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## Putnam and the Contextually A Priori

Gary Ebbs

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“From its *seeming* to me--or to everyone--to be so, it doesn't follow that it *is* so. What we can ask is whether it can make sense to doubt it.” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §2)

When is it reasonable for us to accept a statement without evidence and hold it immune from disconfirmation? This question lies at the heart of Hilary Putnam's philosophy.<sup>1</sup> He emphasizes that our beliefs and theories sometimes prevent us from being able to specify how a statement may actually be false, in a sense of “specify” that goes beyond merely negating the statement. (To save words, from here on I will assume that to specify how a statement may actually be false, one must do more than just negate it.) In the 18th century, for instance, scientists did not have the theoretical understanding necessary to specify how the statement that physical space is Euclidean could be false.<sup>2</sup> Today, however, after Lobachevsky and Riemann discovered non-Euclidean geometries, and Einstein developed his general theory of relativity, scientists believe that physical space is non-Euclidean, and they can specify in rich detail why the statement that physical space is Euclidean is false. This shows that our current inability to specify how a statement may actually be false does not guarantee that we will never be able to do so. Nevertheless, when we cannot specify how a statement may actually be false it has a special methodological status for us, according to Putnam—it is *contextually a priori*.<sup>3</sup> In these circumstances, he suggests, it is *epistemically reasonable* for us to accept the statement without evidence and hold it immune from disconfirmation.<sup>4</sup>

Against this, many philosophers are inclined to reason as follows. “It is epistemically reasonable for a person to accept a particular statement only if she has epistemic grounds for accepting it. But a person’s inability to specify a way in which a statement may actually be false gives her no epistemic grounds for accepting it. Therefore, if the epistemic role of the statement for her is exhausted by her inability to specify a way in which the statement may actually be false, it is not epistemically reasonable for her to accept it.” Those who find this reasoning compelling typically conclude that if we want to show that it is epistemically reasonable to accept some statements without evidence, we must try to explain how it is possible for a person to have *grounds* for accepting some statements without evidence.

In my view, however, it is more illuminating to question the idea that it is epistemically unreasonable for a person to accept *any* statement—even one that she cannot make sense of doubting—unless she has epistemic grounds for accepting it. To question this idea, I will first clarify my use of some key terminology (§1), present a more detailed version of the skeptical reasoning sketched in the previous paragraph (§2), summarize my misgivings about standard responses to it (§3), and explain my strategy for disarming it (§4). I will then examine some of Putnam’s remarks about the contextually a priori (§§5-9), and argue that if a person is unable to specify any way which a statement may actually be false, she cannot make sense of the skeptic’s requirement that she provide grounds for accepting it (§§10-12).

## 1. Three constraints

I assume that the phrase “contextually a priori” contrasts with “contextually a posteriori”. These are terms of art that can be used in different ways; one must place constraints on their use before one can raise any interesting questions about how to apply them. As I see it, ideas we associate with the words ‘a priori’, ‘a posteriori’, and ‘contextually’ may guide, but do not determine, the proper use of “contextually a priori” and “contextually a posteriori”: these grammatically complex terms are *logically* simple. In addition, I place three preliminary constraints on my use of “contextually a priori,” “contextually a posteriori”, and related epistemic terms.

The *first constraint* is that the terms “contextually a priori” and “contextually a posteriori” apply to a person’s *reasons* for believing that S or her *entitlement* to believe that S, where ‘S’ is replaced by a particular use in a given context of a declarative sentence.<sup>5</sup> (I will often use “accepting that S” in place of “believing that S”, and “accept that S” in place of “believe that S”. I will also assume that a particular use in a given context of a declarative sentence S expresses a *statement*, and that ‘S’ stands in for such a statement.)

The *second constraint* is that a person has a *reason* for believing that S only if she can say *why* she believes that S *without presupposing that S*. (Although we sometimes say that a person has a reason for believing that S even if all her best attempts to explain why she believes S presuppose that S,<sup>6</sup> I will not use “reason” in this way.)

The *third constraint* is that a person has an *entitlement* (or is *entitled*) to believe that S if and only if she has no reason for believing that S—she cannot say *why* she

believes that S without presupposing S—but it is (epistemically) *reasonable*, in a sense yet to be clarified, for her to believe that S.

To highlight by contrast familiar examples of contextually a priori entitlements, I will now briefly describe examples of contextually a posteriori reasons and entitlements, and contextually a priori reasons.

Suppose you and I are watching a bird perched in a nearby tree; I say "That's a robin," and you ask, "How do you know?" I reply, "It has a red breast." I thereby offer you a *reason* why I believe that the bird is a robin.<sup>7</sup> This reason does not presuppose that the bird is a robin, but provides grounds for accepting that it's a robin. Suppose I *see* that the bird has a red breast, and wouldn't otherwise believe that it does. In this context, my reason—"It has a red breast"—is contextually a posteriori.

Now suppose that you and I both see that the bird has a red breast, I also *claim* to see that the bird has a red breast, and you challenge me to say how I know that I see that the bird has a red breast. Although it is completely obvious to me that I see that the bird has a red breast, I find I am unable to say anything persuasive or informative about why I believe this. Nevertheless, relative to the ordinary standards in that context, it seems I am *entitled* to believe that I see that the bird has a red breast even if can't give a reason for this belief. This entitlement is contextually a posteriori.

Well-constructed proofs of logical or mathematical theorems—proofs that may presuppose special axioms and rules of inference, but do not presuppose that the theorems in question are true—are examples of contextually a priori reasons for believing the theorems.

