

*Consequences of Contextualism: Commentary on “The Contextual Quasi-Factivity of Objectual Understanding” by Daniel Wilkenfeld.*

Frank X. Ryan

Kent State University

Daniel Wilkenfeld has made an interesting and well-reasoned contribution to the fledgling field of the epistemology of the understanding. In this commentary I'll contend that his argument for quasi-factivity, while very much on the right track, can be fortified with considerations of uses and consequences whose origins lie in classical pragmatism.

Wilkenfeld claims that the function of understanding is neither wholly factive nor non-factive, but quasi-factive—that is, contextually constrained yet underwritten by true beliefs. In doing so he considers an argument from Catherine Elgin to the effect that understanding can occur in the absence of facts. According to Elgin, we'd allow that Chris, who believes humans are descended from apes, has a greater understanding of evolution than Hunter, who believes we're descended from butterflies, even though Chris's view is not factually true. Her other example involves the Ideal Gas Law, which confers understanding despite not being underwritten by truth.

Unlike J. L. Kvanig, who regards Chris' view as less than full “understanding,” Wilkenfeld claims that Chris possesses a legitimate understanding Hunter does not because

Chris' "central beliefs are true." So whether his understanding is genuine or not depends upon the context—in this case he adequately understands the general process of evolution, though not the lineage specific to humans.

Wilkenfeld next extends the argument to include the crucial point that *use* of an object is integral to our understanding it. Scientist A who is right about the conductivity of a metal but wrong about its tensile strength will affirm that understanding by constructing a wire that fulfills her expectation. On the other hand, Scientist B, despite having the same beliefs, will disclose her lack of understanding should she try to construct a bridge with this metal.

The lesson I take from this example, however, is somewhat broader than Wilkenfeld's: A fuller understanding of the properties is achieved only a *consequence* of *both* constructions. At the outset of either it is only a hypothetical or proleptic understanding; understanding per se is not realized unless an expectation is fulfilled or thwarted by an actual consequence. And note, in conjunction with this, that the scientist who builds the collapsing bridge actually achieves a better understanding of the properties of the metal than the one who successfully constructs a conductive wire, yet retains a false belief about its strength.

The *experimental* condition imposed here reminds us that just being "right" about something fails to meet Wilkenfeld's essential criteria of understanding as an *entitlement*, for we can be right about something by accident or a happy coincidence. Entitlement demands we must be able to *demonstrate* our understanding by pointing to concrete cases that have justified our belief. Externalists, of course, are eager to confer knowledge whenever my belief is *true*, with some window dressing about "epistemic virtue." But understanding regarded as genuine *entitlement* seems to require contexts of *use* with demonstrable *consequences*.

Wilkenfeld tentatively distinguishes understanding from knowledge by suggesting that understanding is a *cognitive achievement* of human-world transactions, whereas knowledge is an epistemic relation to “abstracta such as propositions.” He’s skeptical of any close affinity between them, inasmuch as understanding, but not knowledge, is often enhanced by felicitous falsehoods; and that context, while integral to understanding, is (at best) limited to setting forth the conditions of the threshold of knowledge.

I’m less skeptical about this. I find even the suggestion of invariantism at best unnecessary, and at worst incomprehensible. A contextualism of *entitled consequences* doesn’t just pick and choose between invariant “facts of the matter;” instead, it plays an integral role in what those “facts” must be for us. And if contexts are contexts of *use* with determinable *consequences*, then understanding is a relation between our hypotheses and these consequences. “Knowledge,” *on these terms*, is bestowed upon consequences so assured and stable as to be *accepted as facts*: the inert core, to paraphrase William James, of the living tree of understanding—useful as sturdy “guiding principles” in the diagnosis and resolution of new encountered problems, but incoherent as denizens of “ultimate” reality.

Or let’s put it this way. Given Kvanvig’s assessment that those who *know* are non-accidentally connected to the truth, why not embrace the “non-accidental” as implicating the a broad contextualism of *use* culminating in the entitlement of consequences, rather than a milder contextualism content to set conditions of the threshold of knowledge?

Though I don’t think it affects the basic argument and options, let me conclude with a peripheral comment about the opening sections of the paper. The exposition of factivity is confusing—presenting us with three statements that seem inconsistent:

“Factivity is a property of propositions.”

“Propositional knowledge [is] understanding-that.”

“Factivity “seems not to arise for understanding-that.”

Though there’s a discussion of the connection between understanding-that and understanding-why, there is no clear definition of either objectual knowledge (understanding-of) or factivity per se. Is objectual knowledge the understanding of objects? If so, how is the so-called propositional understanding “I understand it is raining outside” also not objectual?