

# REPLIES TO CRITICS

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ABSTRACT: This text brings together replies to three commentaries on my *Description of Situations: An Essay in Contextualist Epistemology* (Springer, 2018) written by Modesto Gómez-Alonso, Anna Boncompagni and Marcin Lewiński.

KEYWORDS: hinges, infallibilism, pragmatism, revisionism, scepticism

## 1. Reply to Gómez-Alonso

Modesto Gómez-Alonso's commentary provides a remarkable overview of my main lines of argument in *Description of Situations*.<sup>1</sup> As he stresses right at the beginning of his text, I am not interested in epistemic contextualism to place all the emphasis, as many others do, on the social dependency of our knowledge claims and the relativism that is often associated with such a perspective. My interest in contextualist epistemology lies, quite differently, in connecting what is necessarily context-sensitive with an objectivity that must be presupposed if we wish to have a realist view of the world. Our daily practices clearly show that we are realists through and through, but one of the most vexing outcomes of philosophical analysis is how realism can vanish so quickly. On the one hand, the fact that our knowledge attributions are context-dependent seems to leave no room for any reality other than the physical reality behind our language drills. On the other hand, the recognition that subjectivity plays a decisive role in the constitution of experience brings to light sceptical worries which are by no means easy to overcome. Interestingly enough, contextualists argue that scepticism can be surpassed if we assume that epistemic standards simply vary according to the situations at stake. The high demand for certainty that takes place in the context of a philosophy class to illustrate the sceptic's view actually contrasts with the relaxed standards we usually make use of to know the very same things. Notwithstanding this ingeniously pragmatic response to the problem of scepticism, there is a specific aspect of the problem that contextualism cannot cope with: modality. This is at the core of radical scepticism.

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<sup>1</sup> Nuno Venturinha, *Description of Situations: An Essay in Contextualist Epistemology* (Cham: Springer, 2018).

As Gómez-Alonso observes, all my effort in *Description of Situations* was to guarantee, in his apt words, “that *the closure of knowledge and the openness of experience are compatible*.” It leaves me epistemologically uneasy that my typing these remarks here and now will not constitute a state of affairs that forms part of the world and exists independently of my knowing it. That is what “closure of knowledge” in this context is about. Regardless of there being no one else around in my room capable of noticing this state of affairs, it must belong to the history of the world. Everything that is now happening without being noticed by anyone also belongs to what is called in the book a “depository” of states of affairs. Of course, by arguing this way, I am left with the complicated job of explaining where this depository has its headquarters and how on earth it relates to individual consciousness. The variety of individual representations is just what promotes the “openness of experience” Gómez-Alonso refers to. David Lewis said he was a realist about possible worlds.<sup>2</sup> Well, I am a realist about *actual* states of affairs. I guess the majority of physicists would say: “We all are!” Still, this is of little help to convince some anti-realist philosophers.

Gómez-Alonso claims that much of *Description of Situations* was “inspired by a *non-dualistic reading* of Kant” in regard to cognition. I do, in fact, devote the entire Chapter 9 to his transcendentalism but I would not go that far. Gómez-Alonso also claims that I subscribe, in a McDowellian way, to “the *discursivity thesis*” and he then proposes another non-dualistic approach, one in which we would have an “*original form of consciousness*, one the ‘knowledge’ of which is intuitive (non-discursive) and immediate.” According to Gómez-Alonso, this can be taken “not as an alternative but as *complementary* to Venturinha’s method.” Let us see if it works.

Gómez-Alonso introduces an important distinction, “the distinction between contextual and trans-contextual truths (and facts),” and also speaks about “perspectival and trans-perspectival truths.” The realm of the “trans-contextual” or the “trans-perspectival” would be that of a possible world which does not need to be made actual by a given context or perspective. As Gómez-Alonso notes, this “helps to accommodate objectivity, at least in the sense that trans-perspectival truths are analogous to transcendental rules.” But he keenly recognizes that in the eyes of a “metaphysical realist” what is at stake is the very fact of reality. As an advocate of metaphysical realism, I do not think that trans-contextualism or trans-perspectivism is required to explain that, for instance, my cellar comprises such and such wines, which are at such and such a stage of bottle development, etc. It could be argued, however, that this realistic assumption is possible because it is

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<sup>2</sup> David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 1–5.