Unlike a theorem that I can prove, however, some statements are such that I cannot say why I accept them without presupposing that they are true. For instance, I cannot say why I believe that no statement is both true and false without presupposing that no statement is both true and false. Nevertheless, in ordinary contexts it seems *reasonable* for me to believe this. Thus it seems I have a contextually a priori entitlement to believe that no statement is both true and false. Similarly, as Putnam has emphasized, the belief that physical space is Euclidean was so basic for scientists in the 18th century that they could not say why they accepted it without presupposing it. (I will discuss this claim in more detail below.) Yet it seems that relative to the scientific standards at the time, it was *reasonable* for them to believe this. Thus it seems that scientists in the 18th century had a contextually a priori entitlement to believe that physical space is Euclidean.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. A skeptical challenge

Beliefs that we ordinarily take for granted in giving reasons for our claims—beliefs to which we seem to be *entitled* by ordinary practice—seem especially vulnerable to skeptical challenge. Consider our confidence that we have contextually a priori entitlements to accept certain statements. I am unable to give any reasons that support my belief that no statement is both true and false, for instance, but I nevertheless take it to be reasonable to accept it. Ordinarily no one would challenge me to say why it is reasonable to accept it. But suppose someone *does* challenge me to say why.<sup>9</sup> I might reply that I can't *make sense* of doubting that no statement is both true and false. But on further

reflection I would realize that my inability to doubt the statement is not a reason for thinking the statement is true. At best it explains why I *take* it to be true. Why then do I think is *reasonable* to accept the statement? I feel at a loss to answer this question, and so I begin to doubt that I have any contextually a priori entitlements, despite my initial confidence that I do.<sup>10</sup>

This skeptical reasoning implicitly depends on the assumption that our practices of making and evaluating statements commit us to four generalizations. The first is that

(1) Belief does not logically imply truth.

Our commitment to this generalization is reflected in our response to the skeptical question of why we think it is reasonable to accept our belief that no statement is both true and false. We realize that we cannot adequately respond to this challenge by citing our *conviction* that no statement is both true and false, since our conviction does not show that our acceptance of the statement is reasonable. We also realize that what counts as reasonable is intersubjective, in the sense that other participants in our search for knowledge should in principle be able to agree with us about whether it is reasonable to accept a given statement. Thus we seem committed to a second generalization about our epistemic practices:

(2) Epistemic reasons and entitlements are intersubjective.

The skeptical reasoning implicitly combines these two generalizations to suggest that

(3) It is epistemically reasonable for a person to accept a statement only if she has grounds for thinking that the statement is true.

The progression from (1) and (2) to (3) seems almost inevitable. Given (1) and (2), we cannot respond to a skeptical challenge by citing our conviction that the statement in

question is true. We therefore feel we must try to explain to the skeptic why it is reasonable for us to accept the statement. But it seems that any such explanation would in effect be a reason for accepting it. In other words,

(4) A person has grounds for thinking that a statement is true only if she has reasons for accepting it.

But if we have a reason for accepting a given statement, then according to the second and third constraints of §1, it is not a statement that we have an *entitlement* to accept. We therefore seem forced to the conclusion that we have no contextually a priori entitlements.

3. Can we accept (1)-(3) but reject (4)?

Many philosophers are inclined to accept generalizations (1)-(3) but reject (4). Some would argue that even if we have no reasons for accepting a given statement, we can have grounds for taking it to be contextually a priori if the psychological processes that led us to accept it reliably yield true beliefs.<sup>11</sup> Others would argue that we have a capacity for "rational insight" that enables us to know directly, without reasons, that a given statement that we take to be contextually a priori is likely to be true.<sup>12</sup> Yet others argue that we are entitled to accept some statements without providing any reasons for accepting them, because our acceptance of them is "constitutive" of the meanings of the words we use to express them.<sup>13</sup>

One problem with all of these approaches is that the skeptic of §2 takes (4) to be a *consequence* of (2), the generalization that reasons and entitlements are intersubjective.

Standard ways of trying to reject (4) are not designed to convince such a skeptic,<sup>14</sup> from whose perspective they amount to rejections of (2), on its most natural interpretation. Yet (2) is part of the reasoning that apparently supports (3), the crucial premise in the argument that leads to the skeptical problem that these theories are supposed to solve.

Another problem is that the standard rejections of (4) tend to conflate contextually a priori entitlements with a priori entitlements. They are at best vindications of traditional examples of a priori entitlements, such as our entitlements to accept basic logical inferences or “conceptual” truths, not of Putnam’s paradigm example of a contextually a priori entitlement--the entitlement of scientists in the 18th century to believe that physical space is Euclidean. According to the implicit meanings strategy, for instance, scientists in the 18th century were entitled to accept the statement that physical space is Euclidean without providing any reasons for accepting it *only if* their acceptance of the statement was “constitutive” of the meanings of the words they used to express it. We now know that the statement that physical space is Euclidean does *not* follow from the implicit meanings of the words that scientists in the 18th century used to express it: in the sense of meaning that is relevant to truth, we did not change the meanings of these words when we discovered that physical space is non-Euclidean. Hence the implicit meanings strategy cannot help us to avoid skepticism about such contextually a priori entitlements. Some philosophers try to make a virtue of such limitations of their epistemological theories by arguing that Putnam should not have used the word “a priori” (even qualified by “contextually”) to describe the 18th-century scientists’ attitude toward the statement that physical space is Euclidean.<sup>15</sup> But the



important question is how we are to understand the methodological status of such statements, not whether we call them a priori.

#### 4. My strategy

In contrast with these standard ways of reacting to skepticism about contextually a priori entitlements, I recommend that we question whether (3) applies to all statements, including those that we take ourselves to have contextually a priori entitlements to accept. I take for granted that (3) applies to *many* statements that we accept. But the skeptic's implicit argument for (3) is entirely general: according to the skeptic, (3) follows inevitably from (1) and (2), and, like them, applies to all statements. Perhaps (3) does *not* follow in this way from (1) and (2). It may be that (1) and (2) hold for all statements, but (3) does not. In particular, perhaps (3) does not apply to statements that we take ourselves to have contextually a priori entitlements to accept. If (3) does not apply to these statements, then the skeptical reasoning of §2 depends on an over-generalization, and the standard responses to the skeptical argument are confused and irrelevant.

My strategy is guided by the idea that a person who regards a statement S as contextually a priori cannot specify any way in which S could be false, and therefore cannot *make sense* of applying (3) to S, or of the skeptic's demand that she provide grounds for accepting S. To develop this idea I will explore some of Putnam's remarks about the contextually a priori. These remarks suggest an instructive but ultimately unsatisfactory reason for thinking (3) does not hold for all statements. I will explain why the reason is unsatisfactory, and then propose a better way of understanding why (3) does

not hold for statements that we take ourselves to have a contextually a priori entitlement to accept.

