Questioning, Context-Sensitiveness and Philosophical Inquiry

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Abstract:
This paper aims to explain that context-sensitiveness is a very important aspect of philosophical inquiry, specifically through the activity of questioning. The activity of questioning fulfills a number of epistemic tasks; these render the inquirer to understand what is relevant about a context of a determinate inquiry, philosophical or otherwise. In revealing what is relevant for formulating questions it is also noted that fallibilism enters the picture of the establishing of a questioning activity: it shows us that the road of inquiry is relentless and we ought to not block it by context-insensitive questioning.

Keywords: Philosophical questioning, inquiry, contextualist epistemology, fallibilism

1. Introduction

It has been said that the impact of philosophy is dim and hardly relevant for interdisciplinary approaches: epistemology, in fact, might be considered for some an unhealthy obsession for achieving a certainty about knowledge that is nowhere to be found, this due to either our fickle natures or to relativistic opinions. This pessimistic opinion can be proved misguided and wrong, since it lacks the acknowledgement of the huge informative methodological impact that philosophy has comported to a number of disciplines ranging from the experimental sciences to the social sciences and even in technology: philosophical inquiry and epistemology can be hugely beneficial in organizing ourselves in a self-controlled quest for knowledge. In short, epistemology seems to entertain doubts and concerns far from our every day worries, to come up with examples that challenge our common sense, and to establish a very elaborate standard for what we call knowledge; however, we can benefit from all these activities if we focus on the inquisitive character they have, and how they push the limits of what we take to know.

It is true, however, that a great deal of the philosophical literature in epistemology seems to concern about worries that have little or no bearings in actual knowledge acquisition. Much of the literature on justification seems to stem from an obsession of getting warrants of far-fetched scenarios such as that we are not deceived brains in sophisticated nerve-stimulating buckets or deceived by evil dream-leading genies. This, however, does not have to be the case, as epistemology has the talent to help philosophical and non-philosophical inquiry to carry on further, even when there are complications to our ways of finding a truth relevant to an aim.

Indeed, we can push forward knowledge if we acquire the skills to make it relevant to a context and we can discover that through the systematic study of questions, rather than propositions that represent achieved knowledge. In this paper I reject the claim that epistemology is unimportant in helping us pursue settling problems by introducing three philosophical topics crucial to Inquiry in all disciplines of knowledge and methodology in and outside philosophy.

We need to see how common sense beliefs, inquiry, and our more fundamental epistemic practices, entail considerations of context that raise activities and have practical bearings beyond the small circle of professionals in epistemology. I will (1) speak about Inquiry as a goal-directed

activity that generates beliefs, and then (2) I will characterize inquiry as a process of questioning in a systematic manner that (3) takes for granted the context-sensitiveness and fallibilism of those beliefs. I shall conclude that philosophical inquiry expressed in questioning is not only beneficial but also essential for the systematic progress of human knowledge.

2. The aims of inquiry

As mentioned above, Inquiry can be defined as a goal-directed activity, and what we reach as an aim of inquiry is a belief that we want to hold as true. We can focus in two aims in this goal-directed process: we can either concentrate in finding a proposition p that fits the purpose of being the response to a relevant and pungent question or we can try to find ways of settling the kind of propositions that would make the question to settle upon, in both cases we are in the search for a belief that needs to be fixed, but the emphasis can be on the proposition to achieve or in the context that will make that proposition become salient. In a series of famous papers in which pragmatism was for the first time popularized, Charles Peirce (1878) observed, against the traditional inflated doubt of the Cartesian inquirer, that doubts are prompted by forces external to us, i.e., a genuine doubt represents an "irritation" that is to be settled by a belief:

Nor must we overlook a third point of difference. Doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief; while the latter is a calm and satisfactory state which we do not wish to avoid, or to change to a belief in anything else. On the contrary, we cling tenaciously, not merely to believing, but to believing just what we do believe (Peirce, 1877, 3; EP 1: 110).

