Pragmatism, truth and right:
Theoretical and Practical reasoning answered.

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Theoretical reasoning aims at *true* beliefs; however, it rarely can grasp it. So, it would be plausible to define rationality in beliefs by the property of being consistent and truth-conducive. The gap between our justifications and the truth has raised a seemingly irresolvable problem in analytic epistemology called Gettier' problem. Similarly, it seems that practical reasoning aims at *right* actions, but it doesn't follow that the action which is based on our practical reasoning would always be the right and the best one. The gap between our practical reasoning and the right actions has caused a huge debate between internalists and externalists about the criterion for rationality in normative reasoning (as opposed to motivating reasoning).

Recently some epistemologies and moral philosophers tried to explain away these two epistemological and practical problems on the basis of contextual approach. Epistemic contextualist tries to answer the Gettier problem based on their contextual

theory which accommodates all the Gettier' counterexamples. Likewise, moral contextualists have tried to make a middle path between internalist and externalist to solve the historical debate between Humean and Kantian on the nature of rationality in action. (Bernard Williams and MacDowell are two important contemporary representatives of internalism and externalism) (Afroogh 2019; 2020)

I believe that both these new approaches which help us to solve our epistemic and moral problems are pragmatic ones. Unfortunately, some analytic philosophers ignore the history of philosophy as well as other schools of thoughts like continental and American philosophy. I hope to show that how William James' pragmatism is the core idea in both theoretical and practical contextualism in analytic philosophy. In this paper, first, I will explain briefly the Gettier problem, and then, I will show how epistemic contextualism provide us with the best answers to this problem. In the second part, I shall briefly explain the debate between internalism and externalism as well as some moral considerations and counterexamples in this debate, and I will show how contextualism will help us in accommodate all the counterexamples and provide us with the best explanation in this regard. Finally, In the third part, I shall explain William Jams pragmatism and his theory of truth; then I hope to show that how his pragmatism is the central idea of

contextualism both in analytic epistemology and the problem of rationality in analytic moral philosophy. [1]

1- Gettier problem in contemporary epistemology

For a long time, it was generally accepted that "knowledge" can be defined as the justified true belief. It means that we, as language users, can legitimately say "I know that P" if and only if:

- P is true,
- I believe that P
- And, I am justified in my belief.

In "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" (1963), Edmond Gettier has proposed two counterexamples for this definition. One of his counterexamples is as follows.

> "Suppose that Smith and Jones have applied for a certain job. And suppose that Smith has strong evidence for the fol1owing conjunctive proposition: (d) Jones is the man who will get the job, and Jones has ten coins in his pocket. Smith's evidence for (d) might be that the president of the company assured him that Jones would in the end be selected, and that he, Smith, had counted the coins in Jones's pocket ten minutes ago. Proposition (d) entails: (e) The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. Let us suppose that Smith sees the entailment from (d) to (e), and accepts (e) on the grounds of (d), for

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[1]. For further readings on Pragmatism see, (Barzun 1983; Benoist 2005; Bernstein 2010; Carrette 2013; Edie 1987; Gale 1999)

which he has strong evidence. In this case, Smith is clearly justified in believing that (e) is true. But imagine, further, that unknown to Smith, he himself, not Jones, will get the job. And, also, unknown to Smith, he himself has ten coins in his pocket. Proposition (e) is then true, though proposition (d), from which Smith inferred (e), is false. In our example, then, all of the following are true: (i) (e) is true, (ii) Smith believes that (e) is true, and (iii) Smith is justified in believing that (e) is true. But it is equally clear that Smith does not KNOW that (e) is true; for (e) is true in virtue of the number of coins in Smith's pocket, while Smith does not know how many coins are in Smith's pocket, and bases his belief in (e) on a count of the coins in Jones's pocket, whom he falsely believes to be the man who will get the job."

In this example, Gettier shows that there can be a case such that all of the three abovementioned conditions are obtained, however, it is not intuitively a case of our "knowledge." Using *reductio ad absurdum*, he proves that these necessary conditions are not sufficient for the definition of "knowledge."

Following epistemologists have struggled to modify the definition of knowledge such that it excludes the Gettier's counterexample. Some of the other contributors tried to explain away such counterexamples, and still some other have tried to reproduce several kinds of Gettier case to show the inescapability of "Gettier cases." "Gettier cases" refer to some cases that there is JTB (the three conditions of justified

true belief); however, we intuitively don't count them as some part of our "knowledge."