made by me, who already *knows* the bottles and can represent them. But what about that which has never been experienced at all? I would not say that it belongs to a possible world. My view is that it is as actual as the objects I have before me. Indeed, I go as far as to claim that any unknown situation is ontologically context-determined. It does not matter whether the *context of reality* can be captured by us. No doubt it will not be entirely captured. But when we capture some aspect of it, this cannot be the result of *our* situated knowledge. What is happening with my bottles, including those processes I am completely ignorant about, is happening in our actual world. If I came to learn some of those processes, I would be in a condition to make knowledge claims that are context-sensitive, though my context-sensitivity should be taken as subordinated to that of reality itself. Gómez-Alonso is aware of what it means to hold this position. That is why he cuttingly writes that “it is this notion of reality in itself that makes radical scepticism not only possible, but also intractable.” What a philosophical misadventure that it is the most forceful realist who opens the door to the radical sceptic!

How then can scepticism arise? What can lead us to cast doubts about things which it seems so natural for us to take for granted? Gómez-Alonso avers that “Venturinha’s crucial insight is that far from being conjunctively related, sensitivity and conceptual awareness are *internally* related in human cognition,” in such a way that “it is *rational activity* that is the special way in which we humans are responsive to external reality.” Gómez-Alonso’s strategy, as indicated above, is to conceive of this “sensitivity” as something that is not rationally absorbed, but has a life of its own. In order to render this mechanism possible, it must be “grounded in a sort of primitive, foundational, *factive awareness*,” he says. I absolutely agree. The problem with this view is that “awareness” only springs from an individual who already integrates the given in his or her subjectivity. One might say—and I would fully endorse it—“What I’m aware of is real.” But this will not detain the sceptic. I should point out that this sceptic is not some baffling creature that philosophers are prone to allude to. The most impetuous sceptic is obviously an uncondescending interlocutor who, like Wittgenstein’s imaginary opponent in the *Philosophical Investigations*, can be found in ourselves. Gómez-Alonso suggests, following Ernest Sosa’s lead, a kind of “constitutive awareness” which, more than representing reality, *presents* it. Despite its practical aptitude, the “immediate identity of subject and object of awareness” that is required by this form of intentionality would be no less problematic than Husserlian phenomenology is—and Gómez-Alonso has a note reminding the reader of my worries about it in Chapter 10 of the book. What does he recommend? That “conceptual awareness” be thought of as involving “*spontaneity* and *constraint*,”

with the latter being the necessary imposition of the world upon our cognitive capacities. Somewhat like Kant, we could say that: “Thoughts [viz. spontaneous acts] without content are empty, intuitions [viz. constraints] without concepts are blind.”<sup>3</sup> However, it is not exactly so since Gómez-Alonso argues that “the *transcendental disunity of the self* [would be] a necessary condition for the possibility of self-awareness.” While in Kant an intuition can only be given according to a transcendental scheme, the domain of what can constrain us would have to be completely de-transcendentalized in order to avoid any kind of idealism. But Gómez-Alonso knows that we are inexorably tied to “the universal configuration of thought and awareness” and that in the end “nothing in thought comes from the outside.” This is what fuels the modal problem in Kant, as I explain in Chapter 9 of the book.

My struggle against the correspondence theory of truth, including the Kantian one, in Chapter 3 was precisely meant as an attempt to de-subjectivize such “universal configuration.” The epistemological programme of *Description of Situations* makes traditional correspondism implode to give way to reality, which determines the multiple possible accesses to it—including our own. Herein lies my interest in Wittgensteinian “hinge epistemology” that Gómez-Alonso also discusses. Following Duncan Pritchard, I see hinges as “arational commitments”<sup>4</sup> that manifest—not only for us, rational beings, but for a number of other animals—the primacy of the real. They somehow occupy the place left by the Tractarian elementary propositions consisting of ultimate ontological links with the world. Without those hinges, there would be no connection between inner and outer, no possibility of forming higher-order beliefs like those we have. They are thus the best weapon against scepticism. For the anti-realist interpreter of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, hinges will simply point to what in a certain linguistic milieu of social practices came to be more or less naturally conventioned—therefore leaving the sceptical problem unresolved. In a different way, I take hinges to be the primary contextual factors that situate us in experience. Gómez-Alonso’s conclusion is that our “feeling of reality” should be accorded a special status, that of an “ultimate fact,” which, to use Kant’s jargon,

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<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, edited and translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B 75.

<sup>4</sup> Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of our Believing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 71.

will correspond neither to “matters of opinion” nor to “facts” (of knowledge) but merely to “matters of belief.”<sup>5</sup> The same, I am convinced, can be said of hinges.

