

This document is published in:

Analysis, (2009) 69 (3): 586-587.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/analys/anp048>

This is a pre-copy-editing, author-produced PDF of an article accepted for publication in *Analysis* following peer review. The definitive publisher-authenticated version: "Gaitán, A., Contextuality in Practical Reason By A. W. Price. *Analysis*, (2009) 69 (3): 586-587" is available online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/analys/anp048>

© The Analysis Trust

Contextuality in Practical Reason

By A. W. PRICE

Oxford University Press, 2008, XXXIV + 208 pp.

Anthony Price's recent book presents a contextualist approach to practical rationality. Price develops his proposal in four chapters. In the first one ('Practical Inference') he outlines a contextual account of the validity of practical inferences. This chapter deals with *logicism*. *Logicism* assumes that 'there is a form of rationality within practical thinking that connects with the logical validity of a practical entailment' (p. 7). Price argues that although the principles of logic are 'invariant and universal' (p. 23) their relevance in evaluating a practical inference is constrained by contextual factors related to the teleology of practical thinking and by the functional role of intentions in guiding our behaviour.

In the second chapter ('Practical Judgments'), Price argues that the content of A's remark to B - 'I must put in another 20p', while both stand together on an underground platform in front of a dispenser - must be interpreted *contextually*, i.e. as referring to a particular end of A (getting a chocolate) for which she needs to put in another 20p. The practical necessity is understood here as dependent on some constraints to be respected by A in the context of her utterance. Price rejects an *invariantist* reading of the proposition expressed by A and generalizes his proposal to other normative terms such as 'ought' or 'need'.

The third chapter focuses on 'how conditionals operate within practical reasoning' (p. 59). Here Price introduces a puzzle concerning such conditionals:

- (a) If you want to get drunk every evening, you should work in a bar
- (b) If you want to get drunk every evening, you should not work in a bar

Price assumes that (a) and (b) are not straightforwardly inconsistent. He further supposes that we should expect no inconsistency in the guidance that they offer. Now, if we affirm:

- (c) You do want to get drunk every evening

we get:

- (d) You should work in a bar
- (d*) You should not work in a bar

But (d) and (d*) provide inconsistent advice. How could we get inconsistent advice from apparently consistent demands? Price appeals to the virtues of *contextualism* to solve this paradox. Assuming that (a) and (b) stand for wide-scope requirements, Price appeals to a version of *defeasible detachment*. This variety of inference - one going from O ($p \rightarrow q$) and p to Oq - would deliver a solution to this puzzle if the conclusion were understood *contextually*. In our case we could move from a wide-scope version of (a) and (b) to (d) and (d*) only if we presupposed (c) and if we relativized the truth of (d) and (d*) to different contexts of utterance. In a given context (C1), by affirming (c) we would be taking into account the end of the agent. A wide-scope reading of (a) *in this context* would say that

working on a bar fits the agent's end of getting drunk. We could detach (d) from (a) by assuming a contextual paraphrase 'relative to his end of getting drunk'. In C2, on the contrary, by affirming (c) we would be attending to an implicit end – the agent's health. A wide-scope version of (b) *in this context* would say that not working in a bar fits the health of the agent. Here we could detach (d*) by assuming, again, a relevant contextual paraphrase - 'relative to the health of the agent'. Now it is easy to understand how (d) and (d*) can both be true at once without offering contradictory advice: both their truth-conditions and their advice are relativized to different contexts of utterance.

In the last chapter ('Reasons for Action') Price offers a contextualist treatment of reason-statements. Assuming Bernard Williams's conceptual framework, Price argues that there is no single set of truth-conditions for claims such as 'A has a reason to ϕ '. The truth-conditions of reason-statements are fixed by the context of utterance of the speaker. Different contexts of utterance will focus on different types of deliberation and these deliberative relativities will fix what is meant by saying that A has a reason to ϕ .

Price's book is an interesting and demanding piece of work. I would question Price's meta-normative framework. He seems to assume that even if an agent ought to work in a bar in a context C1 and ought not to work in a bar in a context C2, only in the latter case the demanded behaviour would be supported by reasons (p. 79 and 87). But why can't we argue that she has also a reason in C1, one grounded on the intrinsic value of *coherence* or *efficiency*? Price acknowledges this possibility at some stage. He ends by suggesting, however, that *coherence* or *efficiency* cannot justify a given combination of attitudes – at least not without presupposing some *positive* value to be promoted by being coherent or efficient (p. 118). But this reply is problematic. It leaves unexplained, for instance, why we ought to be instrumentally rational even in cases in which aligning our attitudes according to the instrumental principle would not promote any *positive* value.

ANTONIO GAITAN
Department of Philosophy
Universidad de Granada
Granada
Spain
agaitan@ugr.es