A Plague on All Your Houses: Some Reflections on the Variable Behaviour of "Knows"

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It is a great pleasure to contribute to this volume in celebration of the life and work of Eva Picardi, and I am most grateful to the editors, Annalisa Coliva, Paolo Leonardi, and Sebastiano Moruzzi, for providing me with the opportunity to do so. My own personal acquaintance with Eva dates back to the 1990s and a series of delightful Summer Schools for graduate students held at various Northern Italian universities in which we both participated. We had each been former students of Sir Michael Dummett and had absorbed from him a deep interest in Frege and in philosophy of language in the Fregean tradition that Dummett did so much to foster. I was greatly impressed by the depth of Eva's Frege scholarship—as well as by her very forceful philosophical personality!—and was delighted when she later agreed to work as a consultant with the team, then based at the *Arché* centre in St Andrews, that was inching towards completion of the first unabridged English translation of Frege's *Grundgesetze* and to which, though already struggling

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with failing health, Eva made very valued contributions as the work neared completion.

My chapter here, though, is not about our shared Fregean concerns. Eva took a keen interest in the 'linguistic turn' taken by the contemporary discussions of relativism and was, I think, both impressed by and suspicious of it. It is my hope that she would have found something of interest in what follows.[1]

1 The Variabilist Reaction against Traditional Epistemology

It is fair to say that from the time of the *Theaetetus* until relatively recently, theorists of knowledge tended to conceive their central task as being to explain in what knowledge consists; more exactly, to explain what further conditions need to be satisfied by a true belief if it is to count as knowledgeable. The widely accepted failure of the post-Gettier debates to execute this task convincingly has motivated a very different tendency in mainstream contemporary epistemology. This tendency, influentially promoted by Timothy Williamson in particular, is *epistemic primitivism*: to concede that knowledge is, as Williamson puts it, 'prime'—that it is a fundamental, irreducible cognitive relation. Knowledge, on the primitivist view, is a basic epistemological kind, and to know is to be in a basic, *sui generis* attitudinal state. There can therefore be no correct analysis of it in terms of other, supposedly constitutive or more fundamental cognitive states (true belief + X). The post-Gettier "X knows that P if and only if…" cottage industry was doomed to disappointment for this reason. To the contrary, for the epistemic primitivist, it is in terms of knowledge that other epistemic notions—justification, evidence, warranted assertion and rational action—are to be understood.[2]

This primitivism, however, shares three traditional assumptions with the reductionism it is set against. They can be wrapped together as the compound idea that knowledge is a *determinate, objective, purely cognitive* type of condition—hence something at which the aspiration of reductive analysis could be sensibly (even if mis-) directed. If we unpack that, however, we find the following three distinct thoughts:

– First, ascriptions of knowledge, that X knows that P, are *contentually invariant* as far as the semantic contribution of 'knows' is

concerned. More specifically, once the referent of 'X', the identity of the proposition that P and the time reference associated with 'knows' are settled, the result is a unique proposition, the same for any competent thinker who considers it.
- Second (although this would normally be taken to be entailed by the first point) this unique proposition has one and the same truth-value, no matter who asserts or assesses it.
- Third, this truth-value is determined purely by the cognitive achievements of the subject, irrespective of what else, other than that part of her total information relevant to the judgement that P, is true of X. In particular, such aspects as X's (or anyone else's) *interest* in whether P is true, or *what is at stake* for her in its truth, or the range and specifics of counter-possibilities to P that occur, or are *salient*, to X—in short: such, as they are often described, "non-traditional" or as I shall say *pragmatic* factors—have no bearing on the matter.

The recent tendency that provides the subject matter of this chapter is the rejection of one or more of these traditional assumptions in favour of one or another form of *variabilism*: broadly, the notion that whether an ascription of knowledge may correctly be regarded as true may depend on pragmatic factors that pertain to the circumstances of the ascriber, or to those of a third party assessing the ascription, or on pragmatic aspects of the circumstances of the ascribee. Although well short of a consensus, there has developed a considerable body of opinion that agrees that *some* form of epistemic variabilism is called for if justice is to be done to the actual employment of "knows" and its cognates.

In what follows, I will review one kind of consideration that has been taken to support that view, critically compare and assess some of the resulting variabilist proposals, and recommend a conclusion both about them and about the prospects for primitivism.

2 The "Data"

Probably the most influential motive for variabilism about "knows" draws on a range of putative linguistic 'intuitions' concerning proprieties of knowledge-ascription provoked, at least among many of the philosophers who think about such things, by imaginary cases of a kind first put forward by Stewart Cohen and Keith DeRose.[3] We can illustrate

by reference to a version of DeRose's famous Bank Case. Suppose it is Friday afternoon, and Ashley and Bobbie are considering whether to bank their salary cheques. There are long queues at all the bank counters. Ashley recalls being at the bank on a Saturday morning two weeks ago and says, "Let's come back tomorrow. **I know the bank will be open tomorrow morning**." Suppose that the bank will indeed be open on the Saturday morning.

Case 1 (*Low stakes*): Suppose that there is no particular reason to ensure that the cheques are banked sooner rather than later—say, by the following Monday. Then
Invited intuition: Ashley's recollection of Saturday morning opening two weeks ago suffices for her to speak truly.