## 2. Reply to Boncompagni

The focus of Anna Boncompagni’s insightful commentary is the conflict between fallibilism and infallibilism, more specifically my “endorsement of a form of infallibilism.” In opposition to the Lewis-inspired epistemological approach I take in *Description of Situations*, Boncompagni sets out to defend the coherence of a fallibilist view such as articulated by Stewart Cohen. As she puts it, “claiming that we know something and at the same time acknowledging that it still might turn out that we are wrong is not only possible, but pretty common.” Boncompagni illustrates this by mentioning those cases in which we reflect upon our previous epistemic position and realize that “we *thought* we knew something,” even if there was a justification for thinking so, when after all “we actually were wrong.”

Let me begin by making two comments on this. The first is that there is an important difference between recognizing that we could be wrong about what we claim to know *and* realizing in retrospect that we were under the illusion of knowing it. I can be very much convinced that I know a multitude of things and still leave room for reconsideration. What happens in this case is that my presumptive knowledge will remain in force unless it is proven otherwise. This is completely different from arriving at the conclusion that my *knowing* this or that was in fact a mere presumption of knowledge. So where does fallibilism fit here? On the one hand, if the fallibilist’s point is to underscore that we could always be wrong, including about what remains unshaken, then the outcome is not so much that our knowledge is *fallible* but *revisable*. Some epistemologists make no distinction between fallible and revisable knowledge, but it is one thing to affirm that knowledge can be defective or unreliable and quite another thing to say it can be subject to revision. On the other hand, if the fallibilist wants to stress that our knowledge has already been proved erroneous sometimes, and will probably be so again, then fallible knowledge would be identifiable only retrospectively. Thus, it does not seem to make much sense to be a fallibilist since either you conjecture that you may well be mistaken about your knowledge claims, while nevertheless maintaining them, or you simply admit that you were wrong about certain things,

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<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, edited by Paul Guyer; translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 467.

but now you know them.<sup>6</sup> In other words, either fallible knowledge is projected as possibly being the case in the future or it is projected as having been the case in the past—it is never a reality in the present. As an epistemological program, fallibilism is a mere expression of suspicion, which can sit more comfortably with revisionism.

My second comment concerns the kind of revisability involved in a fallibilist view. The diagnosis made by the fallibilist that our knowledge is fallible—more accurately, that it can be or was fallible—does not apply to the generality of the things we know but to particular elements of our worldview. We can revise some of these elements, for example that Italian is not the only official language in Italy and that German is also spoken in the autonomous province of South Tyrol. In doing so, we look at our previous claim not as faulty but as incomplete. Even if we could be utterly wrong about something, like proponents of geocentrism were until the imposition of heliocentrism as the correct astronomical model, there cannot be a collapse of all aspects belonging to that picture. Not everything in the Ptolemaic model was evidently discarded. Copernicus kept the idea that the orbits of the planets were perfectly circular, although they would be found to be elliptical, but he also kept many other concepts, definitions, presuppositions, etc. This basis that must be inevitably assumed by everyone—common man, philosopher or scientist—is incompatible with an understanding of knowledge as essentially fallible because it is the starting point for any practice. Boncompagni mentions with approval a paper by Keith DeRose in which he distinguishes between “intuitive fallibilism,” the “sensible” perspective put forward by Cohen, and “GC-fallibilism,” the “genuine conflict” or, as DeRose also describes it, the “real conflict between the likes of ‘I know that p’ and ‘It’s possible that not-p<sub>ind</sub>’” identified by Lewis and which led him to adopt an infallibilist stance.<sup>7</sup> But I think that DeRose’s survey of the various ways in which we can consider this conflict does not do justice to Lewis’ perceptive account of the inconsistency of fallibilism.<sup>8</sup> I shall try to explain why.

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<sup>6</sup> A fully fledged fallibilist will want to admit that she may be continuously mistaken about any of her knowledge claims, but she has to stop somewhere under pain of becoming a radical sceptic.

<sup>7</sup> Keith DeRose, “Contextualism and Fallibilism,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Contextualism*, ed. J.J. Ichikawa (London: Routledge, 2017), 145–155, repr. as Appendices E and F in *The Appearance of Ignorance: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context, Volume 2* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 287. As DeRose explains (*ibid.*, 286, note 7), “p<sub>ind</sub>” expresses the indicative mood that is necessary to keep.

<sup>8</sup> See the aforementioned Appendix F, in which Lewis’ name is not even mentioned.

