What is it amount to *Having Good Reasons*: an Analysis of Stewart Cohen's Contextualist Approach

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ABSTRACT : *In epistemology the concept of having good reason is principally connected with knowledge. In epistemology knowledge is essentially defined as justified true belief. A subject to possess knowledge needs reasons or justifications apart from the subject believing the proposition and truth of the proposition. Now the question is how much reason is required to have knowledge.Here in this paper my main aim is to explain what is it amount to say that S has a good reason to believe that p. Here mainly I am using Stewart Cohen approach to explain the idea of having good reason.*

KEY WORDS: *Knowledge, Good reason, Opaque defeater, Evident defeater.*

I.   INTRODUCTION

Cohen's contextualism tries to examine the nature of the idea *having good reasons* for believing a particular proposition. Here, the relevant questions can be formulated in the following way. How can we characterise the idea *having good reasons*? Or, when do we say that a subject has good reasons to believe a proposition? When we say that a particular subject knows something, then it is implied that the subject has good reasons to believe what (s)he believes.

STEWART COHEN'S CONCEPTION OF GOOD REASON : When we speak about reasons, we mean by it epistemic reasons. In Cohen's view, epistemic reasons have the prima facie structure of being defeasible. By defeasibility, what he means is the following. Consider *r* to be a prima facie reason to believe *p*. But there is a *d* which might work as a defeater for believing *p*. *r* and *d* together will not be a good reason to believe *p*. *d* will stop the subject from believing that *p*. In this case,*d* works as a defeater for *r* for believing*p*. What Cohen wants to say is that for any given proposition, there are reasons for believing that proposition and those reasons can have a defeater. Being possessed of defeater is the prima facie structure of reasons. Consider the following example. Subject believes that the table is red (*p*). Here, the prima facie reason is that, the table looks red (*r*). Here I have the perceptual experience that the table looks red. But there can be a defeater for (*r*), that there is the presence of the red light on the table (*d*) which is provided by a reliable source. Here, (*d*) is the defeater for(*r*) and it is possible for any proposition to have such a defeater.

In Cohen's view, the*good* in *having good reasons*, can be understood as having at least two different senses:*good* as "ideally correct" or as "permissible". Normally, regarding *having good reasons* we say the following. *S* has good reasons *simpliciter* to believe that *q* just in case *S* has prima facie reasons for which he possesses no defeaters.Cohen does not support this kind of approach to the idea of *having good reasons*. Here,*good* in *having good reasons*, means ideally correct. In this sense*having good reasons* can be understood as the following. If *S* has good reasons, then these reasons are undefeated by the evidence he possesses. To explain this Cohen makes a distinction between two kinds of defeaters: obvious and subtle. Obvious defeaters are those which cannot escape the normal intelligence. But subtle defeaters are those which might escape normal intelligence but not an acute intelligence. In the above given case, suppose*d* works as a defeater only through a subtle way and consider that the subject is with a normal intelligence. In Cohen's view, we may be hesitant to deny knowledge to this subject. Because for him, if the subject does not believe in any subtle defeaters then (s)he can have good reasons to believe what (s)he believes. The subject does not have to be after or need to devote time for finding out all the minute subtle defeaters in order to believe what (s)he believes. Here *good* in *having good reasons* means "permissible". Cohen regards, *good* in *having good reasons as permissible*.

A defeater being obvious or being subtle is relative and it can be relative in the following way. A distinction can be made between acute reasoner and obvious reasoner. What is obvious to an acute reasoner need not be obvious to an inferior reasoner. The relevance of defeater can vary relative to inferior reasoner to acute reasoner. When we say that a defeater is obvious then we presuppose a level of reasoning which is inter-subjectively determined.

Cohen considers this inter-subjectively determined level of reasoning as the normal reasoning ability of a relevant social group. According to Cohen, there are four kinds of defeaters. Cohen introduces these concepts to remove ambiguities in the concept of *having good reasons*. These four kinds of defeaters are the following.

Inter-subjectively evident defeater : Inter-subjectively evident defeaters are those defeaters whose relevance is obvious relative to standard which is determined by the normal reasoning ability of a social group.