Contrast that scenario with
Case 2 (*High stakes*): The couple's mortgage lender will foreclose unless the cheques are in the account by Monday to service their monthly repayment. Ashley and Bobbie know this. Bobbie says, "But what if the bank has changed its opening hours? Or what if the Saturday morning opening was some kind of one-off promotion?" Ashley says, "You're right. **I suppose I don't really *know* that the bank will be open tomorrow** (even though I am pretty confident that it will). We had better join the queue."
Invited intuition: Again, Ashley speaks truly. There is too much at stake to take the risk of e.g. a change in banking hours.

So the suggested conclusion is that "I know the bank will be open tomorrow" uttered by Ashley is true in Case 1 and false in Case 2 even though all that is different between the two are the costs to Ashley and Bobbie of Ashley's being wrong. Only pragmatic factors have changed. Everything that might be mentioned in a traditional account of knowledge—as we would naturally say, all Ashley's relevant evidence or information—remains the same.

Two further cases may seem to prompt another important conclusion:

Case 3 (*Unknowing high stakes*): The couple's mortgage lender will indeed foreclose unless the cheques are in the account by Monday to service their monthly re-payment but Ashley and Bobbie are unaware of this (they habitually leave what looks like circular mail from the mortgage

company unopened and have missed the reminder). The dialogue proceeds as first described above, with Ashley asserting, "**I know the bank will be open tomorrow morning**".
Invited intuition: This time, Ashley speaks falsely.

Compare that with
Case 4 (*Unknowing low stakes*): Ashley and Bobbie actually have no good reason to ensure that the cheques are banked before Monday but, misremembering the notice from the mortgage company, they *falsely* believe that Monday will be too late. The dialogue proceeds as in Case 2.
Invited intuition: This time Ashley's disclaimer, "**I suppose I don't really know that the bank will be open tomorrow**" is false.

The suggested conclusion from cases 3 and 4 is this: that when changes in pragmatic factors convert a true knowledge-ascription into a false one, or vice versa, it is *actual* changes that matter, rather than thinkers' impressions of what changes in such factors may have taken place.

3 Varieties of Variabilism

How to explain these 'data'? The space of theoretical options will include at least three quite different kinds of proposal: one for each of the traditional assumptions distinguished in section I. First, we might propose that although knowledge-ascriptions are contentually invariant (in the sense there specified), the proposition thereby expressed may take different truth-values in different circumstances, depending on variation in the pragmatic factors applying to its *subject*, X. This is the thesis, proposed separately by Stanley and Hawthorne,[4] that is most often termed *interest-relative invariantism* (IRI).[5] The details of a proposal of this kind will naturally depend on just what kinds of pragmatic factor are deemed relevant—variation in *what is at stake* is what seems germane in the various scenarios in the Bank Case. IRI allows, apparently, that a pair of subjects may both truly believe that P on the basis of the same evidence or cognitive achievements yet one know that P and the other fail to know that P if they suitably differ in pragmatic respects. I'll come back to this.

Second, we might hypothesise that the variability in truth-value of knowledge-ascriptions across the kinds of situation illustrated is actually a product of variation in *content*. The specific version of this proposal made by DeRose and Cohen is standardly termed *ascriber contextualism*

(henceforward simply "contextualism"). In its original and basic form, this view holds that the (level of) cognitive achievement that is required of X by the truth of an utterance of "X knows that P" varies as a function of pragmatic aspects—needs, stakes, saliences—*of the speaker*. Thus in an example like the Bank Case, variation in pragmatic aspects of a *self*-ascriber across actual, or hypothetical, cases may result in (actual, or hypothetical) tokenings of "I know that P" demanding different—more or less exigent—levels of cognitive achievement if they are to count as true. The truth-conditions, hence content, of tokens of such an ascription can vary, even though the only differences in their respective contexts of utterance pertain to the situation of the speaker in purely pragmatic respects.

The third option—that of *knowledge relativism*, fashioned on the model of assessment-sensitivity as developed by John MacFarlane[6]—shifts the location of the pragmatic factors once again, this time to anyone who evaluates a knowledge-ascription, whether or not they are its original author. So a single token of 'X knows that P' may properly be assigned different truth-values in differing contexts of assessment, whether or not distinct assessors are involved, depending on the situation in pragmatic respects of the assessor. Thus Ashley may again quite correctly return different verdicts on a self-ascription of knowledge that the bank will open on the Saturday in the two contexts described.

An alert reader will have noted that these three types of variabilist view exhibit disagreement in two dimensions. Agreeing that the truth-value of a knowledge-ascription may vary as an effect of variation in non-traditional pragmatic factors, they disagree about the *location*—subject, ascriber, or assessor—of the relevant factors; but they also disagree about the *semantic significance* of such variation. For both knowledge relativism and interest-relative invariantism, variation in pragmatic factors is of no semantic significance at all: rather, one and the same proposition gets to vary in truth-value in tandem with variation in the pragmatic characteristics of the subject, or assessors of that proposition. For knowledge contextualism, by contrast, at least in its classic form, it is the proposition expressed by a particular knowledge-ascription that varies in a fashion sensitive to the pragmatic factors. Ashley's tokens of "I know the bank will be open tomorrow morning" express different propositions in the low-stakes and high-stakes scenarios outlined. There is therefore conceptual space for three further types of view that are the duals in these two dimensions of the three distinguished. There is, first, scope for a