The problem is not that a subject  $S$  often fails to provide a reason  $r$  or an evidence  $e$  to holding  $p$  as true, assuming that  $r$  or  $e$  should entail  $p$  and that infallible knowledge would correspond to such entailment. Since we can never be sure about the completeness of  $r$  or  $e$ , this entailment conception of infallibilism, as Cohen rightly saw, leads to an “immediate skeptical result.”<sup>9</sup> However, contrary to Cohen’s conclusion, the solution cannot be found by reverting to fallibilism for this can also lead to scepticism. Susan Haack, for instance, has shown that it is reasonable to think that, “on an epistemological interpretation,” a fallibilist view “collapses into scepticism.”<sup>10</sup> She sums up her take on this issue more judiciously as follows:

(...) if we distinguish *strong* and *weak* accounts of knowledge, according as the warrant for a belief to count as knowledge must be infallible or merely good [*viz.* fallible], and hence *weak scepticism* (we have no strong [*viz.* infallible] knowledge) and *strong scepticism* (we have no weak [*viz.* fallible] knowledge), then *fallibilism entails weak but not—*not so far as the present argument goes, anyway—*strong scepticism*.<sup>11</sup>

This mitigated or “weak scepticism” that Haack attaches to fallibilism is the necessary consequence of her construal of infallibilism as entailing a “strong scepticism.” This becomes perhaps clearer if we rewrite Haack’s argument in terms of constructive or destructive dilemmas, which are disjunctive forms of *modus ponens* or *modus tollens*, respectively. Let  $SK$  stand for “strong knowledge” and  $WK$  stand for “weak knowledge,” and let  $SS$  stand for “strong scepticism” and  $WS$  stand for “weak scepticism.” We then get, for example, the following:

$$(WS \vee SS), (WS \rightarrow \neg SK), (SS \rightarrow \neg WK) \vdash (\neg SK \vee \neg WK)$$

which amounts to

$$SK \rightarrow \neg WK$$

Or, corresponding more exactly to Haack’s wording:

$$(SK \vee WK), (WS \rightarrow \neg SK), (SS \rightarrow \neg WK) \vdash (\neg WS \vee \neg SS)$$

which amounts to

<sup>9</sup> Stewart Cohen, “How to be a Fallibilist,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 2 (1988): 91–123, here 91. DeRose brings this view into question arguing that “‘infallibilism,’ as Cohen is construing it, does not actually by itself doom us to skepticism,” but he concedes that we could have a sceptical outcome if it were “combined with some restrictive account of what our reasons or evidence might be” (*The Appearance of Ignorance*, 285).

<sup>10</sup> Susan Haack, “Fallibilism and Necessity,” *Synthese* 41 (1979): 37–63, here 49.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

$$WS \rightarrow \neg SS$$

If we now replace  $SK$  with  $I$ , for infallibilism, and  $WK$  with  $F$ , for fallibilism, we get in the first case:

$$(WS \vee SS), (WS \rightarrow \neg I), (SS \rightarrow \neg F) \vdash (\neg I \vee \neg F)$$

which should be equivalent to

$$(WS \vee SS), (WS \rightarrow F), (SS \rightarrow I) \vdash (F \vee I)$$

And in the second case we get:

$$(I \vee F), (WS \rightarrow \neg I), (SS \rightarrow \neg F) \vdash (\neg WS \vee \neg SS)$$

which again should be equivalent to

$$(I \vee F), (WS \rightarrow F), (SS \rightarrow I) \vdash (\neg WS \vee \neg SS)$$

The problem with these arguments is that the construal of  $I$  as  $\neg F$  and  $F$  as  $\neg I$  would make the consequents of the implications collapse into the same element alternating between its affirmation and negation and thus failing to form a proper dilemma. And of course we could also construe  $SS$  as the reverse of  $WS$  and  $WS$  as the reverse of  $SS$ . I think this is not the best way to deal with the question and that it is wrong to postulate that infallibilism entails “strong scepticism.” Lewis calls our attention to the inexorability of taking to be true what is epistemologically vital for us in each context, and that is why, in his view, an infallibilist conception of knowledge is the best antidote against scepticism. This is also the reason why Lewis regards both fallibilism and scepticism as “mad,”<sup>12</sup> a view that, as pointed out in *Description of Situations*, echoes that propounded by Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*. This brings me to the central criticism made by Boncompagni in her commentary.