[1] Inter-subjectively opaque defeater
It is that which is not inter-subjectively evident.
[2] Subjectively evident defeater
Subjectively evident defeaters are those defeaters whose relevance is obvious relative to standard which is determined by the subject's own reasoning ability.
[3] Subjectively opaque defeater

Subjectively opaque defeaters are those which are not subjectively evident.
S has prima facie good reasons to believe that *P* and *S* has ideally good reasons iff *S* possesses no defeaters of those reasons.
S has inter-subjectively good reason to believe that *P* iff *S* possesses no inter-subjectively evident defeaters.
S has subjectively good reasons to believe that *P* iff *S* possesses no subjectively evident defeater.
Here, Cohen himself accepts that these definitions for *having good reasons* are inadequate due to the complicated structure of prima facie reasons.

II. SOCIAL COMPONENT OF KNOWLEDGE

Basically, we assume that knowledge entails *having good reasons*. We have seen in the above mentioned section that there are different senses of *having good reasons*. We need to find out which sense of *having good reason* will be able to explain the entailment relation between knowledge and *having good reasons*. In Cohen's view consideration of this question will help us to see that for knowledge there can be a social component and this social component of knowledge will show that knowledge attributions are context sensitive. For explaining this, Cohen considers following two cases.

Case 1 : *P* is a true proposition. *r* is the reason for believing *P*. *d* is the defeater for *r*. *d* is obvious to *S*.
P= the table is red, *r* = the table looks red, *d* = the architect says red lights were installed in the building.
S believes *P* on the basis of *r*. *S* also knows *d* which is a defeater of *r*, through a reliable source. But in this case, unbeknownst to subject, the source is mistaken. Even if the subject is aware of the defeating effect of *d*, he continues to believe *P* on the basis of *r*. Here, for subject the defeating effect of *d* is obvious. He believes *P* in the presence of *d*, due to some kind of bias he has towards *P*. Again here, there is no restoring defeater for *S*. In this case, even if *d* is false, intuitively we need to conclude that the subject fails to know *P*. From this we can say the following. If subject possesses a subjectively evident undermining defeater of *r* to believe *P* then *S* fails to know *P* on the basis of *r*.

Case 2 : In this case *d* is subjectively opaque for *S*. Like in the first case, *S* believes *P* on the basis of *r*. There is the presence of *d* which is a defeater. Unlike the Case 1, *d* is subjectively opaque for *S*. In other words, subject is not successful in recognizing the relevance of *d*. The relevance of *d* is not obvious to the subject. Here, according to Cohen, term *obvious* is used inter-subjectively. This case is the one in which the subject possesses an inter-subjectively evident defeater which is subjectively opaque. Here also, we can intuitively say that subject does not know *P*. From this the following can be said. Even though for *S* the defeater is opaque for believing *P* on the basis of *r*, provided inter-subjectively *S* possesses that defeater, intuitively we can say that *S* does not know that *P*. This can be said differently in the following way. Even if the defeater is subjectively opaque, provided that defeater is inter-subjectively obvious and the subject fails to correct or regulate his beliefs according to this defeater then the subject does not know what he claims to know. It means knowledge entails inter-subjectively good reasons. Again inter-subjectively evident defeater is defined as those defeaters whose relevance is obvious relative to standard which is determined by the normal reasoning ability of a social group. This at least indicates that knowledge has a social component. Cohen considers another one question here whether knowledge entails ideally good reasons. Testing case must be like the following. It must be the situation in which subject possesses an inter-subjectively opaque undermining defeater without possessing a restoring defeater.

Case 3 : *P* is a true proposition. *r* is the reason for believing *P*. *d* is the defeater for *r*. *d* inter-subjectively opaque for *S*.*P*= the table is red,*r* = the table looks red,*d* = a defeater whose relevance is noticeable only by an acute intelligence. Suppose *S* believes *P* on the basis of *r*. But there is a defeater of *r* that is *d*. Here, *d* is inter-subjectively opaque. It means, only the acute intelligence can notice the relevance of*d*. Consider that,*S* does not possess any restoring defeater. Provided only an acute intelligence can be aware of the relevance of *d*, we would intuitively say that *S* does not fail to know that *P* on the basis of *r*.

It is true that, in Case 3, subject does not possess any ideally good reason to believe *P* because of the presence of the defeater *d* for *r*. And it is the case in which subject possesses an inter-subjectively opaque defeater. Intuitively it might be that *S* knows that *P* on the basis of *r* iff *S* has ideally good reason to believe that *P*.But according to Cohen, stronger is the intuition that *S* fails to know when *S* possesses an inter-subjectively evident defeater than when *S* possesses an inter-subjectively opaque defeater. From this, according to Cohen, it seems that subject's knowledge is challenged by defeaters only up to a certain level of opacity. For him, the level of opacity and the level in which knowledge is challenged by defeaters are socially determined. If Case 3 works, it can be said that knowledge does not entail having ideally good reasons. Thus, standards that are determined socially have some role in saying whether *S* knows or does not know. In this way Cohen concludes that knowledge has social component.

