know whether Jones' belief that polio is caused by a virus is justified. John's response is that he remembers reading an article on the internet saying that polio is caused by a virus. The contextualist argument is that the standards for Jones' justification for his belief changes based on the context of who Jones is. If Jones is an ordinary, medically untrained person, then he would be justified in this belief based on the article he read. However, if Jones was somebody with an M.D. degree, we would appropriately apply more stringent standards for justification of this specific belief. In the latter scenario, it would simply not be justifiable for Jones to believe that polio is caused by virus based solely on one article he had read online. We would expect Jones to have a rigorous understanding of the disease if he possesses an M.D. degree. Annis' example serves to show that we apply different standards of justification based on the context. The "issue-context"⁷, as Annis puts it, determines the level of understanding and knowledge that a person must exhibit in order to be justified for the belief.⁸

The relevance of *issue-context* to epistemic justification is hard to argue against. Indeed, people ordinarily and frequently apply all sorts of different standards for justification based on the context. We apply a far more rigorous standard of justification for doctors regarding their beliefs about diseases, than compared to a medically untrained person. Similarly, we apply a far more rigorous standard for justification for astronomers in their belief about the composition of

⁵ Ibid, 213.

⁶ Ibid, 215.

⁷ Ibid, 215.

⁸ Ibid, 215.

planet X, as compared to someone who reads Astronomy Weekly. Justifiability in beliefs, it seems, is context specific.

Although Annis' thesis seems sound with regards to the *issue-context*, it seems to create problematic implications when he introduces the related concept of "objectors"⁹ and their relevance to epistemic justification. The idea of *objectors* relates to *issue-context*, in that the *issue-context* determines the *objector-group*.¹⁰ *Objectors* are a select group of qualified people, who may provide objections to an individual *S*'s justification for belief in *h*.¹¹ According to Annis, *S*'s justificatory status is contingent on *S*'s ability to convince the objectors, that their objections are not adequate to discredit *S*'s justification for *h*.¹² The following encapsulates Annis' main thesis:

For *S* to be justified in believing *h* relative to the *issue-context*, *S* must respond to certain *objections* from the *qualified objector-group* in a way that causes a *real doubt* of the qualified objector groups.¹³

My main problem with this formulation is that it necessarily makes it impossible for *S* to be justified in a belief without responding to an external group of objectors. In fact, according to Annis, *S* has to convince the objectors that their objections, if appropriate, do not diminish the

⁹ Ibid, 214.

¹⁰ Ibid, 215.

¹¹ Ibid, 215.

¹² Ibid, 215.

¹³ Ibid, 215. Actually, Annis' exact formulation is more precise than my encapsulation of his thesis. I chose to ignore his concepts of "critical truth-seekers", and his categories (A) and (B) of objections that are allowed, because their inclusion does not change the nature of my disagreement. My disagreement applies to *any* and all objections regardless of the categories, and *any* and all types of people, regardless of whether they are truth seekers.

justification.¹⁴ But is such external feedback from objectors necessary for justification? Can you justify beliefs in isolation?

Contrary to Annis thesis, I will argue that a feedback from an external group of qualified objectors is not a necessary condition for epistemic justification. Consider the case of Josh Smart. Suppose Josh is known to the smartest person alive and is equipped with the highest IQ ever known to man. Josh's cognitive ability far exceeds anybody else's, and thus he is able to think with much detail and depth compared to ordinary people. Suppose Josh, using pure deduction, figures out a logical truth *k* so complicated that no one else can process it. Annis' thesis faces problems when evaluating whether Josh is justified in believing *k*. Since *k* is too complex for anyone other than Josh to process, nobody else can confirm or deny *k*'s validity. If Josh were to try and articulate why *k* is justified, nobody would be able to understand him. Josh would not be able to convince *any* class of *objectors-group* about the truth of *k*. By Annis' thesis, Josh would be unable to cast "a real doubt of the qualified objector group"¹⁵ about their objections. Therefore, Josh is not justified in *k* by Annis' account of contextualism.