Although she admits that “the indubitability of hinges is often stressed by Wittgenstein” and that, according to *On Certainty*, “to make a mistake about our basic assumptions, presuppositions or beliefs would look like a mental disturbance rather than a mere error,” Boncompagni regards Wittgenstein as a pragmatist much in the spirit of Peirce. She is therefore happy to accept that *On Certainty* involves a contextualist analysis—one that Boncompagni also identifies in pragmatism—but she rejects the infallibilism I see attached to contextualism. Boncompagni highlights Peirce’s “indubitables,” which consist of “perceptual judgments, acritical

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<sup>12</sup> David Lewis, “Elusive Knowledge,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1996): 549–567, repr. in *Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 418–445, here 419.

inferences, and original beliefs” that, contrary to the present evidence, could turn out to be false in the future. Their indubitable character does not result from a self-evident truth but rests instead on the necessity prompted by the situation which we are in. The pragmatist corollary is that our knowledge “is fallible even on indubitables,” which are so only because we need them to be like this in the course of our various practices. The regularities we find in experience are in the end pragmatically justified. However, and this is an important caveat, Boncompagni considers that this applies to Wittgenstein only partially. She recognizes that, unlike Peirce, Wittgenstein traces “a categorical distinction between hinges and ordinary beliefs,” arguing that “the indubitability of hinges is logical, not empirical.” But, in her view, this does not eclipse “a *form* of fallibilism” that can be found in Wittgenstein. I will conclude by saying why I disagree.

Boncompagni quotes §§ 424 and 425 of *On Certainty* where, at the very end, Wittgenstein states that he cannot be mistaken about his own name nonetheless adding: “that does not mean that I am infallible [*unfehlbar*] about it.”<sup>13</sup> But I do not see this as a capitulation to fallibilism—nor does Boncompagni see it that way. No one, except a child or a demented person, can be mistaken about their name, the name they are called by, which they use to be identified, etc. If I suddenly found out that I had been adopted, that my real name was different, I would certainly suffer some emotional disorder, but I could easily accommodate in my worldview that I had been given another name when I was born and identify “N. V.” with whatever that name was. As said above, I look at these kinds of cases as properly falling within a revisionism that we obviously need to tolerate. Boncompagni will say that I am then a fallibilist, but I am not. If I had been given another name at birth, I would not cease to be called “N. V.” and would not regard this name as involving a *Fehler*, a “mistake.” Similarly, if I disliked the name given by my parents and were to take another name, someone who called me “N. V.” would not be at all mistaken. Not only witnesses but also my documents would state that I had indeed used that name. In addition, those who thought that my name was “N. V.,” unaware that I had taken another name, would not be mistaken about what a man is, a first and a family name are, the role an identity plays in society, the world human beings belong to, etc. It is exactly this network of presumptions that is at the heart of Wittgenstein’s—and Lewis’—infallibilism. The emphasis put on the systematic nature of our knowledge allows revisability but only in the interior of that system, which as such can never be considered fallible. What most fallibilists fail to see is that their reservations about the knowledge we have are

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<sup>13</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, Revised edition by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, translated by Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), § 425.

either amenable to our revision, leaving the infallibilist perfectly happy, or collide with the systemic structure of belief formation, and this is where people like Wittgenstein and Lewis enter the scene. What they say is that this second kind of reservation, which results in a sceptical argumentation, is in fact inoperative since it is logically incoherent. It is only from a theoretical point of view that it seems possible to doubt that I have a body or that the Earth already existed long before my birth. From a practical point of view, a fallibility about this is immediately undercut. As a pragmatist, Boncompagni does not contest this. The fallibilism she finds in *On Certainty* is more subtle. Let me end by sketching out her view and how the infallibilism I defend responds to it.

Boncompagni argues that, even contrary to all evidence, “it *still* might turn out, for some unexpected reasons, that we failed,” and she gives some examples for possible cases of epistemological failure: trees that I have always seen as trees could after all be pictures or holograms; a landslide could occur while I was sleeping and after waking up my front door could suddenly open onto a ravine; or the registered spelling of my name could be different to what its correct spelling has always been for me. Boncompagni’s point is that experience itself can invalidate our deepest beliefs. “The physical possibility of a failure of knowledge remains open,” she says. Boncompagni does not suggest these possibilities of error urge us to adopt a sceptical attitude. Her perspective is that they by no means affect “the objective certainty and the instinctive trust” that our praxis requires. However, these possibilities are there and, so she thinks, we cannot eschew them. As a consequence, “we cannot claim that our knowledge is infallible.” Boncompagni anticipates that, within the framework of my contextualist perspective, such possibilities are excluded insofar as they are *irrelevant alternatives* to our current situation. But I am arguing for an infallibilist view that goes beyond “relevant alternatives” theories.<sup>14</sup> If I know that I have a magnolia tree in my garden, that I have planted and watered it, why should I be a fallibilist about “the tree that I have seen here my whole life long,” to use Boncompagni’s own words, unless I was a radical sceptic? How can it “eventually disclos[e] as something different (say, a picture, or a hologram)” and still fit into a situation that can be depicted? It is noteworthy that she is not referring to some tree that I just saw at a distance, which could for instance belong to a film studio facility, but to one I am fully acquainted with. The same impossibility of depicting the situation is present in her example of the landslide. First, it is highly implausible that if there were a landslide