Inter-subjectively evident undermining defeater stops the subject from knowing something. According to Cohen, it is possible to view this as an instance of the general requirement that knowledge entails ideally good reasons. Cohen provides an argument for showing that even in this situation also social component of knowledge will arise. Here, he considers the interaction of undermining defeaters with restoring defeaters. Let *du* stand for undermining defeater. Suppose *S* believes *P* on the basis of *r*. But there is a defeater of *r* that is *du*. In this situation, we need to consider the subject as possessing a restoring defeater *dr*, because this situation is imagined as subject having ideally good reasons to believe *P*. If the subject is considered to be having ideally good reasons and if there is*du* then there must be*dr*. Here, the question is does *S* knows that *P*. Here, is it possible to say that *S* knows that *P*? In order to answer this we need to consider the following situations of (1) *du* being subjectively evident but *dr* being subjectively opaque and (2) a situation *du* being subjectively opaque and inter-subjectively evident.

Case 4 : du is subjectively evident still, **S** continues to believe **P** due to some bias he has towards **P**. In this case, consider **dr** is subjectively opaque. While **dr** is subjectively opaque, even though **S** has ideally good reasons to believe **P**, **S** fails to know **P**. Here, **S** fails to know because of the obvious effect of **du**. According to Cohen, from an ideal perspective even though **dr** restores **S'** knowledge, the fact **dr** being subjectively opaque makes the Subject to fail to know **P**. The Subject is not in a position of being aware of the restoring defeating effect of **dr**. Thus, subject fails to know **P**. From the above things we can say the following thing. **S** knows that **P** entails that **S** has subjectively good reasons to believe that **P**.

Case 5 : Now consider the situation in which defeater being subjectively opaque and inter-subjectively evident. Here, consider that *du* has this status. That is *du* is subjectively opaque but it is inters-subjectively evident. In this situation, subject is unable to appreciate the defeating effect of *du*, thus *S* continues to believe *P*. In this situation, *S* possesses a restoring defeater which is subjectively opaque and he has ideally good reason to believe that *P*. *dr* provides him or her ideally good reason to believe that *P*. But as in the Case 4, the subject is not in a position of being aware of the restoring defeating effect of *dr*. Thus, subject fails to know *P*. Here, the fact that the subject is not in a position to appreciate the relevance of defeating effect of *du* stops the subject from knowing that *P*.

From this the following can be said. If *S* knows that *P* then for every inter-subjectively evident undermining defeater possessed by *S*, there is subjectively evident restoring defeater possessed by *S*. From the above mentioned cases, the following can be said. Even if subject has ideally good reasons and subjectively good reasons to know a proposition, if subject fails to meet inter-subjective standards, subject may fail to know. Suppose, if we accept that *S* knows that *P* depends on inter-subjective standards, then the question is how those standards are determined or which social group fixes the standards? For me it seems that they are not the same question. They seem to address two different issues. In other words, which is the relevant social group? Here, Cohen's suggestion is that, relevant social group is the one to which the subject belongs. He accepts that this also will not help to find out which is the relevant social group. The standards for attributing knowledge might change from context to context. A morons' society might correctly attribute knowledge to S while we might deny knowledge. Sometimes we might attribute knowledge to S whereas genius' society might deny knowledge to S. In this way attributions of knowledge are context sensitive or indexical. Standards for attributing and denying knowledge are context sensitive. The questions that are to be clarified here is that, what governs the shift of the standard? And which is the relevant social group?

III.   CONCLUSION

To conclude, according to Cohen, one of the features that affect the relevance of the context could be the intentions of the attributor. It is possible that the attributor may intend the standards that are in accordance with the reasoning ability of some social group to which the attributor belongs. There is no restriction to what and what not standards are to be intended in ascribing knowledge? I can either agree with morons or genius in attributing or denying knowledge to the subject. This shows that intensions of the attributor are features of context. If the intentions would not have been the feature of context then this shift in agreement or disagreement would not have been possible. Even if the attributors may intend different standards which in turn would determine the application of standards, does not mean that the attributor make true attribution. This is because, the truth value of his attribution will be a function of both the standards of evidentness he intends and the actual evidentness of the defeater possessed by the subject of attribution.

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