The assertion that Josh is not justified in believing *k*, should be troubling to most people. Annis' thesis posits that there needs to be an *objector-group*, who need to be convinced that their *objections* do not diminish the justificatory status of a belief. But this paves the way for a kind of social justification to beliefs. Indeed Annis uses his thesis to do exactly this, when he writes, "Thus social information—the beliefs, information and the theories of others—plays an important part in justification, for it in part determines what objections will be raised, how a person will

¹⁴ Ibid, 215. "To be justified in believing *h*, *S* must be able to meet their objections in a way that satisfies their practices and norms."

¹⁵ Ibid, 215.

respond to them, and what responses the objectors will accept.”¹⁶ Annis’ theory falls short in the case of the lone genius, who is unable to convey the complex justification for the ordinary people of society. Such was the case with Galileo, who made complex observations through his telescope to test the validity of the heliocentric theory. His belief in the heliocentric theory was justified by his observations and evidence, but he was ultimately unable to challenge the social norms of the time and was burned at stake for his seemingly unjustified belief.¹⁷ Few people today would argue today that Galileo was unjustified in his belief because he wasn’t able to convince his *objector-group*, who thought that his belief in the heliocentric model was tantamount to heresy.¹⁸ Reliance on social information and norms can be faulty, and could even be a dangerous way to assess epistemic justification.

Annis further turns to social norms to be the basis of justification for beliefs for the remaining of his paper. He writes, “To determine whether *S* is justified in believing *h* we must consider the actual standards of justification of the community of people to which he belongs.”¹⁹ “*S* must be able to meet their objections in a way that satisfies their practices and norms.”²⁰ In evaluating these quotations, one will come to the conclusion that *S* must conform to the standards of justification for his community in order to be justified. However, there should not be a requirement for truth seekers to conform to social norms and standards of justification. Why must a personal justification be predicated by other members of society? This question poses several deep problems for Annis’ thesis.

¹⁶ Ibid, 215.

¹⁷ April 2018. *Discover Magazine, Burned at the Stake for Believing in Science.*
[http://www.discovermagazine.com/2008/sep/06-burned-at-the-stake-for-believing-in-science.](http://www.discovermagazine.com/2008/sep/06-burned-at-the-stake-for-believing-in-science)

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Annis, David. *American Philosophical Quarterly. Volume 15, Number 3, July 1978.* Page 215.

²⁰ Ibid, 215.

I will offer another example to illustrate the problem that a social nature of justification poses to epistemology. Suppose that there is a tribe that slaughters very third-born, due to the belief that the act of sacrifice will produce better harvest throughout the year. Now suppose an enlightened member *S* of the tribe has the following belief:

[B1] Sacrificing third-borns will not produce a good harvest.

S's reasons for B1 is that the harvest has been disappointing for the past decade despite the prevalent amount of sacrifices made by the tribe. The records and evidence of harvest justify *S*'s belief B1. However, B1 is considered heresy by the rest of the tribe, and such a belief is punishable by death. Now *S* would not be able to meet the tribe's objections in a way that satisfies the tribe's practices and norms. Thus, Annis's thesis of the social nature of justification breaks down here, since it suggests that *S* is not justified in believing B1. Nevertheless, the evidence shows that *S* is justified in believing B1.

These examples show that feedback from an external objector-group does not seem to be a necessary condition for epistemic justification. One objection to this argument might be that my examples are too lenient with selecting the proper objector-group. Perhaps feedback from objector-group is necessary for justification, provided that the appropriate objector-group is selected with a much more stringent criterion.

In the case of Josh, the lone genius, it could have been argued that in the issue-context of his unrivaled cognitive ability, there are no objector-groups in the world who would be qualified to pose objections to his belief. Even the smartest of the logicians would not be qualified to be a part of Josh's *objector-group* because of the discrepancy between theirs' and Josh's IQ. Since there are no *objector-groups*, there are no *objections* that Josh would have to satisfy. Josh

satisfies all the available objections, which is no objections. Therefore, Josh is justified by Annis' thesis.