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<sup>14</sup> I elaborate on this theme in a critical notice of Jessica Brown’s *Fallibilism: Evidence and Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), which is mentioned by Boncompagni. See Nuno Venturinha, “Non-sceptical Infallibilism,” *Analysis* 80 (2020): 186–195, esp. 189–191.

one night I would not wake up. Second, the possibility of encountering a ravine when opening my front door next morning is only an admissible possibility if my house is built on a steep slope. There are thus specific truth-conditions for that event. This possibility is empirically cancelled by the geography of the place where I live, which is pretty much flat. But anyone living near steep slopes should definitely be worried about landslides at night. What these two examples show is that they are not, as Boncompagni believes, “concrete possibilities within our context,” even if far-fetched or remote. They can represent possibilities of error only within some specific contexts—precisely, when they are representable. In all other cases they are abstract possibilities that, *pace* Boncompagni, illustrate how, strictly speaking, fallibilism coincides with scepticism. What needs to be understood is that it is an entire structure of reasons that leads us to ponder the possibility of being erroneous. The third example given by Boncompagni, the possible misspelling of my name when confronted with official records, does not convince me either of the merits of fallibilism. I could discover that my surname was actually spelled with an accent and I would try to figure out why in my documents, since I remember them, it appears without a diacritic. But I do not think that this should be sufficient to say that I was mistaken about my name. I would wonder why in the documents I saw my father’s name was also spelled without an accent and try to find a plausible explanation for this. Orthographies change, clerks are sometimes careless—these would be good explanations. Again, this is at best a revisable matter, not something by which we would be epistemologically enhanced by being fallibilists.

My conclusion is that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, there is not too much difference between my infallibilism and Boncompagni’s fallibilism. What I emphasize is the problematic closeness between fallibilism and scepticism, which, so far as I can see, only an infallibilist take on knowledge and justification can break.

### 3. Reply to Lewiński

Marcin Lewiński’s commentary raises an array of interesting points from the perspective of pragmatics in the midst of which the social dimension of language, with all its performativity, is decisive. Even though the context-sensitivity defended in *Description of Situations* is at the core of a pragmatic approach, there should be little surprise that a performative outlook is hardly reconcilable with the epistemological objectivism I pursue. Therefore, the challenges posed by Lewiński gain special importance because he presses my arguments from a totally different

angle than the other commentators. In what follows, I shall try to accommodate the chief worries of a pragmatic position within my account.

Lewiński's starting point coincides with the way I open *Description of Situations*. My sentence "I am working at a table" is meant to throw the reader into a situation, analogous to the multiple situations in which we get involved, and lead this reader to realize what is epistemologically implied in the words we use in that particular context. The narrative of *Description of Situations* is strategically oriented around a subject who happens to be me but is supposed to mirror the access anyone has to the world. At every moment, we condense the reality before us into a coherent whole. Each one, equipped with their own background, constantly forms a view of tiny pieces abstractedly cut out from the bulk of experience. These varied pieces do not stand apart from each other but are linked in what is typically called awareness or consciousness. More than just being individuals who construct their personal identity over time, we fill the entire surrounding space with a wide range of conceptualizations—cultural, political, religious, scientific, etc. This, however, is not easy to discern in our regular activities and one mode of grasping the causal mechanisms that constitute these events is to decompose them into situations, which are only accessed by means of propositions. Describing situations amounts to nothing more than analysing ordinary propositions.

