Contextualism has been a prominent epistemological theory for more than twenty years. Its central claim is that standards for justification and of knowledge ascriptions can vary from one context to another context. However this is not the end of the story, for one must subsequently explain these variations of standards in order to avoid arbitrariness. Two strategies offer themselves at this point: generalism and particularism. We argue that the latter could provide a viable support for an overall contextualist approach. David Lewis in his paper “Elusive Knowledge” provides a nice case of contextual epistemology and points to several important aspects of knowledge. But we disagree with Lewis on two points of his account: (i) knowledge without justification and (ii) set of exceptionless rules that determine relevant alternatives. We preserve the overall conception of knowledge as justified true belief and attempt to work out a contextualist account of knowledge by pointing to an alternative, particularistic view of relevance and relevant alternatives.

Keywords: contextualism, justification, relevant alternatives, particularism, D. Lewis.

1. The Definition Based Account of Knowledge

The general drive in epistemology is to assure necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge with the use of exceptionless general epistemic principles. For a long time, and in diverse ways, one has tried to deliver a story of knowledge by definitory means, the most widespread definition of knowledge being:

\[ K_a p =_{\text{def}} p \land B_a p \land J_a p \]

where \( a \) is for a subject, \( p \) is for a given proposition and \( K, B, J \) respectively figure for operators of knowledge, belief and justification. Subject \( S \) knows that \( p \) in the case \( p \) is true, \( S \) happens to believe \( p \) and there is a proper justificatory route leading to this belief. The definition of knowledge was provided by Plato in an informal manner. But it was only with the explicit definition of knowledge in modern analytic epistemology, such as it is furnished above, that the chase for an ultimate
assessment of conditions for knowledge was really open. One has witnessed the spelling out of each imaginable proposal to capture conditions for knowledge, the chase proceeding over all possible counterexamples to the definition of knowledge. A case in point figures the Gettier (1963) counterexamples showing the possibility of justified true belief failing to result in knowledge. This certainly has enriched epistemology and it has provided a wide and diversified range of ways to look at knowledge. It also proceeds by the usage of general exceptionless principles for determining knowledge.

Perhaps the nature of knowledge simply resists definitions. Definitions would provide a generalist pattern, where knowledge would be specified for a whole range of cases. If the lesson of the definition-based account’s failure is taken to heart, then it may finally happen that there is no generalist pattern around to take care of knowledge. In recent development some signs can be found for the epistemological strategies that tend to loosen generalistic approaches. There is the shift from the naturalized epistemology towards an interest in *a priori* forms of knowledge and in intuition. Virtue epistemology also aims at knowledge (or in some cases at understanding) as something that escapes the approach by usage of exceptionless generalities.

One proposal is to mellow the pressure of general requirements for justification, say, to general principles allowing for exceptions or *ceteris paribus* clauses. One may also embrace quasi-particularism as the way to account for knowledge. Quasi-particularism still retains *ceteris paribus* principles all in believing that thereby it has already taken over the holistic point of view.¹ But the radical proposal is particularistic normativity.

Particularism was elaborated for the area of morality, claiming that one should oppose the atomist persistence of a feature’s value over a range of cases, and that one should allow for the change of a feature’s contribution along the rich and intractable pressures of its dynamical holistic environment. One cannot once and for all define a set of features and properties of our actions that always are or would be morally relevant and would count as reasons. Our moral judgment must follow each particular situation. Moral particularism argues for holism of reasons—moral reasons are essentially context dependent in a way that they are all capable of being altered by changes in context. The possibility of moral thought and judgment does not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles.²

Although moral particularism is elaborated for the moral thought, the idea of particularism originated in the area of causality. We accordingly propose to extend particularism to such areas as metaphysics and epistemology.³ An important device related to particularism is what we call unique and holistic beautiful patterns, which we oppose to generalist patterns. There is a generalist opinion allowing for relevance in several areas to be achieved only upon the basis of generalist patterns. But we believe that relevance comes from particularist beautiful patterns. This stresses the point that the particular does not need to be arbitrary and that it is not