Annis' thesis, however, clearly does not impose such a stringent set of rules for selecting an appropriate *objector-group* based on the *nature* of the belief at hand, such as complexity and depth. Instead, Annis writes "we determine whether *S* is justified in believing *h* by specifying an issue-context raised within a community of people *G* with certain social practices and norms and justification. This determines the...standards he is to satisfy. The appropriate objector group is a subset of *G*."²¹ Annis' remarks show that the complexity and the depth of *S*'s belief does not necessarily "pick-out" an *objector-group* who is appropriate to determine justificatory status. The standard that *S* is to satisfy does not exclusively stem from the nature of *S*'s belief. Instead, the standards of justification are determined by the existing social information. *S*'s justification must merely satisfy a *preexisting objector-group* in the society, in accordance with the available social information. In the case of the lone genius Josh, then, Annis' thesis fails to classify Josh as being epistemically justified for his belief. Josh fails to convince *any* class of existing objector-group in the society because the rest of society is unable to process the depth of Josh's justification. Such a reliance on social information seems inadequate basis for epistemic justification.

I further assert that the kind of agreement from objector-groups that Annis advocates, is not an appropriate condition for epistemic justification. The examples I have laid out demonstrated this claim in several ways. Now I turn to analyze the *role* that *objector-groups* play in Annis' version of contextualism and argue that as described by Annis, feedback from

²¹ Ibid, 215.

objector-groups ought not to be the basis of justification. A *qualified objector-group* plays the *role* of filtering-out the legitimate objections from a population. The qualified objector-group, for a physicist's belief in planetary motion, are other, equally qualified physicists. A person who is not well-versed in planetary motion would struggle with providing valid objections to the physicist's belief. Similarly, the qualified objector group for a computer scientist about his beliefs in an algorithmic analysis are other computer scientists, and so on. At a given population, there will be a number of unqualified objectors, as well as qualified ones. This "filtering-out" of unqualified objectors shows that ideally, although not necessarily, objectors must be on equal footing with the believer with regards to the knowledge relating facts concerning that specific belief.

While on paper, the ideal version of an *objector-group* seems compelling, it does raise several practical concerns. Consider again, the case of lone genius Josh. There cannot be a qualified objector that is on equal footing as compared to Josh to evaluate his belief, because nobody else has the same capacity for knowledge and experience as Josh does. In a similar way, practically no one in the real world has exactly the same amount of knowledge or experience as anybody else. People always differ in knowledge, perspectives, experience, and cognitive ability. Given any person *S*, it could be impossible to find objectors that are identically equipped as *S* to evaluate *S*'s belief. The only person who is sure to be in that position is *S* himself. Only *S* can have all the reasons including prior knowledge and experience, for why he believes in *h*. To judge *S*'s justificatory status for belief *h* based on an external objector-group is to base epistemic justification for a belief on an external standard that may not take the totality of *S*'s reasons into account. The space of reasons for how an *objector-group* might respond to *S*'s belief *h* is not

necessarily identical to S 's reasons for believing in h . Therefore, feedback from external objector groups cannot be the basis epistemic justification for a belief. Instead, justification must be determined by examining the all of the specific reasons that an individual S has for believing k , in the context of the knowledge and the experience of individual S .

My examples concerning the lone genius Josh and the slaughtering tribe illustrates that the available social information and norms are not a viable basis for epistemic justification. There are indeed cases where social information in any available objector-group is wrong, or misguided. Annis' thesis fails to produce satisfactory epistemic justificatory status in those cases. Furthermore, Annis' thesis does not deal with the individual contextual differences between people, which makes it infeasible for an external group to determine the justificatory status for an individual's belief. Reliance on an external objector group for epistemic justification of an individual's belief is not reliable when it comes to epistemic justification.

References:

1. Annis, David. *American Philosophical Quarterly*. Volume 15, Number 3, July 1978. Pages 213-215.
2. April 2018. *Discover Magazine*, *Burned at the Stake for Believing in Science*.
<http://www.discovermagazine.com/2008/sep/06-burned-at-the-stake-for-believing-in-science>.