The main difficulty with describing a situation is that it is essentially blurred. We refer to specific situations but their contours are barely distinguishable. Situations overlap each other. They are never completely closed in themselves but constantly integrate new aspects and evolve in an unpredictable way. Moreover, their content is not made up only of objects but actions and relations play a fundamental role too. Drinking, raining, smiling are all actions of possible situations which, alone, could never create an actual situation. Many other elements are required to describe, for example, that two people are on a date—say, an elegant bar where they drink some fancy cocktails, on a romantic rainy night, while they smile at each other. Situations are thus made of continuous saturated frames and composed of various conceptual elements that are not exclusive to the situation at stake. In addition, like Aristotelian substances, situations possess their accidents, which can themselves be turned into new substances, or sub-situations, depending on our angle of analysis or recognition. The amount of drink that at a certain time is in each of the glasses form a sub-situation of the main situation of the two people dating. Where, then, does one situation end and another begin so that we can refer to completely different situations even using some of the same words, such as *drinking* coffee at breakfast, driving when it is *raining* or half

*smiling* politely? It is here that context enters. Contexts are inherently epistemological. The people in the bar could be doing many things other than dating. They could be chatting, conspiring, doing business. But they could not be making parachute jumps, orbiting around the Earth or sailing. Lewiński asks why someone should interpret, as I do, my working at a table as writing philosophy when it could be interpreted in so many different ways. Indeed it can, but what I try to underscore is that any interpretation must be *contextually acceptable*, therefore excluding a whole set of interpretations which, being possible states of affairs in the world, do not ontologically fit in the situation. It is precisely due to this paramount contextual definition that the processing of possibilities does not go on indefinitely but is actually limited to a fairly reasonable number of scenarios. Without contexts, our brains would be stuck between a logical sum " $p_1 \vee p_2 \vee p_3 \vee \dots$ " (either writing philosophy or tidying up the desk or authorizing a nuclear attack or ...) and a logical product " $\neg q_1 \wedge \neg q_2 \wedge \neg q_3 \wedge \dots$ " (neither swimming in the pool, nor playing cello, nor hunting the snark nor ...).<sup>15</sup> I am sure that Lewiński will not contest that powerful political leaders could authorize a nuclear attack while working at their tables but that an academic is slightly more limited under the same circumstances. What he asks then is what kind of description I am offering. Is it a "thin" or a "thick" description, in the words of Gilbert Ryle? Am I merely concerned with spatiotemporal, behaviouristic descriptions, or is my concern the meaning of the situation?

Lewiński remarks that even though Ryle does not look at the matter exactly so, the "thin" descriptions will "largely correspond to what logical empiricists would call 'protocol' or 'observation sentences'," in the sense that they are "directly experienced, brute descriptions of empirical reality." And he immediately goes on to quote a passage from *Description of Situations*, where I mention that "[a]n extraordinarily complex interpretation is made at all times and [that] it is through this framework that we organize reality," as an evidence for my emphasis on the "thick" descriptions. Lewiński is absolutely right that I am not just interested in "thin" descriptions for the simple reason that they alone cannot explain a situation. A physicalist description of someone sitting at a table could hardly instruct us about what is really happening. What Lewiński does not understand is how I can put together the "social ontology" characteristic of "thick" descriptions and epistemic objectivism when, for philosophers like John Searle, "the social world is *ontologically subjective*." Lewiński notes that "[t]he *ontologically objective* natural

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<sup>15</sup> To be more exact, none of these possibilities could ever have been considered if the calculations of logical sums and products had not stopped at some point determining specific notions.

world would by contrast exist as well without any human experience, as argued by Venturinha too,” but this presumed objectivity is of little epistemological interest if it does not inform the social reality. There is in fact a gap between my understanding of the objectivist/subjectivist divide and Lewiński’s understanding of the same categories. My aim was not to carry out either (i) “objective descriptions of the objective, natural world” (I do not work in natural science) or (ii) “objective descriptions of the subjective, social world” (I do not work in social sciences either). And my aim is definitely far from (iii) “subjective descriptions of the objective, natural world” (I am not a realist artist) or (iv) “subjective descriptions of the subjective, social world” (I am not telling a story). Lewiński says he is unsure about whether I am “clear enough about which type of ‘descriptions of situations’” defines my approach. Well, I think the book makes clear that what is at issue is, to use Ryle’s own terms, to show how “thick” descriptions are not completely dependent on social factors but are, in the end, subordinated to what can be captured by some “thin” descriptions. Hence, the description of situations that I conduct is different from each of the four types suggested by Lewiński, which do not take on board the intricacies of our everyday situations. To describe situations is not a technical endeavour but something that the common man already does at every single moment and that a contextualist epistemology seeks to scrutinize. As Lewiński notices, in my book this scrutiny takes the form of a description that has its roots in the work of the later Wittgenstein, but here again Lewiński fails to take one key aspect into account.