## 5. Conceptual schemes and contextually a priori entitlements

To explain why inquirers have contextually a priori entitlements to accept certain statements, Putnam once suggested that a statement can be “necessary relative to a given body of knowledge”:

... when we say that a statement is necessary relative to a body of knowledge, we imply that it is included in that body of knowledge and that it enjoys a special role in that body of knowledge. For example, one is not expected to give much of a reason for that kind of statement. But we do not imply that the statement is necessarily *true*, although, of course, it is thought to be true by someone whose knowledge that body of knowledge is.<sup>16</sup>

Strictly speaking, Putnam should not have spoken of necessity relative to a body of knowledge, since to say that a statement is necessary or that a belief is knowledge is normally to imply that it is true. Acknowledging this point, he now recommends that we speak of “*quasi-necessity*” relative to a “conceptual scheme”.<sup>17</sup> We must therefore ask,

(a) In what sense was the belief that physical space is Euclidean *quasi-necessary* relative to the 18th century scientists’ conceptual scheme?

and

(b) How does this show that it was reasonable for them to accept this statement without evidence?

I will address (a) in this section and (b) in the next.

Putnam's answer to question (a) is that scientists in the 18th century could not have revised their belief that physical space is Euclidean without developing a new theory of physical space. Contextually a priori statements

... can only be overthrown by a new theory--sometimes by a revolutionary new theory--and not by observation alone. Euclidean geometry was always revisable in the sense that no justifiable canon of scientific inquiry *forbade* the construction of an alternative geometry; but it was not always 'empirical' in the sense of having an alternative that good scientists could actually conceive.<sup>18</sup>

To understand this passage, one must know a little about the history of scientific theorizing about the shape of physical space from the 18th century until Einstein's development of the general theory of relativity.

Scientists in the 18th century did not distinguish between applied, or physical geometry and pure, or mathematical geometry.<sup>19</sup> It was only in the 19th century, after Lobachevsky, Riemann and others discovered that they could consistently describe mathematical "spaces" in which Euclide's parallel postulate does not hold, that it became possible to draw this distinction. The mathematical discovery of non-Euclidean geometries might have suggested to some that physical space may be non-Euclidean. Nevertheless, around 1830, when he first published his results, Lobachevsky called his new topic "imaginary geometry".<sup>20</sup> Even in the late 19th century, after Riemann had developed non-Euclidean geometries of curved surfaces, few philosophers or mathematicians took seriously the idea that physical space is non-Euclidean. They might have regarded it as in some sense an empirical question. But the sense in which the

question is empirical only became clear after Einstein changed the way we think about light and gravity. Einstein's general theory of relativity both showed how to make questions about the shape of physical space empirical, and convinced many physicists and philosophers that physical space is non-Euclidean.<sup>21</sup>

In the 18th century, scientists lacked many of the conceptual resources necessary to grasp this possibility. Their failure to see any alternative to their belief that physical space is Euclidean was not based in simple oversight or ignorance. Perhaps it took longer than it might have for mathematicians and physicists to come to see how physical space could be non-Euclidean. But the 18th century scientists' belief that physical space is Euclidean was not epistemically irresponsible. Their understanding of geometry and physical space prevented them from seeing alternatives to Euclidean geometry, and it was no simple matter for them to overcome this obstacle. A great deal of mathematical and physical theorizing was required.

Putnam thinks there are important methodological lessons to be learned from the history of our gradual realization that questions about the shape of space are empirical. In particular, he stresses that

Before the development of general relativity theory, most people, even most scientists, could not imagine any experiences that would lead them to give up, or that would make it rational to give up, Euclidean geometry as a theory of actual space; and this is what led to the illusion that Euclidean geometry was *a priori*.<sup>22</sup>

By describing the methodological roles of such sentences in our rational inquiries, Putnam tries to show that some statements are so basic for us at a given time that it would not be reasonable to give them up at that time, even if we have no guarantee that they are

true. He tries to convince us that if a person cannot specify any way in which a statement S may be false, then she has a contextually a priori entitlement to accept S, even if someone else, or she herself at some later time, can specify a way in which S may be false.

In short, Putnam's answer to question (a)--“In what sense was the belief that physical space is Euclidean *quasi*-necessary relative to the 18th century scientists' conceptual scheme?”--is that scientists in the 18th century had not yet developed the mathematical and physical theories that would later make it possible to specify a way in which their belief that physical space is Euclidean may actually be false. The idea is that this limitation of their “conceptual scheme” *explains* why they were unable to specify any way in which their belief that physical space is Euclidean may actually be false.

## 6. The conceptual scheme explanation

Let us now consider question (b)--“How does this show that it was reasonable for them to accept this statement without evidence?” Note first that Putnam's explanation of why the scientists were unable to specify any way in which their belief that physical space is Euclidean may actually be false does *not* show that they had any epistemic grounds for accepting it, or that it was likely to be true. If one accepts that (3) applies to the statement that physical space is Euclidean, then one will conclude that it is epistemically irresponsible to accept the statement unless one has grounds for accepting it. Since Putnam's explanation of why the 18th century scientists accepted the statement strongly suggests that they had no grounds for accepting it, his explanation seems

relevant only to psychology, not methodology (epistemology). Yet Putnam insist that "... the difference between statements that can be overthrown by merely conceiving of suitable experiments and statements that can be overthrown only by conceiving of whole new theoretical structures—sometimes structures, like Relativity and Quantum Mechanics, that change our whole way of reasoning about nature—is of logical and methodological significance, and not just of psychological interest."<sup>23</sup> How can we make sense of this?

Consider the following explanation. "Suppose we regard a statement as contextually a priori in Putnam's sense. Then our present system of beliefs—our conceptual scheme—*prevents* us from specifying any ways in which that statement may actually be false. To make sense of doubting such statements we would need to develop a new way of thinking, one that goes beyond our current understanding. But if we cannot specify any alternatives to a given statement, and no one else shows us how to do so, then that we cannot see how the statement could be false, and so we cannot make sense of applying (3) to it. For the same reason, we cannot understand the skeptic's demand that we give grounds for accepting it. Hence Putnam's description of the role of contextually a priori statements is of methodological (epistemological) interest: it dissolves the skeptical challenge of §2."

This is what I will call *the conceptual scheme explanation*. I will raise three problems for it (in §§7-9), and then suggest (in §§10-12) a better way of understanding why (3) does not apply to statements we treat as contextually a priori.