kind of contextualism—an instance of *non-indexical* contextualism[7]—that agrees with classical contextualism on the matter of location but disagrees on the matter of semantic significance. On this view, Ashley's two imaginary tokens of "I know the bank will be open tomorrow morning" express the same proposition in the low-stakes and high-stakes scenarios, but this proposition takes a different truth-value as a function of the difference in what is at stake for the ascriber—Ashley—in those scenarios. Second, there is scope for a view which, like classical contextualism, regards ascriptions of knowledge as varying in their content (truth-conditions) as a function of variation in pragmatic characteristics but holds, like interest-relative invariantism, that the relevant characteristics are those not of the ascriber but of the subject, or subjects, to whom knowledge is ascribed. On such a view, a predicate of the form, " … knows that P", will vary in its satisfaction-conditions rather as e.g. "… is sharp enough" so varies depending on whether it is being applied to a bread knife or a surgical scalpel. And finally, there is scope for an example of the view that *content itself* is, locally, assessment-sensitive: that what proposition is expressed by a token knowledge-ascription is itself a function of pragmatic characteristics of an assessor of it, with assessment-sensitivity of truth-value merely a consequence of such assessment-relativity of what is said.[8] I do not know if anyone has ever seriously proposed a view of either of these two latter kinds for the semantics of "knows" but in any case neither will feature further in the discussion to follow. However in view of the difficulties, to be touched on below, that classical contextualists have encountered in trying to make good the claim that "knows" is indeed semantically context-sensitive, its non-indexical counterpart presents as worthy of serious consideration. It will surface from time to time below.

4 The Location Question

So, *whose* standards (saliences, interests, etc.) count? The cases 1-4 considered to this point involve *self*-ascriptions of knowledge. So they have the subject of the knowledge-ascription coincide with the ascriber coincide with an assessor. They therefore can suggest at most that we should be receptive to *some* sort of variabilism. They are powerless to motivate one rather than another of the variabilist views. Can we find some crucial experiments?

Here is a simple kind of case that has seemed to contextualists to favour their view over IRI:

Case 5 (*High-stakes ascriber, low-stakes subject*): Ashley and Bobbie are situated as in Case 2. They ask Chris, another customer who is leaving the building, whether the bank will be open tomorrow. Chris says "Yes, I happen to know it will—I was in here a couple of weeks ago on a Saturday." Ashley says to Bobbie *sotto voce*, "Hmm. **That chap doesn't know any better than we do**. We had better join the queue."
Invited intuition: Ashley speaks truly even though—as we may suppose—there is nothing at stake for Chris, the subject, in whether the bank will open on the Saturday or not. Here, it seems the interests that count are those of the ascriber, even when the subject is someone else whose interests are different (and less urgent).

The significance of this kind of case is prima facie countered, however, by the following simple case that may seem to point back towards IRI:

Case 6 (*Low-stakes ascriber, high-stakes subject*): Ashley, Bobbie and Chris are again situated as in Case 5. Chris is puzzled that Ashley and Bobbie have joined the queue again notwithstanding the advice they were just given about Saturday opening and asks them about this. They explain their concern about the risk of foreclosure of their mortgage. Chris says, "OK, I understand now. I guess you guys had better not assume that the bank *will* be open tomorrow."
Invited intuition: Chris speaks truly. But since "You know that P but had better not assume that P" is some kind of conceptual solecism, Chris's remark is presumably a commitment to "**You do not know that the bank will be open tomorrow**."[9]

So, neither contextualism nor IRI does well in all cases—in fact they do just as well and badly as each other: well enough in cases where subject and ascriber are identified, but badly in various kinds of case where they are distinct—which are of course the crucial cases. This might encourage the thought that *both* have the location issue wrong and one might therefore wonder whether knowledge relativism promises an overall better ride. And indeed we can very simply modify Case 5 to get one that seems to favour knowledge relativism over contextualism *and* IRI:

*Case 5** Ashley and Bobbie are dithering in the foyer and then merely overhear Chris (in a phone conversation) say "Look, I don't need to wait here now. My partner, Denny, was here a couple of weeks ago on a

Saturday and can vouch that this bank will be open tomorrow." Ashley remarks, *sotto voce*, "We can't rely on that; **that Denny doesn't know any better than we do**."
Invited intuition: Ashley speaks truly.

However while knowledge relativism may possibly best explain some intuitions in cases like this where subject, ascriber and assessor are all distinct, it faces the basic problem that it must coincide in its predictions with contextualism in any case where ascriber and assessor are one. So any two-agent problem cases for contextualism, like Case 6, are problems for relativism too.

These conflicting intuitions present a potential paradox if we think that they do, near enough, show that there is *some* kind of relativity to pragmatic factors in the offing. How can that be so if the intuitions also suggest that each of the possible hypotheses about location is open to counterexample?

5 A Contextualist Attempt to Explain Away the Recalcitrant "Data"

There is a response that at least one leading contextualist has offered that is potentially something of a game-changer. Keith DeRose observes[10] that in taking patterns of conversation like those illustrated by Case 6 to constitute prima facie counterexamples to contextualism, we are implicitly taking it for granted that the mechanism whereby the context of a token knowledge-ascription contrives to set the standards for its truth is simply by identifying them with the standards of the ascriber: that "X knows that P" as uttered by Y is true just if X's relevant epistemic situation, replicated by Y but without change in the pragmatic aspects of Y's situation, would suffice for the truth of "Y knows that P". DeRose points out that there is absolutely no reason why that has to be the only kind of case. It is very familiar that in a wide range of examples—'impure indexicals' like some personal pronouns, demonstratives, and gradable adjectives—the semantic values of context-sensitive expressions featuring in particular utterances are settled as a function, in part, of the intentions of the utterer. It is therefore open to the contextualist to allow a similar role for the intentions of the author of a knowledge-ascription in determining the standard of epistemic achievement to be applied in fixing its

truth-conditions. This can of course be the standard she would (take herself to) have to meet in order to satisfy the relevant ascription. But it need not be. In certain contexts—like that of Case 6—an ascriber may instead set a standard that defers to the needs, interest, or saliences of the subject. In such a case, IRI and contextualism will coincide in their predictions of the truth-conditions of the knowledge-ascription.