Now, in order to perform inquiries that will allow us to settle genuine doubts by a belief, we need to have impinging doubts that prompt us to carry on in the way of inquiry, such are the cases of the so-called big questions, but it also applies for concrete inquiries. Unless we take the logic of questions seriously, we shall have a flawed understanding of central issues in the philosophies of language and mind: assertions and beliefs are elicited or activated by questions and questioning. (see Hookway 1990, 10) Some aspects of this questioning activity are the following, and they are first and foremost characteristics of questions in epistemology:

- Through questions we can formulate cognitive goals, i.e., we can establish what kind of responses to those questions actually will work as answers, and whether more questions have to be asked in this process.
- By the use of contextual aspects of a question we can elicit information: we surely will come across propositional information, but the emphasis of this paper wants to underlie that propositional information is secondary to the aim of generating questions that permit us to say that we are carrying a self-controlled activity.
- Questions are used to have indirect complements in reflection, to exercise regulative control over inquires (see Hintikka, 2007).
- Questions are formulated in a pragmatic or contextual consideration: we cannot answer our questions if the beliefs or propositions we have come across do not make a difference in the ways we should act or respond, should we be presented with a similar situation.

The above considerations are aimed to express some of the roles that are played by questions in order to achieve the aims of our inquiry. Stressing the value of questions over propositions is not a matter of preference in the epistemic domain, what we want to say is that focusing in the kind of questions we can articulate will render us more propositional information than focusing on the justification of a particular proposition. The belief that the question aims to settle is expressed in propositional form, but arriving at it requires the process of inquiry. Presuming that things can be the other way round equates to claim that we know the answers before asking the questions, but in that case we do not really need the inquiring activity.

Thus, for example, if I ask questions as to how far a galaxy is from us I might also be interested in questioning for the methods to find out that distance and other scientifically interesting

questions: I could use that information in a creative way perhaps by questioning if that distance is actually stable or changing due the alleged expansion of the universe, or whether the distances represent some stage of the universe's development and the like. But common-day inquiries also are favoured: suppose I am interested in getting a flight from Helsinki to London: I can ask how to do the online booking and the like, but knowing that I can also ask about times when the price is low can actually help me save resources or optimise the flight, asking whether there are particular restrictions (even though my initial answers are settled), can make me change my mind about buying a deceivingly cheap flight and rather get another route, etc.

3. Questioning as inquiring

Our best way to understand concepts such as the concept of knowledge is by examining their role in regulating our inquiries. A dynamic conception of knowledge is suited to favour inquiry rather than the static picture: suppose I know that *p*, how can I take a dynamic stance in my propositional state of knowing it? I can maybe ask: what is the belief that *p* good for? And if I can have salient considerations that can impact other related concepts then I am in a good place to see if the consequences of knowing that p are promising to push knowledge forward, rather than contemplating a system of beliefs. Questions establish our cognitive goals, so therefore our progress in inquiry can be monitored and traced if we can discover to what extend we have answered a relevant question. Doing questions elicits salient considerations if an inquiry is to prosper. The way we know that these considerations keep being relevant is if we can keep asking surrogate questions that push the road of inquiry forward. The way of inquiry is effectively push if it has the following order: a question prompts a problem to solve, this generates more questions and subordinate inquiries and so on… this process, if it is properly bound by a continuous aim of solving a problem in the road of inquiry, represents a dynamic (as well as unified) view of our inferential activities.

Consider the case of a murder, if I am a detective it won't be any wise to ask: "who killed x?" I rather ask: who had any relevant relationship R that was relevant as a cause for the murder of x? A detective will have to know if she can keep asking questions that elicit explanations, but the most interesting thing is that the responses can be formulated in the interrogative mode and still be relevant.

4. Epistemic contextualism

Contextualism is a strand of epistemology that focuses knowledge-attribution not only in the proposition itself, but also in the situation in which the attributor of the proposition is. There are many versions of contextualism; many of them are aimed to defuse sceptical challenges, so as to permit to consider if a sceptic challenge is actually salient. I will avoid spending too much of this space explaining what the nuances of different versions of contextualism (for detailed accounts see Rysiew 2016). My aim is to show the reader that taking seriously our context can help us to be more sensitive to what a real doubt prompts. Contextualism, so understood, is the proposition that "knowing" is an activity that ought to be relevant to a context, the context is the situation that will require higher or lesser standards for some belief to count as knowledge. As I see it, contextualism does not strip away the importance of either truth or justification, but articulates these around the process of a living problem or a body of problems: truth is something we want to count as settled belief for a problem, and justification is the explanation of how this is so.