1.1 Epistemic contextualism

Recently, some epistemologies (like Dretske, 1981) have argued that all the Gettier cases can be accommodated if we reform our definition of knowledge based on some contextual insights. They state that the condition of "truth" in the definition of knowledge, i.e., "True justified belief," is vague. They state that our usages of the word "knowledge" completely depend on the contexts we are using them. Our epistemic sensitivity is different in low-stakes and high-stakes situations, and it makes some important differences. Consider these two examples:

1- I feel pain in my head, but it is not a big deal. I had already the same problem, and I went to the hospital C, and I was treated very soon. I "know" that there are good physicians there.
2- I have got cancer, and I should go to visit some good physicians. I don't "know" whether or not there are some good physicians in Hospital C.

As it is clear, the first example is a low-stakes situation, and that case is not so sensitive. So, I can legitimately say that "I *know* that there are some good physicians there." However, the second example refers to a high-stakes situation, and it is really a high-stakes case. Therefore, I would be more sensitive about the truth conditions

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of the "knowledge" in that case, and I say "I *don't know* whether or not there are some good physicians in hospital C."

Contextualist believe that the contexts and the *pragmatic* sensitivity are so important, and we need to take it into our account while we are giving a definition of "knowledge."

2-Internalism vs. externalism: on the nature of rationality

In *Internal and External Reason* (IER), Bernard Williams proposes his influential theory, reason internalism. He argues, metaethically, for what considerations can be legitimately called reasons for action. After proposing two major interpretations of internalism and externalism, Williams, following Hume (based on the standard interpretation), radically claims that all considerations, which are capable of being called a reason for someone to do something, are internal reasons, and the only true reason-statements are those involved with an internal interpretation. According to Bernard Williams, "A has a reason to φ *iff* A has some desire the satisfaction of which will be served by his φ-ing" (Williams, 1979), and he modified his theory of reason in two ways. First, sometimes an agent has a reason, but just for the sake of being ignorant about that, she is not actually motivated toward action for that reason. Secondly, in the case of false belief, an agent come to be

motivated towards an action, while she lacks any reason for that act. Williams takes internal reason as the criterion for rationality, moral responsibility, moral judgment, blameworthiness, and prudentially (Williams, 1989). He also recognized reason externalism - which says "there is no such condition, and the reason–sentence will not be falsified by the absence of an appropriate motive" (Williams, 1979) - as a self-contradictory theory. (Afroogh 2019)

Williams' theory (in its standard reading) is distinguished from his Humean ancestor by an extended notion of desire (i.e., *subjective motivational set*) and a new conception of instrumental rationality. He defines the subjective motivational set as including more mental states than actual desires, like inclinations, beliefs, dispositions, etc. So, in some sense, it is not necessarily incompatible with some moral agent who would follow Kantian categorical imperative, *iff* the agent is motivated by them; however, even in this case, we have just extensional equality between internal and external reason, and it doesn't follow that the agent has an external reason. Furthermore, his conception of instrumental rationality involves both objective and subjective reason, which is clear in the examples of gin and tonic and ignorant agent.

Reason externalism, in contrast, is not committed to the abovementioned condition for having a reason and it defines reasons for an action independently of an agent's motivational set. Reason externalism is not radical in the sense that the

only reasons for actions are to be external, or that all of the true reason-statements are those with external interpretations. It also doesn't include all the extensions of practical reason (like in the case that you want to eat chocolate ice cream, so you do it). It is roughly limited just to some universal moral or rational rules like the Kantian categorical imperative. However, reason externalism is also, in some other sense, extreme. It states that all the agents, in its limited scope, have reason to do something, no matter whether they are motivated by these reasons or not, and no matter whether they are aware of this reason or not. According to externalism, in this limited scope, all people, regardless of the contexts in which they are, are equally responsible for their actions. They take the external reason as a criterion for rationality, moral responsibility, moral judgment, fare blames and prudential reasoning. (Afroogh 2021)

2.1- The central problem

The central problem in the debate of external and internal reason consists of some moral considerations which traced back to the major conflicts between the Humean theory of reason and Kantian categorical imperatives or other universal rational rules.

The rationale of most externalists is moral considerations. They believe, by *reductio ad absurdum*, that if they could not resist internalist's radical view (that there are no such things as an external reason), it entails some disastrous conclusion

for moral realism and moral absolutism. However, since practical reason is not limited to moral action and also due to the controversy of moral objectivity, the same consideration is also extended to some prudential reasons. Externalists believe that Hitler had several (moral) reasons to not murder thousands of innocent people no matter what motivation and desires he had. In contrast, according to the internalists, he had such reasons *iff* he was motivated to by those reasons. Another example, which is proposed by Bernard Williams, is that, according to the reason internalism, a man who is not motivated by some considerations to treat his wife well has no reason to do this. However, according to reason externalism, he has some reason to do this, no matter whether he is motivated by those considerations or not.