I described this 'flexible contextualist' manoeuvre as a potential game-changer. It is, of course, merely ad hoc unless a principled and comprehensive account is provided of the conditions under which relevant variations in a speaker's intentions can be expected, enabling empirically testable predictions of variable truth-conditions. DeRose expends some effort in that direction, to not implausible effect. His basic suggestion is that knowledge-ascriptions may be harnessed to two quite different kinds of project: whether X knows that P may be of interest because one wishes to rate X as a potential *source of information*; but it may also be of interest in the context of assessing X's performance as a *rational agent*. In the former type of case one will naturally impose standards on X's claim to knowledge appropriate to one's own needs and interests. Just this is what seems to be happening in the kind of high-stakes ascriber, low-stakes subject cases illustrated. But in the latter type of case, when the focus shifts to what it is rational for X to do, it may well be (one's conception of) X's needs and interests that determine what level of cognitive achievement it is reasonable to demand if X is to be credited with the knowledge that P. And this seems to be the driver for the (invited) intuitions operative in kind of the low-stakes ascriber, high-stakes subject cases like 6.

I have no space here to consider further whether the flexible contextualist manoeuvre can be developed so as to deliver fully satisfyingly on its initial promise. However two points are worth emphasis. The first is that an exactly analogous flexibility on the location question is, obviously, available to knowledge relativism. Whatever potential shifts of interest are offered to explain variations in the location of standards from the point of view of a knowledge-ascriber, they will be available also to explain such variations from the perspective of a knowledge-ascription assessor. Flexibility thus offers no prospect of an advantage for contextualism over relativism. Second, there is no analogous move open to IRI, which is stuck with the idea that the standards for the truth of a knowledge-ascription are inflexibly set as a function of the needs, interests, or saliences of its subject. If IRI is to restore dialectical parity after (and presuming the success of) the flexible contextualist manoeuvre, it

must therefore explain away cases, like Case 5, where the location seems to go with an ascriber (or assessor), rather than the subject, as some kind of linguistic mistake. What are the prospects?

It is important to take the full measure of the challenge. Any presumed *knowledgeable* ascription of knowledge to a third party entails—by closure and factivity—an ascription of the same knowledge to oneself. And of course if IRI is right, and one's standards are relatively high, one may not have that knowledge. In that case, one won't be in position to ascribe it to a third party either, whatever their standards. There is therefore in general no difficulty for IRI in explaining our *reluctance to ascribe* knowledge in such cases. That, however, is not the relevant *explanandum*. What the defender of IRI has to explain—what the high-stakes ascriber low-stakes subject examples are meant to illustrate—is a readiness of high-stakes ascribers to (falsely) *deny* knowledge that P to a relevant low-stakes subject. (Thus Ashley: "That person doesn't know any better than we do.")

It would take us too far afield to pursue the details of all the responses that defenders of IRI have offered to this challenge. Let me here merely record the opinion that they have not so far proved successful.[11]

6 Ugly Conjunctions

We have so far been concerned with the challenge to the different variabilist views to capture and explain not just some but all the pragmatically variable patterns of use of "knows" and its cognates that, according to the 'intuitions', competent speakers seem to find acceptable. And at this point, provided they are prepared to go 'flexible', and thus steal the cases that otherwise favour IRI, contextualism and relativism seem to be tied in the lead. But there is also an obverse challenge: to avoid predicting uses to be acceptable which are apt to impress as anything but. How do the different theories fare on this?

IRI imposes a condition on knowledge-ascriptions as follows:

> X knows that P at t is true only if X's belief at t that P is based on cognitive accomplishments that meet standards appropriate to X's practical interests (or whatever) at t,

and consequently appears to do very badly. Suppose X fails this condition—his practical interests are such that it is vitally important at t for him to

be right about whether or not P, and he does at t truly believe that P, but does so on the basis of evidence that, though probative to a degree, impresses us as too slight to confer on him knowledge that P. Then IRI seems to treat as on an equal footing either of two remedies: X can either improve his evidence; or he can work on his practical interests in such a way that much less is at stake whether he is right about P or not. He can grow his evidence to meet the standards for knowledge imposed by his practical interests at t; or he can so modify his practical interests as to shrink, as it were, the standards which knowledge that P requires. Suppose he takes the latter course. Then a situation may arise at a later time, t*, when we can truly affirm an 'ugly conjunction' like:

> X didn't (have enough evidence to) know P at t but does at t* and has exactly the same body of P-relevant evidence at t* as at t.