Consider cases in which two groups of people can have questions about a matter that depends highly in fallible hypotheses: imagine one group of people is a group that survived a shipwreck in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and happened to find themselves in a desert island. Now imagine that the other group of people is a team of relatives and rescue squads that have searched for them for months. After an extended period of time they start to entertain that there were no survivors: they fallibly, but steadily start to entertain that probably that will be the kind of proposition that will settle the matter. However, for the group of survivors the entertainment of that hypothesis is completely implausible, as they have survived! So in a way the context seems to give

reasons to the other group to entertain the no-survivors hypothesis, while the group of survivors needs to hold on to questioning how they might solve their conundrum of made themselves found. In the example presented, we can appreciate that the context of both groups (attributors of propositions) has entirely different epistemic scenarios about one question. The two groups do not claim to have contradictory knowledge about one situation, but differing contexts that render each of them different accesses to knowledge.

5. How questions can connect to contexts?

We can consider the value of questions in two ways: one of them is to look at the semantic content of the question itself; in which case we need to see whether is a "who-question", "why-question" etc. Questions also offer an explanatory contrast among competing explanations, so they seem as important as propositions to render inquiry going (Cross, Charles, & Roelofsen, 2016: 1). The semantic content of questions is a fundamental ability to use them properly, but it is not all there is to questions. Indeed, the other kind of considerations about questions is how they relate to contexts: if a question is relevant that will not be revealed by its semantic content, but the pragmatic considerations that the question releases. Suppose that I am interested in finding out whether a personality disorder, in the context of psychological inquiry, is an indicator of a mental illness: the semantic content will take me as far as identifying if there is a meaningful correlation between the two concepts. But if I want to discover whether this is the case for a particular person I also need to ask questions that have pragmatic considerations sensitive to the context of a patient such as questions of her personal history, family relations, and the like. The more a question produces a subordinate inquiry the more promising is, pragmatically speaking. But how to know if a question is sensitive to the context in pragmatic grounds. Keith DeRose, a prominent contextualist epistemologist, proposes the "rule of sensitivity" in these words:

> When it is asserted that some subject S knows (or does not know) some proposition P, the standards for knowledge (the standards of how good an epistemic position one must be in to count as knowing) tend to be raised, if need be, to such a level as to require S's belief in that particular P to be sensitive for it to count as knowledge. (DeRose, 1995, 36)

The activity of questioning, in my opinion, is the best way to find out what is relevant for a context, and how the knowledge-attribution gets its main property: salience. Salience is the fact that there is a relevant relation between a proposition and how an inquiry can be pushed forward. The value of the salience of a particular proposition can be put to a test if it renders responses that, as a subordinate inquiry, can be put in the interrogative mode.

Thus, for example, consider the case of a solicitor trying to find a way to excuse her client from the enforcement of a particular law due to an exceptional circumstances: she will need to ask different questions; possibly how the law can be interpreted, will have to find another cases that render flexibility to that interpretation in which she can ask why the law was interpreted otherwise. She will carry on finding evidence of different situations and in each case ask whether there are similarities to the context of her client. Only if there are enough subordinate inquiries the solicitor will be able to make her case for her client, and hence try to push for an exception to the usual interpretation of a law.

6. Fallibilism and Context-sensitiveness

Fallibilism and Context-sensitiveness Fallibilism, as the doctrine that our beliefs must be sensitive to error and our theories prone to correction entails a concrete philosophical character to any kind of inquiry. However, only philosophical inquiry is wide enough to encompass the consequences to adopt fallibilism. Fallibilism helps us to distinguish when a question is logically real and relevant as a real doubt prompting inquiry.

So a question is locally real (for a community) when that community recognizes some things as straight answers to it, and recognizes that some evidence would favour one of those answers over the rest (Hookway, 2008, 17), that it is its cognitive frame, but we must recognise that we do not hold absolute certainty for any of our beliefs. Even in well-settled beliefs as those coming from mathematics or logic, there is always room for improvement or revision (see Priest, Tanaka, and Weber, 2015).

Fallibilism is the negation that knowledge works as a fixed body of beliefs that remains unaltered and can be contemplated back without change. A fallibilist will rather consider that beliefs are, in Peirce's happy expression: strands of a cable rather than links on a chain: i.e., their effectiveness comes from the joint way they overlap with other relevant beliefs, but these are always developing.

This conclusive aspect of fallibilism is good news, though: it means that our cognitive interest meets a balance with our pragmatic interest, and makes our beliefs sensitive to context and, even more importantly, sensitive to error. In this paper this relationships between inquiry, the context-sensitiveness of beliefs and the importance of questioning will become apparent. Examples on how to apply these epistemic virtues beyond epistemology and philosophy will be shown.

Acknowledgments

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