## 7. Two preliminary problems for the conceptual scheme explanation

The first problem is that there are statements that count as contextually a priori according to the constraints in §1 that are not contextually a priori according to the conceptual scheme explanation. For instance, Frege had no difficulty understanding Russell's explanation of the contradiction that arises in Frege's logic. Frege's assumption that his logic was consistent was therefore not contextually a priori according to the conceptual scheme explanation. Yet prior to Russell's letter, Frege could not specify any way in which his logic was inconsistent. He could not offer any *reasons* to back up his assumption that his logic was consistent, either. He was exacting and precise about all his assumptions, however, and in this sense his belief was reasonable. It therefore seems that according to the constraints in §1, Frege had a contextually a priori entitlement to believe that his logic was consistent. Yet according to the conceptual scheme explanation, his belief was not contextually a priori, since it did not lie deep in his system of beliefs—he could immediately see that Russell's paradox undermined his belief that his logical system was consistent.<sup>24</sup>

A natural reply to this objection is that the conceptual scheme explanation concerns a slightly different topic from the topic that is implicitly defined by the constraints in §1. Suppose this is so. Still, the conceptual scheme explanation does not show why it was reasonable for Frege to accept that his logic was consistent. It also suggests that since there is no deep explanation of why Frege did not see that his logic was inconsistent, (3) applies to Frege's belief that his logic was consistent, so, given (4), it was *not* reasonable for him to accept it without providing reasons for it.

This suggests a second, more serious objection to the conceptual scheme explanation: we have no criterion for determining whether or not our current failure to specify a way in which a particular statement may actually be false shows that the statement is contextually a priori in the proposed sense, or whether we are just overlooking something that we would immediately recognize as a way of specifying how the statement may actually be false. Let's say that a statement is *deep* for a person if and only if she would have to develop a fundamentally new way of thinking even to conceive of how that statement may actually be false. Suppose that you are unable to specify a way in which a given statement S may actually be false. The difficulty for the conceptual schemes explanation is that you cannot tell whether or not S is deep for you. Tomorrow you might discover that you overlooked something, just as Frege was surprised when he read Russell's letter. But if S is not deep for you, then the conceptual schemes explanation gives us no grounds for claiming that (3) does not apply to it. And if (3) does apply to it, then you are vulnerable to the skeptical reasoning presented above, because you are unable to provide any grounds for accepting the statement.

#### 8. Two arguments by analogy

The most serious problem with the conceptual scheme explanation is that the imagined methodological perspective from which our statements are classified as deep or not deep for us apparently licenses an argument by analogy that would enable us to make sense of applying (3) even to statements that *are* deep for us. To understand this



argument by analogy, it helps to consider first a simpler argument by analogy that is easier to disarm.

*First argument by analogy*

The simpler argument may be stated as follows. “Suppose we cannot presently specify a way in which a given statement S may actually be false. We nevertheless know that some statements that once seemed beyond doubt in this sense are now regarded as false. Based in our experience with such statements, we feel we understand how statements that we once regarded as beyond doubt can come to seem doubtful, and even false. By analogy with such statements, it seems that we can make sense of the possibility that S is false, even though we cannot now specify any way in which S may be false.”

According to this simple argument by analogy, we understand the skeptic’s suggestion that S is possibly false, so (3) applies to S, and it is therefore unreasonable to accept S unless we have some reason to think it is true. In this way, the argument by analogy suggests that (3) applies to *all* our statements. Once again, however, if (3) applies to all our statements, we are vulnerable to the skeptical challenge presented above: unless we can provide some reason for thinking that a given statement S is true, it is unreasonable for us to accept it; we therefore have no contextually a priori entitlements.

But the argument is too simple. The natural response to it is that the analogy fails. There is a crucial difference between statements that once we could not doubt but now we can doubt, and statements that we cannot now doubt. The fact that once we could not

doubt but now we can doubt a particular statement only establishes that we are fallible, and that our failure to be able to doubt a particular statement in no way guarantees it is true. This does not go beyond (1), so it does not establish that (3) applies to statements that we now regard as contextually a priori. Our fallibility does not by itself give any meaning to the claim that a particular statement may actually be false. If we cannot specify a way in which it is false, then merely mentioning our fallibility will not help us to specify a way in which it may actually be false.

*Second argument by analogy*

A more challenging argument by analogy results when we supplement the first with a description of the methodological roles of our statements. As we saw in §7, Putnam says that contextually a priori statements are "quasi-necessary" relative to a "conceptual scheme". This suggests that we can describe the methodological roles of such statements, and thereby explain *why* investigators regard them as "quasi-necessary" relative to their "conceptual scheme".

The appeal of this kind of explanation can be explained as follows. We now see that scientists in the 18th century did not simply fail to consider ways in which their statement that physical space is Euclidean may actually be false; their beliefs and theories *prevented* them from doing so. But we don't have this retrospective understanding of the centrality of any of our *current* beliefs. Tomorrow we might find that we overlooked something that we could easily have seen today. This suggests that to take ourselves have a contextually a priori entitlement to accept a given statement S, we must assume that S is deep for us, so our failure to specify ways in which S may actually be false is not

due to a simple oversight on our part. To classify statement S as contextually a priori for us now is therefore to take a certain methodological perspective on our own current beliefs—to assert that our acceptance of S is deeply imbedded in our “system” of beliefs, and that is *why* we find ourselves unable to specify a way in which S may actually be false.

Supplemented with this methodological perspective, the first argument by analogy is transformed into a second argument by analogy that can seem more persuasive (though I will question it below). As before, the argument begins with the observation that we are now able to doubt some statements we were previously unable to doubt. Thus a contextually a priori statement may end up being doubtful, even false. The argument then continues as follows. “Statements that we currently regard as contextually a priori are from a methodological point of view no better off than those that we regarded as contextually a priori in the past. By *methodological analogy* with cases in which statements actually became doubtful, we can make sense of the possibility that a statement we now treat as contextually a priori is false, even though we cannot now specify any way in which it could be false.”

Like the first argument by analogy, this argument suggests that we understand the skeptic’s claim that a statement we now treat as contextually a priori may actually be false, and that it is therefore unreasonable to accept the statement unless we have some reason to think it is true. In this way, the second argument by analogy suggests that (3) applies to statements that we take to be a contextually a priori, and so the strategy of answering the skeptic by denying that (3) applies to statements we regard as contextually a priori fails.