Such a remark seems drastically foreign to the concept of knowledge we actually have. It seems absurd to suppose that a thinker can acquire knowledge without further investigation simply because his practical interests happen so to change as to reduce the importance of the matter at hand. Another potential kind of ugly conjunction is the synchronic case for different subjects:

> X knows that P but Y does not, and X and Y have exactly the same body of P-relevant evidence.

when affirmed purely because X and Y have sufficiently different practical interests. IRI, as we noted earlier, must seemingly allow that instances of such a conjunction can be true.[12]

So far, so bad for IRI. But does contextualism escape any analogue of these problems? Certainly, there can be no commitment to either form of ugly conjunction so long as we are concerned with cases where the relevant standards are set as those of an ascriber distinct from X and Y. In that case the same verdict must be returned about X at t and at t*, or about X and Y, simply because some single set of standards is in play. But what if the context is one where contextualism has gone *flexible*, availing itself of the licence to defer to standards set by the (changing) pragmatic characteristics of the subject(s)? In that case, *non-indexical* contextualism, at least, can offer no evident barrier to the assertibility in suitable circumstances of either type of ugly conjunction. So much is simply

the price of the flexibility it appropriates to accommodate the cases that seemed to favour IRI.

Regular (indexical) flexible contextualism, by contrast, stands to suffer a commitment only to the metalinguistic counterparts:

> "X doesn't (have enough evidence to) know P" was true at t but "X does (have enough evidence to) know P" is true at t* and X has exactly the same body of P-relevant evidence at t* as at t;
>
> "X knows that P" and "Y does not know that P" are both true and X and Y have exactly the same body of P-relevant evidence.

These are spared 'ugliness' by the postulated shifts in the semantic values of the occurrences of "know" which are the trademark of the classical contextualist view and block disquotation. Nevertheless, they are unquestionably extremely strange to an English ear.

Does knowledge relativism fare better with these potential snags? Again, the interesting question concerns a flexible relativism: one with the resources to handle cases where the pragmatic features of its subject determine the standards that a correct knowledge-ascription has to meet. And of course for the relativist, as for the non-indexical contextualist, there are no complications occasioned by shifts in the semantic value of "knows". We know to expect that relativism will coincide in its predictions with non-indexical contextualism in all scenarios where knowledge is ascribed in the indicative mood and where there is no contrast between the ascriber and an assessor. It is therefore no more than the price paid for the flexibility to copy the verdicts of IRI in cases that reflect well on the latter that relativism, like non-indexical contextualism, will sanction certain cases, both synchronic and diachronic, of ugly conjunctions.

So here is the scorecard.

IRI is, seemingly, encumbered by a commitment to the assertibility, in suitable circumstances, of both forms of ugly conjunction.

However, commitments of this kind are not, as is sometimes assumed, a distinctive problem for that particular form of variabilism:

Non-indexical contextualism and *relativism* both share that commitment provided they avail themselves of the option of 'flexibility'. And of course, if they do not so avail themselves, the IRI-favourable cases stand as counterexamples to their proposals.

Classical (flexible) contextualism is committed only to metalinguistic versions of ugly conjunctions. That is not as bad only provided (i)

the metalinguistic versions are not as ugly and (ii) their disquotation is indeed blocked, i.e. provided "knows" is indeed context-sensitive.

7 Is There Any Good Reason to Think That "Knows" is Context-Sensitive?

When utterances of the same type-sentence in different contexts appear to be able to take differing truth-values, context-sensitivity—that is, sensitivity of the content expressed to features of the utterance-context—is plausibly the most natural explanation. So, anyway, it must have seemed to the original authors of contextualism when first reflecting on the apparent variability of "knows". But that was before the rival invariantist kinds of explanation here considered entered the scene. Can evidence be mustered to restore the presumption that context-sensitivity is at the root of the variability phenomena and so give classical contextualism an edge?

The literature on the matter is complex, extensive and inconclusive; it is fair to say that there are no uncontroversial, or even generally agreed criteria for (non-) context-sensitivity.[13] Jason Stanley argues persuasively[14] that the alleged context-sensitivity of "knows" is not felicitously assimilated to that of any of gradable adjectives ("rich", "tall"), pronouns ("I", "you", "this"), or quantificational determiners ("all", "many", "some"). Schaffer and Szabo grant this but suggest instead a comparison with so called A-quantifiers ("always", "somewhere").[15] Still, there is no reason in any case why a *bona fide* context-sensitive expression should behave exactly like context-sensitive expressions of other kinds. Can any *general* reason be given to think that "knows" and its cognates are context-sensitive, whether or not their behaviour sustains close comparison with that of other, uncontroversially context-sensitive expressions?

Here is a natural litmus. If "S" contains context-sensitives, then distinct tokens of "S" in different mouths may have different truth-conditions. So distinct token questions, "S?" in the mouths of different questioners may impose different conditions on the appropriateness of an affirmative answer. Hence if "knows" and its cognates are context-sensitive, it should be possible to design a pair of conversational contexts within which a pair of tokens of the question, "Does X know that P?" presented simultaneously to a single agent—the *questionee*—can respectively properly deserve prima facie conflicting answers.

Call this the *Forked Tongue test*. It's pretty crude—it won't, for instance, distinguish context-sensitivity from simple ambiguity. Still, its credentials as at least a necessary condition for context-sensitivity seem good. Let's construct a simple illustration. Suppose Ashley and Bobbie are wondering whether to duck out of the queues at the bank and go to get coffee and cake. Chris meanwhile, standing nearby, is on the phone to Denny. Bobbie overhears Chris say "Yes, my dear, there is. There is a Caffè Nero just two minutes away where they serve excellent coffee and *torta di cioccolata*." Bobbie says, "Excuse me, but did you say that there is a nice coffee shop just two minutes away." Chris replies, "Ah. Actually, no. I mean: I did say that, but I was talking to my partner about a location downtown."

