

David Lewis's epistemic contextualism versus how to talk to a mental health nurse

Author: Doctor Terence Rajivan Edward (or 0161_Rajivan, if that helps)

Abstract. I notice that quite a few philosophers die younger than I expect, given the affluent social groups they are from or connected to, such as Robert Nozick (63 years), G.A. Cohen (68 years), Bernard Williams (73 years), and Derek Parfit (74 years). Perhaps others suffer from mental health problems, beyond the quite mild problems I suffered from writing a lot in 2023, which led to quite a heavy-handed response by the NHS, I think. In this paper, I explain how to talk with a psychiatrist or mental health nurse, in a way which draws upon our skills as analytic philosophers. I refer to David Lewis when doing so, suspecting he is a bad influence!

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Robert Nozick (63 years), G.A. Cohen (68 years), Bernard Williams (73 years), and Derek Parfit (74 years): they all died quite young, it casually seems to me, given the affluent social groups they are part of. They seem similar in the topics they focus on and their level as philosophers: is there something unhealthy about this combination? I doubt it. Anyway, instead of early death, one might experience mental health problems. I experienced some mental health problems in September 2023. The response from the National Health Service seems heavy-handed to me: I ended up spending around 2 months in hospital, was on anti-psychotic injections once a month for almost a year, and have regularly met with nurses or psychiatrists for discussions of how I am doing. In this paper, I want to present some lessons I have learnt about how to interact with these medical staff, in case they are useful for any others. I focus on mental health nurses below.

Nurses who attend chiefly to your mental health outside of a hospital setting - in the community, as they say - will try to develop a friendly personal relationship with you. They will try to learn about your character, your preferences (likes and dislikes), your hobbies, your routines, your social network, and more. They will speak in a gentle way and you will probably feel obliged to speak in a friendly way in return, given the norms of our society. But they have a set of boxes to tick and scores to give you. You don't want to score badly on these evaluations, do you? The best way to not do so is to give up on friendly chit-chat mode and make an argument, as you

are accustomed to in philosopher seminars. I met a new nurse today and towards the end of her meeting, I listed the reasons for thinking I am doing well, “I sleep well. I worked. I worked last week at a charity shop. I published. I published recently on utilitarianism. I am here on time and clean and well-dressed. I am functioning. You cannot say that I am not functioning well!”

I suspect some philosophers are simply not prone to argumentative discourse outside of special contexts, such as the philosophy seminar. They are like a boxer who in the ring, with its specific system of rules, are formidable and aggressive forces, but beyond it are gentle characters. I believe David Lewis has made a significant impact by arguing that “knows” is applied with different standards outside philosophy class, or seminar, and within, which a sociologist would probably take to be an expression of the professional philosopher’s perspective on the world: “I do philosophy in these contexts and then I go home or meet my friends or do sport and mostly set all that philosophy aside.” Lewis seeks to elaborate this view: “In the strict context of epistemology we know nothing, yet in laxer contexts we know a lot.” (1996: 551) Influenced by Lewis, one might think, “We are in another context now and I don’t talk like that,” when interacting with a mental health nurse in an informal setting.

But talking with nurses is not so different from talking with philosophers, about some arcane topic. It is a rational discourse governed by clear rules, from the nurse’s perspective anyway. There is merely a superficial dressing of ordinary talk in an informal setting. Lewis is a bad influence even. He’s like a bad kid from a troubled background who has come to rule over a school!

Reference

Lewis, D. 1996. Elusive Knowledge. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74(4): 549-567.