The rationale of reason internalism is also some moral considerations, and there are some other moral counterintuitive examples against externalism, too. One of the most important moral motivations of Williams' internalism is to defend the dignity of human beings and prevent externalists to simply ascribe all the agents equally to being irrational and being immoral, regardless of their mental states and desires. Protecting people from such a negative attitude (i.e., simply accusing people irrespective of their motivations) would be itself one of the major moral responsibilities for which we all are responsible. Consider a person in a primitive tribe who doesn't know anything about liberal democracy, and she has no such conception in her mind at all. She naturally resists all arguments for it as the best

political structure to govern every society. Given that liberal democracy is the best, according to externalists, she is an irrational and immoral person. However, according to Williams' reason internalism, we are not legitimate to accuse her of being irrational if she is not motivated by the arguments. Williams believes that external considerations are not a good criterion for our judgment irrespective of their mental states. We should analyze her being rational and moral in terms of the reasons which are *acceptable* for her in that contexts, at that moment.

2.2- Contextualist rationality

Theoretical rationality aims at *true* beliefs; however, it rarely can grasp it. So, it would be plausible to define rationality in beliefs by the property of being consistent and truth-conducive. Similarly, it seems that practical rationality aims at *right* actions, but it doesn't follow that the action would always be the right and the best one. It is completely relative to the contexts, and the pragmatic aspects are so important in this regard, and it is independent of the agent's actual desires and goals as well.

Contextual rationality believes that Hitler was not a rational agent. The notion of rationality is intuitively dependent upon morality in practice. Consider the following story.

Changzhou and Brayan recently became friends on Facebook. Changzhou is living with his tribe in a forest near the equator, and Bernie recently got an iPhone

for her. Bernie is a cultural activist who works with some charities in different countries. The presidential election of the USA is going to be held in two weeks, and Brayan, like some other people, is fully engaged in election campaigns. He talks with Changzhou about the election and the voting process in the USA, and he explains it to her, and he states that it is a usual political structure for choosing a president. Changzhou listens carefully to Brayan to get the idea of democracy; however, she is not sympathetic with Brayan, and she thinks that it cannot be the best way to choose a leader. She believes that his vote cannot be equal to his brother's, father or the vote of the head of the tribe. Brayan implicitly accuses her of being irrational, while he himself is going to vote for a racist and sexist person in the upcoming election!

If you think, like Brayan, that Changzhou is an irrational person, you are an externalist. If you think that Brayan himself, while he votes for racism and sexism, is a rational person, you are an internalist. If not, you probably are sympathetic with Bernie who believes in contextual rationality.

Bernie has been working in different cultures for a long time, and she is thoroughly familiar with cultural diversity and its origins and implications in the modern world. He knows that why in a war-ridden country carrying a weapon is forbidden, while in a country with completely peaceful history it is considered as an obvious right. From Bernie's point of view, it is immoral to accuse Changzhou of

being irrational, while it is fully reasonable to condemn Brayan for his immoral and irrational approach. Bernie believes that Brayan chooses to be a racist while he is living in a context in which it is not so difficult to learn about the reasons for human rights and against racism; Brayan knows them; however, he ignores them. Bernie believes that it would be morally wrong to recognize Brayan as a rational and moral person, even though he is instrumentally rational.

As it is shown, the central problem in the debate is some moral considerations for both reason internalism and externalism. Bernard Williams' theory of rationality and moral judgments is correlated with his internal reason, and according to his reason internalism, Brayan has no reason to change his mind about racism as long as he doesn't come to motivate by some of the reasons against it. Similarly, Hitler had no reason to stop killing people as long as he had not been motivated by some universal moral codes. Likewise, a person who treats her husband very badly has not any reason to change her treatments as long as she is not motivated by some reasons for the human rights. Externalists, *in contra*, believe that moral judgment and rationality should be established based on external reason, no matter whether or not the agent is motivated or even aware of these rules. So, they, like Brayan, easily accuse Changzhou of being immoral and irrational, ignoring the context in which she is.

The best way to define absolute rationality, such that it includes all the

intuitive extensions of rationality and moral judgment (like some people who are not properly brought up) and excludes all the irrational and immoral ones (like Hitler), is the *contextual* definition of rationality based on contextual reason. "A has a reason to φ," is true if the agent is aware of a reason and understands it *or* it is *contextually accessible* for the agent to be aware of a reason and make a sense out of it, no matter if she/he is motivated by that reason or not. Therefore, according to the contextual interpretation, Brayan has some strong reasons to stop supporting the racist candidate. Hitler has a lot of reasons to stop killing innocent people, and he is definitely an immoral and irrational agent. The agent who treats her husband immorally is definitely an immoral person if she has been brought up in a context in which the action is generally considered as morally bad one. Moreover, it is immoral to accuse Changzhou, who is not sympathetic with liberal democracy, of being irrational. The argument for liberal democracy is not simply understandable for her as much as Brayan. Needless to say, we are talking about judging the agent's action, not the action independently itself.