Thus: "just two minutes away" passes the Forked Tongue test. It was the context of Denny's question, rather than Bobbie's, that set the reference of "just two minutes way" in Chris's original remark. When Bobbie puts a token of essentially the same type-question, the reference shifts and the correct answer changes.

Can we get a similar result with "know"? Let's try to construct an analogously shaped case, but where the questioners' respective contexts differ in respect of the stakes they have in the truth of the answer. So

Case 7: Ashley and Bobbie are dithering in the foyer of the bank as before. They talk about the risk of foreclosure and Bobbie says, "Look, we had better ask someone." Chris and Denny standing near the back of one of the queues, happen to overhear their conversation. Denny is also perturbed by the length of the queues and says to Chris, "Do you know if the bank will be open tomorrow? We could come back then if it will, but I'd rather not leave it till Monday since I have a hairdresser's appointment on Monday morning and am meeting Stacy for coffee in the afternoon." Chris, recalling the Saturday morning visit of two weeks earlier says, "It's OK. I happen to know the bank will be open tomorrow. I'll drive you over after breakfast." Ashley, overhearing, says, "Excuse me, but did you say that you know the bank will be open tomorrow?" Chris, mindful of Ashley and Bobbie's overheard priorities, replies, "Ah. Actually, no. I mean, I did use those words, but I was talking to Denny here, who has less at stake than you guys."

Case-hardened contextualists may find this dialogue unexceptionable, but I would suggest that Denny, Ashley and Bobbie might reasonably be baffled by Chris's last reply. It is also striking that, if the

dialogue *is* regarded as unexceptionable, it should remain so if all play with "know' is dropped and the operative question is rephrased as simply, "Will the bank be open tomorrow?" But in that case the explanation of the acceptability of Chris's final remark will presumably have nothing to do with context-sensitivity in the operative question. So it looks as though the contextualist faces a choice between admitting that "know" fails the Forked Tongue test in this instance, or insisting that it passes but that this fact has no significance for its putative context-sensitivity.

8 Is There Any Good Reason to Think that "Knows" is **Not** Context-Sensitive?

The consideration that has proved perhaps the most influential in this regard in the recent debates, and indeed has provided the prime motivation for knowledge relativism, is provided by ostensible patterns of *correction and retraction* that our knowledge-talk seems to exhibit. Here's a toy example of the relevant kind. Chris and Denny have gone away for the weekend and have left Ashley and Bobbie the keys for the use of their car.

> *Ashley*: Do you know where their car is parked?
> *Bobbie*: Yes, I do—Chris texted me that they left it in the multi-storey lot as usual after badminton on Friday.
> *Ashley*: But, as you very well know, there have been several car thefts in the neighbourhood recently. We should have gone to get it earlier. What if it's been stolen?
> *Bobbie*: I wasn't reckoning with that. OK, I guess I don't *know* that it is in the multi-storey lot—we had better go and check.

Here, the reader is intended to understand, Ashley's second question doesn't change Bobbie's epistemic situation—doesn't give her any more evidence. But it does persuade her that it is appropriate to impose more demanding standards of evidence on her answer than she started out doing—and she now disavows the knowledge she originally claimed.

Now, the crucial point for the relativist is the suggestion that this disavowal is to be understood as a *retraction*. Consider this continuation of the dialogue:

Ashley: Was your first answer, about knowing where the car is, true when you originally gave it, before I raised the possibility of the car's being stolen?

and two possible responses:

Bobbie: *Either* (a) Sure, but I could not truly repeat the words I used, once I was reminded of the recent incidence of car-theft.

Or (b) No; as I just said, I wasn't thinking about the possibility of the car's being stolen. I shouldn't have claimed to know that it is in the multi-storey lot.

The relativist's idea is that contextualism ought to predict that answer (a) can be acceptable. For if the content of a knowledge-ascription is relative to standards set by the context of ascription, then suitable changes in that context may be expected to go along with a shift in content consistent with tokens of a single type-ascription being respectively true in an original context but false in a later. But in fact answer (a) is, on the face of it, simply bizarre, and the natural answer, in context, is answer (b), which notably not merely supplants but critiques and retracts the original. That is evidence, it is alleged, that the content of the knowledge claim has not shifted in response to the change of standards, but has remained invariant throughout.

Note that the contextualist can of course allow Bobbie to affirm not merely that she doesn't know now where the car is but that she *didn't know* when she made her first answer. That is because the referent of "know", even as used in that past tense claim, will—according to contextualism—have shifted to some high-standards knowledge relation in response to Ashley's invoking the possibility of theft, whereas Bobbie's original claim will have involved some different, low-standards relation. So contextualism can actually predict what *sounds like* a retraction: "I didn't know that P". What, the critic will charge, it cannot predict is agents' willingness to treat such remarks *as* retractions—their refusal to stand by the different thing that, according to contextualism, they originally said.

9 But are the Retraction Data Solid? A Doubt

It is, however, a further question whether our patterns of apparent retraction of knowledge claims really *do* provide the powerful argument for relativism that its supporters, notably MacFarlane, have urged. I'll canvass two doubts.