After quoting a passage from my Preface in which I mention a remark from Wittgenstein written on 30 June 1931 and where he identifies “a description of nature” with “the description of a situation,”<sup>16</sup> Lewiński argues that what this idea implies is “a protocol sentence that needs (and allows for) no more than a thin description of the ontologically objective world,” adding that “[n]o tricky, socially recognizable *as* something entity is being involved here.” It is indisputable that Wittgenstein’s middle or transitional philosophy is very much under the influence of both the *Tractatus* and the Vienna Circle and that only in the *Philosophical Investigations* does Wittgenstein fully open, to use Lewiński’s nice formulation, “the Pandora’s box of thick descriptions, descriptions of society.” Nevertheless, it is a mistake to consider that when Wittgenstein refers in this remark to “the analysis of an ordinary proposition, for example ‘there is a lamp on my table’” and says that “we should be able to get everywhere from there,” since such a situation would

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<sup>16</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Vienna Edition*, vol. 3, edited by Michael Nedo (Vienna: Springer, 1995), MS 110: 243, my translation.

contain “the material for all the rest,”<sup>17</sup> he has no more than a physicalist description in sight. The path that led Wittgenstein to the recognition of the social character of language started exactly in the early 1930s, with several remarks from this period making their way into the *Philosophical Investigations*.<sup>18</sup> Two remarks that would form the core of § 122 of the *Investigations*, with its crucial notions of “surveyable representation” and “intermediate links,” were drafted only a couple of days later, on 2 July 1931.<sup>19</sup> And the pivotal notion of “language-game”—to which Lewiński alludes as a turning point in Wittgenstein’s thought—appears as early as 1 March 1932.<sup>20</sup> More significant than this, however, is the fact that the remark from June 1931 mentioned in my Preface is used as a mere motto for an inquiry that, apart from some engagement with the *Tractatus* in Chapters 2 and 3 and minor references to other texts, only finds an echo in *On Certainty*, which is central in Chapters 7 and 11—the latter entitled “Social Dependency.” My effort was to show that it is possible to read *On Certainty* as a fundamentally non-relativist work, with Wittgenstein manoeuvring, to employ Pritchard’s terminology, between an understanding of hinges as “arational commitments” or “über hinge commitments,” on the one hand, which result in “über hinge propositions” that stand by themselves, and “personal hinge commitments,” on the other, which result in “personal hinge propositions” framed according to our socio-cultural world.<sup>21</sup> The corollary is an epistemological model that can accommodate contextualism within a minimal realism, thus avoiding the relativism and even scepticism that standard contextualist approaches—with the notable exception of Lewis’ infallibilism—must necessarily admit. I am of course aware that pragmatists tolerate relativism well and that radical scepticism is quite far from their list of concerns. But the driving force behind epistemic contextualism has always been a reaction to sceptical worries, and *Description of Situations* should be no different.

I would like to conclude with a general comment on an important concept that Lewiński brings to the fore in the final part of his commentary: the concept of

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> See in this regard Nuno Venturinha (ed.), *The Textual Genesis of Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Wittgenstein, *Vienna Edition*, vol. 3, MS 110: 257. I take the translations of these notions from *Philosophical Investigations*, Revised fourth edition by P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), § 122.

<sup>20</sup> See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Vienna Edition*, vol. 5, edited by Michael Nedo (Vienna: Springer, 1996), MS 113: 88–89.

<sup>21</sup> See Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 71 and 95–96.

“presumption.” I have already alluded to the notion of “presumptive knowledge” in my reply to Boncompagni and it can certainly be fruitfully explored, as Lewiński proposes, within the framework of a contextualist epistemology. Presumptions, as he accurately observes, “would be the counterpart of defeaters,” which exert a key role in contextual analyses by virtue of the conflicting evidence they originate. The problem with defeaters is that, as Michael Williams elegantly put it, “the severity of standards for knowing is directly proportional to the remoteness of the defeaters that command our attention,”<sup>22</sup> and thus the appeal to defeasibility seems like a never-ending road. Better presumptions than defeaters, for sure. But what I take to be the essential feature of presumptive knowledge is very different from what Lewiński sees as its main trait: the development of “an intersubjective *as-ifness*, achieved in collective critical testing of claims through public argumentative practices.” No doubt this is very much needed in our post-truth society. But, as said before, I am interested in the network of presumptions that lie beneath all “argumentative discussions” in which we can get involved, the presumptions that we can by no means drop regardless of the arguments under discussion. It is this space of truth that I consider to be essential and non-negotiable in epistemology.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Williams, “Scepticism and the Context of Philosophy,” *Philosophical Issues* 14 (2004): 456–475, here 470.

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