## 9. Limits of the second argument by analogy

Sometimes Putnam characterizes contextually a priori statements in a way that leaves our acceptance of them vulnerable to this second argument by analogy. In "There is at Least One A Priori Truth," for instance, Putnam contrasts contextually a priori statements with "absolutely" a priori statements--statements that "it could never be rational to revise", and thereby suggests that to call a statement contextually a priori is to say that it could someday be rational to revise it.<sup>25</sup> This conception of contextually a priori statements suggests that we understand how some contextually a priori statements may actually be false, even if we cannot now *specify* a way which they are false.<sup>26</sup>

Even if it is successful in some cases, however, there are limits on the application of the second argument by analogy. As Putnam emphasizes in "There is at Least One A Priori Truth," we can make no sense of the suggestion that it may be reasonable some day to give up the minimal principle of contradiction, according to which not every statement is both true and false. This limits the argument by analogy by emphasizing that we do not have even the *vaguest*, purely methodological idea of how we could end up accepting that every statement is both true and false.<sup>27</sup> Hence it shows that (3) does not apply to the minimal principle of contradiction.

By blocking the argument from analogy for the minimal principle of contradiction, this reasoning suggests that we can discredit the skeptical challenge in this case. Nevertheless, the second argument by analogy suggests that many of the statements that we now take ourselves to have a contextually a priori entitlement to

accept may actually be false. In this way, the second argument by analogy suggests that (3) applies to these statements. This leaves us vulnerable again to the skeptical reasoning of §2. To accept this reasoning is to think that almost all cases in which we take ourselves to have contextually a priori entitlements are of psychological interest only, and tell us nothing about which statements it is epistemically reasonable to accept. In this way, the methodological perspective that lies behind the conceptual scheme explanation and the second argument by analogy apparently undermines the assumption that contextually a priori statements are of methodological and not only psychological interest.

#### 10. The second argument by analogy disarmed

Despite its initial appeal, the second argument by analogy is really no better than the first one. The first one fails because the fact that we have been wrong in the past is not a reason for thinking it we are wrong now; at most it shows that we are fallible. The second analogy aims to provide an *additional* reason for thinking we understand how a statement that we now regard as contextually a priori may actually be false. The additional reason is suggested by the conceptual scheme explanation of why we are entitled to accept some statements as contextually a priori. According to that explanation, we are entitled to treat a statement as contextually a priori only if it is deep for us. But to make sense of the claim that a statement we now accept is deep for us, we must imagine that we can describe the “methodological role” of this statement in our current “system” of beliefs. The problem is that from our current perspective, the most

we can do to clarify the methodological role of a statement that we currently accept without evidence is to search for ways of specifying how it may actually be false and report on the results of our search. Looking back on our previous beliefs, we can distance ourselves from them enough to see that in some cases we were prevented from entertaining alternatives. But we cannot take this kind of perspective on any belief that we *now* regard as contextually a priori. To imagine that we can is to imagine that we accept the belief *because* our current “conceptual scheme” prevents us from seeing any alternatives to it. But that is not a *reason* for accepting a belief. Someone *else* might be able to explain our acceptance of the belief in this way, and perhaps we will be able to explain it in that way at some future time, but right now we cannot take this perspective on it. To take this perspective on it is to undermine it. And this explains what is wrong with the second argument by analogy: the fact that we can look back on our previous beliefs and see that in some cases we were prevented from understanding alternatives to them does not show that we can make sense of the claim that our *current* beliefs prevent us from understanding alternatives to the beliefs that we now regard as beyond doubt.

The methodological perspective that the second argument by analogy tries to apply to our current beliefs only makes sense from a third-person perspective. We are tempted to think that we can take up this third-person perspective on our own current beliefs by the conceptual scheme explanation, which suggests that we cannot trust the beliefs that we now treat as contextually a priori unless we assume that they are deep for us. But the most we can coherently claim about the methodological status of beliefs we now regard as contextually a priori is that we cannot specify any ways in which they may actually be false. If we were convinced that our failure to see ways in which the

statement may actually be false is due to some kind of limitation of our “conceptual scheme”, we would no longer take ourselves to be entitled to accept the statement. To take ourselves to be entitled to accept the statement, however, is not to take ourselves to have some kind of guarantee that we will not find out that we are mistaken. There is a crucial distinction between admitting we are fallible, even about whether it is possible to make sense of doubting a particular statement, on the one hand, and concluding that we *understand* how the statement could actually be false, on the other. Both arguments by analogy elide this distinction.

In short, what the argument from analogy overlooks is that *to make sense of doubting a given belief one must be able to specify a particular way in which the belief may actually be false*. A corollary is that human fallibility is not by itself a reason for doubting any of our beliefs.<sup>28</sup> For this reason, (3) does not apply to a statement if we cannot specify any way in which it may actually be false.

At any given time we accept some statements that we cannot doubt, in the sense that we are unable to specify any ways in which they may be false. When we accept such statements, we cannot coherently distinguish between those that are revisable and those that we could never reasonably reject. Hence we can't make sense of Putnam's suggestion (discussed in §9 above) that some statements are "absolutely a priori". If we cannot now specify any way in which a particular statement we accept may actually be false, we cannot be sure that we will *never* be able to make sense of giving it up without changing the topic. Nor can we be sure that we *will* someday be able to make sense of giving it up without changing the topic. The most we say is that given our current understanding of the topic, *we see no way* to give up those statements without changing

the topic. Since we see no way to give up those statements without changing the topic, we cannot make sense of applying (3) to them. Hence the skeptic's demand that we give grounds for these statements has no content for us.

I conclude that if a person accepts a statement S and she cannot specify a particular way in which S may actually be false, her acceptance of S is epistemic bedrock for her, for the moment, at least, and she cannot *make sense* of the skeptic's "demand" that she give grounds for accepting S. In these circumstances, she has what I call a contextually a priori entitlement to accept S.

## 11. Intersubjectivity

Suppose Alice can specify a way in which a given statement S may actually be false but Bob cannot. In these circumstances, Bob has a contextually a priori entitlement to accept S, but Alice does not. In effect, Alice and Bob have arrived at different conclusions about whether it is reasonable to treat S as contextually a priori. This seems to conflict with (2), according to which epistemic entitlements are intersubjective.

As I understand (2), however, it requires only that two inquirers should always be able to discuss and, in principle, to agree about whether a given person can specify a way in which a given statement may actually be false. When the two inquirers are discussing the beliefs of a third person, without including her in the conversation, they should be able to agree about whether she can specify a way in which a given statement may actually be false. Things become more complicated if two inquirers together discuss the question whether one of them can specify a way in which a given statement may actually



be false. Inquirers often share the background beliefs that are relevant to determining whether or not they can specify way in which a given statement may actually be false, and so they often agree about which statements to treat as contextually a priori. But there could be two inquirers, the first of whom can specify a way in which a given statement may actually be false, the second of whom cannot. The complication is that if they communicate about this, the second person may learn from the first one how to specify a way in which the statement may be false.