To begin with, there are issues about what exactly should count as the manifestation in practice of the relevant kind of retraction. Do we, in response to changes in pragmatic factors, really retract former ascriptions of knowledge in exactly the sense that relativism needs? We have already noted an important distinction in this connection. Consider this dialogue:

> *Ashley (on a fast moving train in New Mexico)*: Look, there is a cougar!
> *Bobbie*: Where? I don't see it.
> *Ashley*: Just there, crouching by those rocks.
> *Bobbie*: I still don't see it.
> *Ashley*: Oh, I am sorry. I see now that it was just a cat-shaped shadow on the rocks. *There wasn't a cougar.*

Here Ashley's last speech is a retraction in anyone's book: she is denying, using appropriately changed context-sensitive language, exactly the thing she originally said. But to accomplish this, it suffices merely to change the tense of the original and negate it. Whereas under the aegis of classical contextualism about "knows", corresponding moves do *not* suffice for retraction of a knowledge-ascription, as we observed. Contextualism allows that Bobbie may perfectly properly admit, in response to Ashley's canvassing the possibility of car-theft, both that she does not know where the car is and *did not know when first asked*. The latter admission is not a retraction of the original claim, since—according to contextualism—it concerns a different, high-standards knowledge relation. Accordingly, the relativist needs to point to clear evidence in our linguistic practice that the disposition to retract knowledge claims when the stakes are raised goes deeper than the apparent denial involved in merely changing the tense and negating the result. Speakers will have to be reliably and regularly disposed to say things that distinguish what they are doing from such merely apparent retractions, since contextualism can take these in stride.

What kinds of sayings would manifest that distinction? Bobbie was presented above as doing something of the needed sort by saying "I wasn't thinking about the possibility of the car's being stolen. *I shouldn't have claimed to know that it is in the multi-storey lot.*" But that is exactly *not* what she should say on the assumption of knowledge relativism. Relativism allows that the earlier claim, in the lower-standards context then current, can have been perfectly appropriate—indeed, from the

standpoint of that context, *true*. So if that were the form that retractions of knowledge claims were generally to assume, the fact would be at odds with rather than advantageous to relativism. What is wanted, it seems, is a form of repudiation which is neither a simple denial, modulo any needed changes in tense, etc., nor a repudiation of the propriety of one's making the earlier claim in its original context.

The salient remaining possibility is something along the lines of, "What I said before is false". Unfortunately for relativism, even this pattern of retraction, should it be prevalent, is too coarse to be unpredictable by contextualism. The reason it is so is because in order to give what passes as an appropriate disquotational specification of what was said by some utterance in a previous context—"What he expressed before by S was that P"—it is not necessary—or indeed possible—to adjust *every* kind of context-sensitive expression that S may have contained. To be sure, if Ashley says, "Right now, I am going crazy waiting in this queue", then in order to specify what she said, we'll need to shift pronouns and tenses and temporal adverbs in routine ways: what Ashley said was that, *at that time*, *she was* going crazy waiting in *that* queue. But this does not apply in general to, for instance, gradable adjectives nor, so the contextualist may contend, to "knows" and its cognates. If an inexperienced hospital theatre orderly asserts, "This scalpel is very sharp", intending roughly that you could easily cut yourself if handling it carelessly, he may quite properly be reported to an expert surgeon as having said that *that particular scalpel is very sharp*, even when the context set by conversation with the surgeon is understood as one in which the notion of an instrument's sharpness is high-standards—for instance, is tied to its suitability for refined neurosurgery. And in such a context, the orderly may have to accept a reprimand and allow that "What I said—viz. that that scalpel is very sharp—was false." In short: where some kinds of context-sensitive language are involved, admissible ways of specifying 'what was said' are not guaranteed to deliver an actual content previously asserted rather than a counterpart spawned by differences between the original context of use and the context of the specification.

Of course it's usually easy enough to disambiguate in such cases if the conversational participants find it important to do so. The hospital orderly may (perhaps unwisely) protest that all he meant was that the scalpel had enough of a fine edge to be dangerous if handled carelessly. Perhaps therefore the relativist argument should be that we don't go in for such disambiguation where knowledge claims are concerned but, as

it were, *simply* retract. But is that true? With "sharp" now annexed to high (neurosurgical) standards, the orderly has to have recourse to other language to explain what he originally meant to say. If that is allowed to constitute sticking by his former claim, then we surely will want to say something similarly exculpatory about the credentials of our erstwhile epistemic situation and an associated knowledge claim even as we feel obliged to revoke the latter purely because of pressure of elevated standards.

It is, accordingly, open to question whether relativists have succeeded in tabling a notion of retraction with each of the needed features (a) that we do go in for retraction of knowledge claims under changes of pragmatic parameters of context, (b) that relativism predicts this and (c) that contextualism cannot predict as much.

10 But are the Retraction Data Solid? A Second Doubt

A second doubt about the alleged pro-relativistic significance that our patterns of retraction of knowledge claims supposedly carry concerns the *extent* of the phenomenon. Relativism predicts that two contexts of assessment, c_1 and c_2, differing only in the values of pragmatic parameters, may be such that one mandates an endorsement of a knowledge-ascription and another its repudiation. The examples so far considered have tended to focus on one direction: where a knowledge-ascription is made in a relatively low-standards context and then, apparently, retracted as the stakes rise, or certain error-possibilities become salient, or whatever the relevant kind of change is proposed to be. What about the converse direction? Does our practice pattern as relativism should expect?

