

Further reply to Kasavin: Context, Meaning and Truth

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In my initial response to Kasavin's paper, I tried to clarify his position in sketching a different view of the relation between cognition and context. My objective now is to stress and to justify the difference between our two views of the relation of thought to context. According to Kasavin, we are simultaneously wholly free and wholly determined by context. I contend, on the contrary, that we are never wholly free, nor ever wholly determined by context.

In his rejoinder, Kasavin isolates three statements in my response that he maintains subtly misrepresent his position. He further clarifies his view with comments on what he calls underdetermination and the explanatory value of context before concluding with a remark on freedom and determination in reference to our disagreement. Let us leave aside the difficulty about whether I successfully captured his position in my initial response in order to concentrate on the present version of his view. According to Kasavin, "underdetermination" means "the complexity of determination". To elucidate this claim, he suggests the explanatory value of context, and he points out that different epistemic agents working independently achieve similar results.

I take Kasavin's central claim to be that we appeal to context to understand meaning. He rightly wishes to avoid an overly simplistic version of this point. I want to make a stronger claim since I think that context functions not only to understand meaning but also to justify truth claims. Kasavin gives examples from literature and from mathematics in which similar backgrounds led in practice to similar results. That is certainly the case, but it does not follow that if results in similar situations are similar that this justifies similar truth claims. I do not know how one could formulate a truth claim about the poems by Rilke, Svetaeva and Pasternak about Maria Magdalena. It is further unclear that the cognitive value of the independent discovery of non-Euclidean geometry by Gauss, Lobachevski and Bolyai depends in some way on their similar contexts. One might prefer, say, one version of non-Euclidean geometry over alternatives. But the correctness of a non-Euclidean approach to geometry depends in turn on prior views about what constitutes an appropriate approach to geometry, including current conceptions of geometrical proof, axioms, postulates, and so on.

"Underdetermination" is often taken to refer to the inability to decide which among several views is correct on rational grounds. Descartes, for instance, appeals to a form of underdetermination in his dream and his demon arguments. In both cases we cannot decide on rational grounds whether we are being deceived. Quine suggests that the available evidence is insufficient to decide which belief we should hold about the facts. In his view of the indeterminacy of translation, He famously insists on the poverty of evidence in his gavagai example. In philosophy of science underdetermination is often thought to be problematic for scientific realism.

Kasavin, who uses the term "underdetermination" in a different way, suggests that knowledge claims depend on context for meaning. That seems correct. Yet, since meaning is not truth, they need to be distinguished. There are many theories of meaning. There are also many theories of truth. Here we do not need to decide between different theories of meaning and truth. It will be sufficient to indicate a basic way that meaning and truth differ. A very rough way to put the point is that "meaning" refers to what the author conceivably has in mind, say in formulating a theory, but "truth" refers to the correctness of the cognitive claim. Thus "meaning" might imply a relationship between signs and that they stand for, but "truth" refers to the relation to the facts or reality. Hence, I am suggesting that meaning is more than simply identifying truth conditions since what someone has in mind, hence means to say, and whether that statement is correct, or true, are not merely equivalent.

I agree with Kasavin that context functions to identify meaning. Yet I also believe that context functions to justify or to legitimate claims to know. If that is correct, then the truth of the truth claim could be said to be doubly dependent on context with respect to meaning as well as to the acceptability of one claim over other possible contenders. Kasavin appears to me to be asserting a version of the familiar view that a claim to truth does not depend on but is rather independent of context. I take him to be saying that as concerns cognitive claims we are completely free, and that means we can in all cases and in fact must choose between different alternatives. On the contrary, I contend that we not free in the precise sense that our views of what is true are not independent of but rather dependent on the context in which they are formulated.

Let me give some examples to illustrate my view that truth claims depend on context. In the *City of God*, Augustine claims that 72 translators working independently in Alexandria at the same time arrived at exactly the same translation of the Old Testament word for word and syllable for syllable.¹ Augustine, who recounts this implausible story, believes the translators were inspired and that their translation is therefore true. He maintained this claim against St. Jerome, who later prepared a different, more accurate translation. I take Augustine to be saying that because of the context in which the translation was carried out, we can infer that the results are necessarily true.

Consider further the example of analytic philosophy as the paradigm of the correct philosophical approach. It will come as a surprise to no one that Western philosophy interested in the domain is still currently dominated by Anglo-American analytic philosophy that was invented by two undergraduates at the University of Cambridge at the beginning of the twentieth century. In part because Russell and Moore always differed in basic ways about how to approach philosophy, the analytic approach has never crystallized in terms of a single identifiable model. I believe that when the history of analytic philosophy is written it will turn out that it is not and never was a conceptually unified tendency even though there are conceptual commitments, such as the proscription

¹ See Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, edited and translated by R. W. Dyson, Cambridge: Cambridge, University Press, 1998, 883.

of idealism that analytical thinkers often share, a shared interest in metaphysical realism, a general disinterest in textual interpretation, and so on.

There are a number of identifiable analytic strategies, hence different interpretations of how to understand analytic philosophy. For present purposes, I will identify four variations on the analytic theme. One approach is the ongoing analytic effort to solve the semantic problem of reference whose proximal source lies in Frege, and which continues through Kripke and his successors. For a while there was a positivistic analytic strategy centering on the empirical criterion of meaning among those associated with the Vienna Circle. Perhaps the most familiar English-language version of this approach was associated with Ayer. Another strategy was the analysis of ordinary language associated, for instance, with J. L. Austin. A third form of analytic philosophy is the so-called linguistic turn identified by Rorty, what Quine called semantic ascent. Still another is the idea that analytic philosophical argument is in itself rigorous, which Gutting has recently identified above all with Kripke.² Since there are different analytic approaches, it remains unclear how to understand the claim that it is superior to non-analytic approaches.

Still another example can be drawn from the relation of cognitive claims to basic scientific trends, what Kuhn usefully calls paradigms. Kuhn gives the notorious example of so-called different worlds inhabited by Priestley, who explained combustion through phlogiston and by Lavoisier who appealed to oxygen.³ This kind of example runs through the history of science. What was acceptable as physical theory has changed greatly since the time of Aristotle, who favored qualitative science, through the Middle Ages, and then on to modern science emerging in the seventeenth century, which adopted a non-qualitative, quantitative approach to nature in a mechanistic view of the world system, which reached its peak in Newton, and then in our period when the main theories are relativity theory and quantum mechanics. A theory that, say, denied that light was deflected in the vicinity of a massive object would require a higher level of proof than a theory that accepted that point, which is central to the general theory of relativity that currently counts as an important constraint about what is acceptable.

My main point is very simple: cognitive claims are doubly dependent on context for meaning as well as for the capacity to make truthful assertions. In other words, context forms the horizon in which a claim can be said to be true or false. Kant thinks that the horizon of truth claims is *a priori*, hence forever fixed. Yet this argument is itself part of the ongoing debate, which is not an historical but rather historical, since it is subject to change as our views change. It follows that we are not and cannot ever be wholly free in Kasavin's sense of the term since cognitive value claims are not independent of, but rather dependent on, context.

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² See Gary Gutting, *What Philosophers Know: Case Studies in Recent Analytic Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

³ See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970, 118-122.