This can happen, for instance, in a case where one of the inquirers knows very little about a topic, and the other is a respected authority about it. Most students first learning about the shape of space are unable to doubt that it is Euclidean, because that is the only notion of physical space that they have.<sup>29</sup> Once they learn more geometry and physics, or read popular explanations of discoveries in these areas, they learn that it is possible to doubt that physical space is Euclidean. Before such a student learns enough to make sense of doubting that physical space is Euclidean, she has a contextually a priori entitlement to accept it. Her entitlement is intersubjective in the sense that anyone who properly understands how she thinks about physical space will see that she cannot specify any way in which that statement may actually be false.

But one might think that if she cannot specify any way in which that statement may actually be false, then she cannot *learn* from someone else that this statement is true: if she hears someone utter the words "Physical space is not Euclidean," she should not take these words at face value; she should instead try to reinterpret them in a way that fits with what she already believes.<sup>30</sup>

This reasoning overlooks the fact that we typically take each other's words at face value unless we have good reason in a given context not to do so. What counts as a good reason of this kind is something that we can only discover by looking carefully at what we *actually* count as a good reason of this kind. For instance, we know that the British-English word "football" is translated by the American-English word "soccer"; if a British person says "Brazil has an excellent football team," we have good reason not to take his term "football" at face value. We all know, however, that a student first learning about physics typically has no good reason not to take the words of her teachers at face value, even if prior to her studies, she cannot make sense of doubting that space is Euclidean. Similarly, scientists who discover radically new theories typically take themselves to be talking about the same topics into which they were inquiring before they came up with their new theories. In practical terms, this means that scientists often take themselves to use the same words with the same denotations, both at a given time and over time. Speakers of the same language typically take each other's words at face value in this way. Sometimes, as in the "football" example, there's good reason not to do so. But a person's present inability to make sense of doubting a given statement S is not by itself a good reason for her to refuse to take at face value a fellow speaker's utterance of the negation of S.<sup>31</sup> She will naturally want an explanation of how S could be false. Once she hears the explanation, however, she may begin to see how S could be false, and she may even be convinced that S *is* false.<sup>32</sup>

This observation should also dispel the worry that if a speaker has a contextually a priori entitlement to accept a statement S, then her acceptance of S cannot be challenged or criticized. One might think that by *relativizing* our understanding of when

a person has a contextually a priori entitlement to accept a statement S to our understanding of whether she can specify a way in which S may actually be false, we commit ourselves to an *epistemological relativism* according to which some statements are so basic to a person's way of looking at the world that no one who does not accept those statements can challenge or criticize her acceptance of them. As the example of the student who learns about non-Euclidean geometry and the general theory of relativity shows, however, a person may *lose* her contextually a priori entitlement to accept a statement S by learning how to specify ways in which S may actually be false. In this case, we see that at one time she had a contextually a priori entitlement to accept that physical space is Euclidean, because at that time she could not specify any way in which the statement could be false. Now that she is learned more, however, she no longer has a contextually a priori entitlement to accept that physical space is Euclidean. Whether or not she has a contextually a priori entitlement at a given time to accept a statement S depends on whether at that time she can specify a way in which S may be false. The relativity about whether or not a given speaker has a contextually a priori entitlements to accept a sentence S does not insulate her acceptance of S from all challenges or criticisms, since she may have a contextually a priori entitlement at one time to accept a given statement S, and later lose that entitlement, because she has learned how to specify a way in which S may be false.

This sketch of the sense in which our practice of attributing entitlements is intersubjective partly elucidates (2), according to which reasons and entitlements are intersubjective. It also partly elucidates (1), by reminding us that we are fallible, and that our acceptance of a belief does not make it true. At the same time, however, we have

concluded that if a speaker cannot specify a way in which a given statement may actually be false, then she cannot apply (3) to it, and she cannot make sense of the skeptic's demand that she provide grounds for accepting it. We can therefore accept (4)—the observation that one has grounds for accepting a given statement S if and only if one has reasons for accepting it—without committing ourselves to skepticism about contextually a priori entitlements.

## 12. Conclusion

The conceptual scheme explanation creates the confused impression that we can *explain* why it is reasonable for us to accept some statements by saying that they are deep for us—that we would not be able even to make sense of giving up the statements unless we developed a new way of thinking about them. The trouble is that we cannot make sense of the claim that a sentence we *now* accept is deep for us. We might be able to make sense of this at some point in the future. But to say that a sentence is deep for us is to say that our failure to be able to specify a way in which it is false is explained by a *limitation* of our current conceptual scheme. And if we were convinced that our current acceptance of the statement is explained by a conceptual limitation of this kind, we would no longer accept it.

Our discovery of our own previous conceptual limitations shows us that our estimations of whether it is possible to specify a way in which a given statement may actually be false are fallible. But this fallibility by itself does not give any content to the claim that a given statement that we now accept is deep for us. Without any

understanding of this explanatory claim, we cannot make sense of the analogy that is supposed to give content to the conceptual scheme explanation. We cannot make sense of the imagined perspective from which our current beliefs, taken together, constitute a “conceptual scheme” with built-in limitations on our ability to specify ways in which some of our statements may actually be false. For the same reason, we cannot make sense of the idea (discussed in §9 above) that among the statements we now accept there are some that we could *never* reasonably reject. This idea has content only if we can contrast such statements with other statements that are deep for us, but revisable. Since we cannot make sense of the idea that some statements we now accept are deep for us, we cannot make sense of the idea that some statements we now accept are “absolutely a priori,” in the sense that we could never reasonably reject them.

The moral is that we cannot *explain* or *justify* our current contextually a priori entitlements. To have such entitlements is just to rely on statements that we find ourselves unable to doubt. In many cases this reliance is unreflective, yet reasonable: if challenged, we would not be able to make any sense of the possibility that the statement is false. In other cases, we persistently search for ways of specifying how a statement that we accept may be false, and fail to find any. Since we fail to find any, we cannot make sense of applying (3) to the statement, and we cannot make sense of the skeptic’s demand that we provide grounds for accepting it. In both kinds of cases, if we have not irresponsibly ignored clues or hints about how to specify a way in which the statement may be false, we are epistemically entitled to accept it.

