Community-Based Attributor Contextualism:

A New Solution to the Problem of Other Minds

Overview

I propose a new response to the epistemological problem of other minds: the problem that as we cannot directly access another's mental states we cannot be justified in our claims to know that they have any. I develop a new version of Attributor Contextualism, which incorporates my reading of Wittgenstein's ideas about meaning in language. On this view, the meaning of the term 'know' is established by a community of language users taken as a whole. As the sceptic, in raising her sceptical challenge, fails to adhere to the community's criterion of correct application of the term 'know', she fails to say something coherent. My hypothesis, in brief, is that combining Attributor Contextualism with ideas from Wittgenstein, concerning a community of language users, provides a solution to the problem of other minds.

My thesis will draw upon, and contribute to, debates in at least two key sub-areas: Epistemology and Philosophy of Language. Regarding the first, the position I intend to develop will entail the denial of an invariantist account of the epistemic standards governing knowledge attributions. Concerning the second, according to my theory, 'know' should be viewed as akin to an indexical expression. Moreover, that others have minds (like our own) is a presupposition of the majority of the Social Sciences. For example, Economists attribute preferences to others while the qualitative research methods involved in much Sociology and Anthropology presupposes that we have ways of coming to know the contents of other minds. The issue is therefore an important one, not only because the sceptic's success has serious consequences for many areas within Philosophy and other Social Sciences, but because her success entails the falsity of an intuitive everyday belief: that others have minds.

My proposed supervisor, Sean Crawford, specialises in Philosophy of Language, Philosophy of Mind, and the Philosophy of Wittgenstein. Given my proposal's combination of elements from Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and mind with a Contextualist approach to the philosophy of language and epistemology, I believe Sean Crawford is well suited to oversee this project. My proposal can also draw on the expertise of many other members of staff in Manchester: for example, Thomas Uebel's work in epistemology, Graham Stevens' work on the semantics of indexicals, Julian Dodd's work on Wittgenstein, and Joel Smith's work on the problem of other minds. This expertise, combined with Manchester's excellent reputation in philosophy of language (demonstrated by its research institute 'The Manchester Centre for The Philosophy of Language') make it the most suitable place for me to carry out my research and prepare for an academic career in philosophy.

Position of research in literature

My thesis combines, and develops, ideas from DeRose's (2009) Attributor Contextualism with aspects of Wittgenstein (1953) and Kripke (1982). Attributor Contextualism (AC) claims that the truth conditions of knowledge-ascribing and knowledge-denying sentences will vary according to the context in which they are uttered. What varies is the epistemic standards

that a subject must meet in order for a knowledge-ascribing statement to be true, where the epistemic standards are relative to the context of the *attributor* (the person/s describing the subject as a knower or non-knower), and not the *subject*. My thesis puts forward the idea that the attributor of knowledge is best construed as a community of individuals. This idea concerning a community of language users stems from Wittgenstein, and my hypothesis is that it can resolve the problem of other minds when combined with elements of AC.

Wittgenstein's 'rule following considerations' (RFC) form the basis of his conception of how words can have meaning, hence how language is formed. The basic idea is that a word's meaning is its use in the language. Kripke's interpretation of this claim is that meaning is determined by a community of language users, who adhere to a criterion of correct and incorrect applications of the rules. In this way, rule following is essentially social.[1] I intend to draw upon the so-called Communitarian interpretation of Wittgenstein's RFC and apply it to AC.

In this way I contend the community *as a whole* acts as attributor: the community's context establishes whether a subject within that community is following a rule for the correct application of a term. If the subject complies with the community's (attributor's) rules, then the individual is said to be rule following. Therefore it is the community which establishes the meaning of the term 'know', hence establishes whether a subject is said to know. This is my Community-Based Attributor Contextualism (CBAC).[2]

My thesis is that the sceptic, in presenting her challenge to our knowledge of other minds, does not adhere to the community's correct use of the term 'know'. The sceptic raises the epistemic standards we must meet, in order to claim truthfully to know, to such a high standard that the term 'know' now has a different set of correct/incorrect applications. This augmentation of the rules distorts our ordinary meaning of the term 'know' in such a way that the sceptic's claim that 'it is false that we know others have minds' has a different, and incompatible, meaning to our ordinary claim to know this very thing. I will argue that this illuminates why traditional AC maintains that both our ordinary claim to know, and the sceptic's denial of this, are simultaneously true: our claims incorporate different, and incompatible, meanings of the term 'know'.

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[1] Here I am endorsing a Communitarian view of Wittgenstein's RFC. See Kripke (1982) and Malcolm (1989). Whether this is the definitively best interpretation of Wittgenstein's RFC is highly debated. However, in agreement with those such as Kusch (2006), I will defend this position and argue that the Communitarian interpretation presents us with a logically possible and consistent picture of the constitution of meaning by language use.

[2] Kusch (2002) presents a Communitarian Epistemology in which it is argued that the *existence* of knowledge is dependent upon the *existence* of a community. My CBAC agrees with this claim, but also argues that the *nature* of knowledge is dependent upon the *nature* of a community.

Thus, when I say 'I know x has a mind' my community determines the epistemic standards I must meet to claim truthfully to know x has a mind, and as I do meet these standards I can be attributed a true knowledge claim. A subject's (e.g. the sceptic's) context does not establish the truth/falsity of *this* knowledge claim; rather, the attributor's context does, which is the community of rule followers taken as a whole. The sceptic fails to determine the truth/falsity of this claim ('I know x has a mind') because the sceptic's denial of this doesn't share its meaning, and is incompatible, with my claim to know x has a mind.

<u>Methodology</u>

My solution to the problem of other minds takes the form of a theoretical diagnosis of the sceptical problem: I argue that the other-minds-sceptic has the wrong conception of the semantics of "to know" and consequently fails to present a coherent challenge.

My thesis is novel in its aim to combine AC and Wittgenstein's RFC. Where very recent literature has only alluded to a community aspect in Contextualism,[3] I formulate and explicitly develop this idea. My proposal is also distinct in its attempt to deal directly with the problem of other minds, where previously Contextualism has only dealt with external-world scepticism.

In addition, I present a different way to interpret the relation between Wittgenstein and scepticism: past interpretations applied Wittgenstein's remarks on epistemology, e.g. remarks about hinge propositions,[4] directly to scepticism. My application of Wittgenstein is original in its aim to interpret him within a Contextualist framework, taking a view of his RFC and using it to develop a new form of AC in response to the sceptical challenge.

In this way my thesis connects state-of-the-art philosophical issues with frequently contested ideas found in Wittgenstein exegesis, demonstrating a powerful new theory which can find a comfortable position amongst the current literature on Contextualism, the problem of other minds and debates concerning the interpretation of Wittgenstein.

Word count – 1500.

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[3] Greco (2008) suggests epistemic standards of knowledge attributions are restricted by the social function of knowledge, implying that knowledge isn't dependent on an individual attributor, but groups of individuals.

[4] Wittgenstein (1969). See Pritchard (2011).

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