Certainly, our judgments about actions are entirely independent of the agent's mental states or the context. We can have an immoral person who is doing a moral action (in the case that Hitler is mistakenly condemning his Nazi fellow), or we can have a moral person who is doing an immoral action (in a case that a fair judge is condemning, based on some false evidence, an innocent people).

The contextual approach is based on a middle level of objectivity which is contextually accessible to the agent and is a way to avoid the central problems in both camps. It provides us with the best intuitive ground to give an intuitive explication of both relative and absolute notion of rationality, as well as fair, moral judgment and prudential reasoning.

3- William James' Pragmatism

William James is one of the great contemporary thinkers, and he has done some great interdisciplinary works between philosophy and psychology. His *The Principles of Psychology* (1980), is one of the most influential works in both fields, and it is full of novel and original ideas like his pragmatism both in theory and practice.

William James main goal in pragmatism is to reconcile between radical scientism and morality as well as the spiritual aspects of human being's life. He is going to solve this dilemma, and due to that, he talked about some mental states of human beings. He discussed the implications of his pragmatism in the theory of knowledge as well.

Pragmatism is a "mediating philosophy" which tries to show the significance of both external facts and internal aspects of human knowledge. It also takes the pragmatic significance of the consequent in its account of the truth. He claims that the pragmatism is not just limited to our practical life. It goes beyond that, and it

proposes that the best theory about truth is that based on the pragmatic significance of the propositions. He states that "truth" is what is good for us to believe. He says:

> "The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite assignable reasons. (1907: 42)
> *'The true,' to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as 'the right' is only the expedient in the way of our behaving.* Expedient in almost any fashion; and expedient in the long run and on the whole, of course. (1907: 106)" (Hookway, 2016)

He also says that:

> "Ideas … become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relations with other parts of our experience. (1907: 34)
> Any idea upon which we can ride …; any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, saving labor; is true for just so much, true in so far forth, *true instrumentally*. (1907: 34)" (Hookway, 2016)

This suggests that a belief can be made true by the fact that holding it contributes to our happiness and fulfillment. (Hookway, 2016)

It clearly shows that, according to William James, true beliefs are those which has useful usages for our concrete lives. Form this point of view, the true propositions are not just limited to the scientific propositions. It included a lot of spiritual

propositions as well. That being said, the question is that how James' pragmatism is the core idea of contextualism both in epistemology and practical rationality?

3.1- The pragmatic sense of epistemic contextalis

As I explained, contextualist in epistemology proposes that we can solve the Gettier problems by concentrating on the contexts as well as some pragmatic insights. They believe that "truth" is not a mind-independent condition for human beings' knowledge. The concepts of "truth" is relative to the contexts and its semantic varies in low-stakes and high-stakes situations. Most of the contextualists are analytic philosophers, however, it seems that such ideas have originated from William James pragmatism and his pragmatic theory on the nature of "truth." William states that true propositions are those which are good for our concert life and they are completely relevant to the context. So. It seems to me that William James original idea provides us with the best ground in analytic epistemology to answer Gettier problem. What is true in terms of contextualism epistemology is what is pragmatically useful in our concrete lives. The interesting point is that Williams James has proposed such novel idea about one century ago, and analytic philosophers just recently found it helpful for their goals.

3.2- pragmatic sense of contextual rationality

The central problem in the debate of external and internal reason consists of some moral considerations which traced back to the major conflicts between the Humean theory of reason and Kantian categorical imperatives or other universal rational rules.

Internalist focus just on the internal reason and rationality and they ignore some external facts which we need to take into our definition of rationality. In contrary, externalist proposes a very ideal and external theory about rationality irrespective of some fact on human beings' psychology. Contextual rationality is a mediating philosophy which takes both external facts and human beings psychology into account.

However, it seems that this mediating approach in analytic philosophy is not novel. Williams James' pragmatism provides us with the best ground to propose such moderate approach in the definition of rationality. According to William, rational (or write), actiosn are those which are good for our lives and have good consequences for us. It seems that contextual rationality is just a disguised version of William James pragmatism, and again the interesting point is that Williams James was much earlier than the analytic philosophers.

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