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<sup>1</sup>I present some of my reasons for this claim (though not the claim itself) in my paper “Realism and Rational Inquiry,” (in Christopher S. Hill, ed., *Philosophical Topics, Volume 20* (1992): 1-33), and in chapters 6, 7, and 9 of my book *Rule-Following and Realism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997). Putnam himself once wrote: “I think that appreciating the diverse natures of logical truths, of physically necessary truths in the natural sciences, and of what I have for the moment lumped together under the title of framework principles--that clarifying the nature of these

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diverse kinds of statements is the most important work that a philosopher can do. Not because philosophy is necessarily about language, but because we must become clear about the roles played in our conceptual systems by these diverse kinds of truths before we can get an adequate global view of the world, of thought, of language, or of anything." (Hilary Putnam, "The Analytic and the Synthetic," reprinted in Hilary Putnam, *Mind, Language, and Reality: Collected Papers: Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 41)

<sup>2</sup>Probably no scientist in the 18th century would have said, "Physical space is Euclidean." We may summarize the 18th century scientists' views of space in this way only if we keep in mind that in fact their acceptance of Euclidean geometry was expressed by their commitment to such principles as that straight lines cannot form a triangle the sum of whose angles is more than 180 degrees. We now know that this principle conflicts with the view that a straight line is a path of a light ray, and that in some regions of space-time, paths of light rays form triangles the sum of whose angles is more than 180 degrees. See Hilary Putnam, "The Analytic and the Synthetic," 46-50. To save words, in the rest of this paper I use "the statement that physical space is Euclidean" as shorthand for a family of related principles that we would now call Euclidean.

<sup>3</sup>In "Two Dogmas' Revisited," reprinted in *Realism and Reason: Philosophical Papers: Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 87-97, Putnam writes: "... there are statements in science which can only be overturned by a new theory--sometimes by a revolutionary new theory--and not by observation alone. Such statements have a sort of 'apriority' prior to the invention of the new theory which challenges or replaces them: they are contextually a priori." (95)

<sup>4</sup>As far as I know, Putnam has not used the phrase "epistemically reasonable" in this way. But his remarks about the methodological significance of contextually a priori statements suggest that he could endorse this way of expressing his view.

<sup>5</sup>We can define further applications of these phrases by using these primary ones. For instance, we can stipulate that a person's belief that S is contextually a priori (or a posteriori) for her if and only if she has a contextually a priori (or a posteriori) reason for believing or an entitlement to believe that S, and that S is contextually a priori (or a posteriori) for her if and only if she believes that S and her belief that S is contextually a priori (or a posteriori) for her.

<sup>6</sup>For instance, some philosophers believe that by appealing to semantical rules for using our logical connectives, we can give good reasons for accepting the inference rule modus ponens, even though we must rely on modus ponens to give those reasons. This use of "reason" is suggested by what Michael Dummett says about the justification of deductive inferences in his paper "The Justification of Deduction," in Michael Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Cambridge: Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 290-318.

<sup>7</sup>This example is modeled on J. L. Austin's goldfinch example, from his paper "Other Minds," reprinted in his *Philosophical Papers*, third edition, edited by J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 76-116; the goldfinch example is discussed on pages 77-86.

<sup>8</sup>Recall that I use "the statement that physical space is Euclidean" as shorthand for a family of related principles that we would now call Euclidean. See note 2.

<sup>9</sup>Many statements we accept are so basic to our way of thinking that we can see no point in asserting them or questioning them. It is only in the context of a skeptical challenge that we would become aware that we accept them at all. Are they genuine statements before we are aware of accepting them? The answer depends on what is meant by "statement". I use this word in a way that covers both acknowledged and unacknowledged commitments, where the commitments themselves are understood partly in terms of the inferences a person draws from sentences she explicitly asserts.

<sup>10</sup>The skeptical reasoning presented in this section resembles the "Agrippan" skepticism that Michael Williams describes on pages 61-63 in his book *Problems of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). It applies to contextually a posteriori entitlements, too. But the skeptical challenge to contextually a posteriori entitlements must be treated differently from the skeptical challenge to contextually a priori entitlements, so I will not address it in this paper.

<sup>11</sup>Georges Rey, "A Naturalistic A Priori," *Philosophical Studies* 92 (1998): 25-43.

<sup>12</sup>Laurence Bonjour, *In Defense of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and Jerrold Katz, *Realistic Rationalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup>Paul Boghossian, "How Are Objective Reasons Possible?" in *Philosophical Studies* 106 (2001): 1-40, and "Knowledge of Logic," in P. Boghossian and C. Peacocke, eds., *New Essays on the A Priori* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 229-255. See also Christopher Peacocke, "Explaining the A Priori: The Programme of Moderate Rationalism," in *New Essays on the A Priori*, op. cit., 255-286.

<sup>14</sup>For instance, speaking about a skeptic who would challenge his explanation of why it is warranted for us to accept modus ponens, Paul Boghossian writes: "We cannot accept the claim that we have no warrant whatsoever for the core logical principles. We cannot conceive what such a warrant could consist in... if not in some sort of inference using those very core logical principles. So, there must be genuine warrants that will not carry any sway with a skeptic." (Paul Boghossian, "How Are Objective Reasons Possible?" 36.) By "warrant" Boghossian means what I call "grounds". This passage therefore expresses Boghossian's choice to reject (4).

<sup>15</sup>See Jerrold Katz, *Realistic Rationalism* (MIT, 1998), page 49. For a similar objection, but without explicit reference to Putnam, see Georges Rey, "A Naturalistic A Priori," *Philosophical Studies* 92 (1998): 25-43, pages 28-29.

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<sup>16</sup>Hilary Putnam, "It Ain't Necessarily So," in Hilary Putnam, *Mathematics, Matter, and Method: Philosophical Papers: Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 240.

<sup>17</sup>Hilary Putnam, "Rethinking Mathematical Necessity," in Hilary Putnam, *Words and Life*, edited by James Conant (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 245-263; the new formulation is presented on 251.

<sup>18</sup>Hilary Putnam, "Two Dogmas' Revisited," op. cit., 95

<sup>19</sup>Hans Reichenbach, *The Philosophy of Space and Time*, Maria Reichenbach and John Freund, translators, (New York: Dover, 1958), chapter 1.

<sup>20</sup>Carl B. Boyer, *A History of Mathematics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968) p. 587.

<sup>21</sup>Laurence Sklar, *Space, Time, and Spacetime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), chapters II and III.

<sup>22</sup>Hilary Putnam, "There is at Least One A Priori Truth," in Hilary Putnam, *Realism and Reason: Philosophical Papers: Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 98-114; quotation from 99.

<sup>23</sup>Hilary Putnam, "It Ain't Necessarily So," op. cit., p. 249. Putnam still endorses this passage from "It Ain't Necessarily So," which was published in 1962. In "Rethinking Mathematical Necessity," op. cit., Putnam writes "... there are at any given time some accepted statements which cannot be overthrown merely by *observations*, but can only be overthrown by thinking of a whole body of alternative theory as well. ... I insisted (and still insist) is that this is a distinction of methodological significance." (251)

<sup>24</sup>Frege's reaction to Russell's letter was more complicated than this brief characterization suggests. In the appendix to his *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik*, Volume II, Frege shows how to derive Russell's contradiction within Frege's own *Begriffsschrift*. But, as Michael Kremer pointed out to me, Frege also suggests that the derivation shows that some expressions of his *Begriffsschrift* have not been given any *Bedeutung*. Since Frege rejected the idea that deduction can be understood purely formally, he might have thought that his "derivations" of Russell's contradiction were not genuine derivations at all. Nevertheless, Frege found these "derivations" compelling enough to give up his basic law (V). In his letter to Russell dated June 22, 1902, six days after Russell sent Frege his famous letter about the contradiction, Frege wrote, "Your discovery of the contradiction has surprised me beyond words and, I should almost like to say, left me thunderstruck, because it has rocked the ground on which I meant to build arithmetic. It seems . . . that my law V ([*Grundgesetze*] §20, p. 36) is false. . ." (*The Frege Reader*, edited by M. Beaney (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 254.) In the appendix to *Grundgesetze*, Volume II, where Frege shows how to "derive" the contraction within his *Begriffsschrift*, he concludes at one point that "law (V) itself has collapsed." (*The Frege Reader*, op. cit., p. 284.) The change in Frege's attitude toward law (V) came about very swiftly, without the development of a fundamentally new theory of logic; in this respect it was unlike the change in attitude toward Euclidean geometry that Putnam highlights in his accounts of the contextually a priori.

<sup>25</sup>Hilary Putnam, "There is at Least One A Priori Truth," op. cit., 99.

<sup>26</sup>Putnam doesn't always describe contextually a priori statements in this way. In "Rethinking Mathematical Necessity," op. cit., he writes that "...if we cannot *describe* circumstances under which a belief would be falsified, circumstances under which we would be prepared to say that  $\neg B$  had been confirmed, then we are not presently able to attach a clear *sense* to "B can be revised." In such a case we cannot, I grant, say that B is "unrevisable," but neither can we intelligibly say "B can be revised." (Hilary Putnam, "Rethinking Mathematical Necessity," op. cit., 253-254.)

<sup>27</sup>We must keep in mind, however, that our current inability to doubt the minimal principle of contradiction is not a reason for thinking that it is true. To make sense of asking for or providing such a reason, we must be able to make sense of the "possibility" that the statement is not true. If we can not make sense of the "possibility" that every statement is both true and false, we cannot make sense of raising any substantive question about whether the minimal principle of contradiction is true, and therefore it is a confusion to suggest that we have some reason to think it is true. For this reason, it is misleading to say that the minimal principle of contradiction is a priori. It is better to emphasize that we can make no sense of the "possibility" that every statement is both true and false.

<sup>28</sup>This point is well expressed by J.L. Austin in "Other Minds," op. cit. He writes that "being aware that you may be mistaken doesn't mean merely being aware that you are a fallible human being: it means that you have some concrete reason to suppose that you may be mistaken in this case." (p. 98) In *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), Stanley Cavell develops this point in rich detail, yet without just *dismissing* skeptical challenges, as Austin was inclined to do.

<sup>29</sup>One might think that a speaker could accept the statement that physical space is Euclidean, for instance, without having any idea of what physical space is or of what it is for physical space to be Euclidean, hence without being able to specify any way in which physical space may actually be Euclidean. Similarly, one might think, such a speaker can also make sense of the negation of the statement that physical space is Euclidean even though she is unable to specify a way in which the statement may actually be false. This objection overlooks the crucial point that to count as expressing the thought that physical space is Euclidean by using the sentence "Physical space is Euclidean," a speaker must be at least *minimally* competent in the use of the words that occur in the sentence, and this involves having some idea of what thought is expressed by using that sentence. I explain this point about minimal competence in chapter seven of my book *Rule-Following and Realism*, op. cit., and in my paper "A Puzzle about Doubt," forthcoming in S. Nuccetelli, ed., *New Essays on Semantic Externalism and Self-Knowledge* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003). The same observations about minimal competence can also be used to correct a misunderstanding of "understanding." It might seem that to understand a statement that  $p$  one must be able to distinguish circumstances in which  $p$  is true from

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circumstances in which  $p$  is false. But this would imply that to understand the statement that  $p$  one must be able to specify a way in which  $p$  may be false, and therefore that no one understands any statements that I call contextually a priori. This overlooks our ordinary criteria for taking a person to be competent in the use of a sentence, hence to have at least a minimal understanding of the thoughts she expresses by using it.

<sup>30</sup>Donald Davidson's principle of charity leads inevitably to this unacceptable conclusion (despite his occasional claims to the contrary), for reasons I explain in my paper "Learning From Others," *Noûs* Volume 36, Number 4 (December 2002): 525-549.

<sup>31</sup>The relationship between what we can make sense of doubting, and what we can understand another person to have said is subtle and context-sensitive. I know of no easy generalizations about this relationship. To understand it better, one would need to look carefully at what we would say in practice to a wide range of cases in which the limits of what a person can make sense of doubting are apparently challenged or extended by what another person writes or says.

<sup>32</sup>Similarly, a mathematics student who is unable to see how a certain solution to a mathematical problem she is trying to solve could possibly be correct is not thereby entitled to believe that the proposed solution is incorrect. If the proposed solution comes from a trusted and authoritative source, such as an accomplished mathematician or a respected textbook, she should suspend her belief until she understands it better.