Let's try an example:

Case 8 begins exactly as Case 2: It is Friday afternoon, and Ashley and Bobbie have arrived at the bank to deposit their salary cheques. However there are long queues at all the bank counters. Ashley recalls being at the bank on a Saturday morning two weeks ago and says, "Let's come back tomorrow. **I know the bank will be open tomorrow morning**." Suppose that the bank will indeed be open on the Saturday morning. However the couple's mortgage lender has written to say the company will foreclose unless the cheques are in the account by Monday to service

the monthly repayment, and Ashley and Bobbie are mindful of this. Bobbie says, "But what if the bank has changed its opening hours? Or what if the Saturday morning opening was some kind of one-off promotion?" Ashley says, "You're right. **I suppose I don't really *know* that the bank will be open tomorrow** (even though I am pretty confident that it will). We had better join the queue."
Invited intuition: Ashley correctly retracts her original claim. There is too much at stake to take the risk of e.g. a change in banking hours.

But now let's run the example on. Let it so happen that Eli, who is the manager of the local branch of Ashley's and Bobbie's mortgage company, is also waiting in one of the queues and overhears their conversation. Remembering 'that nice young couple' and taking pity on them, Eli comes across and says, "Don't worry, guys. Just between us, there is a degree of bluff about these 'final reminder' notices. We never actually foreclose without first making every effort to conduct an interview with the borrowers. It will be absolutely fine if this month's payment is serviced by the end of next week." Ashley and Bobbie are mightily relieved and Ashley says, "Aha. **So actually I *did* know that the bank will be open tomorrow**! Let's go and get a coffee and come back then."

Relativism predicts that Ashley's last emboldened remark is perfectly in order—indeed it expresses a commitment: the context after Eli's intervention is once again low-stakes, so low-standards, so Ashley's knowledge claim is now mandated by the original evidence and the intermediate knowledge denial should be retracted. But while relief and the decision to get a coffee are reasonable enough, Ashley's last remark is actually utterly bizarre.

This is a crucial issue for knowledge relativism. I have no space here to pursue it in detail, but I conjecture that there are actually no clear cases where, moving from a high- to a low-standards context, and *mindful of the fact*, we are content, without acquiring any further relevant evidence, simply to retract a former knowledge-disclaimer and to affirm its contradictory. Where P was the proposition of which knowledge was denied, we may well say things like, "Well, I guess it's reasonable now if we take it that P" or "We can now probably safely assume that P". But the claim to now *know* that P will simply invite the challenge to re-confront the error-possibilities made salient in the previous high-standards context. And when the changes involved in the context shift are wholly pragmatic, we will tend to regard ourselves as, strictly, no better placed,

epistemically, to discount those possibilities than we were before. For example, Ashley should not now after conversation with Eli, any more than earlier, want to claim *knowledge* that the Saturday opening of two weeks ago was not a one-off promotion.

The qualification, "mindful of the fact" is crucial. No doubt it may happen that, forgetting altogether about a previous high-standards situation, we may in a new, relaxed context be prepared to make knowledge claims that contradict earlier disclaimers. But these claims will properly rank as *retractions* only if we recall the previous context and what we said then. And if we do that, recollection of the error-possibilities that drove the early disclaimers is still likely to inhibit our outright claiming the relevant bits of knowledge even if it no longer seems urgent to reckon with those possibilities. Relativism, by contrast, predicts that there is now a mandate for such claims and that any such inhibitions about them conflict with the correct semantics for "knows".[16]

11 Conclusion

Variabilism, in all its stripes, is motivated by an *appearance*: that the language game of knowledge-ascriptions and denials incorporates a dependence of their truth-values on pragmatics—on interests, or salience, or stakes. Each of the four theoretical proposals here considered, albeit offering very different accounts of the nature of the dependence involved, takes this appearance to be veridical. If, as has been the general tendency of the foregoing discussion, none of these accounts is satisfactory—if each under-predicts (fails to predict some uses) or over-predicts (predicts uses with which we are uncomfortable)—the natural conclusion is that the appearance is *not* veridical: that our discourse involving "knows" and its cognates is subject to no genuine pragmatics-sensitive variability of truth-conditions.

If we draw that conclusion, two possibilities remain. One, of course, is invariantism. But invariantism must come to a view about where the invariant threshold for knowledge falls, and wherever it is placed, it will have to be acknowledged that a significant body of our knowledge claims, or knowledge-disclaimers, are false and an explanation will therefore be owing of why so much of our linguistic practice with "knows" and its cognates falls into error. Invariantists have not been slow to respond to this challenge.[17] I here record the opinion, for which I have no space to argue, that to date their efforts have been unpromising.

The other possibility is a view concerning "knows" and its cognates that stands comparison with what deflationists about truth say about "true". For the deflationist about truth, very familiarly, it is a metaphysical mistake to ask after the character of the property that "true" expresses. The proper use of the word is accountable, rather, not to the nature of an assumed referent in the realm of properties but to the service of certain practical purposes—notably indirect endorsement, and generalisation—that it enables us to accomplish. Correspondingly, a deflationism about knowledge will discharge the idea that there is any determinate epistemic relation or—in deference to contextualism—family of relations that the proper use of "knows" serves to record and whose character determines the truth-conditions of knowledge-ascriptions. Rather the use of the word needs to be understood by reference to the practical purposes—notably, for example, as DeRose observed, the accreditation of potential informants and the appraisal of agents' rational performance—that it enables us to accomplish. The variability phenomena surface as one or another of these purposes comes to the fore in a particular pragmatic context. But it is a metaphysical mistake to project these phenomena onto the putative nature of an assumed referent, or referents, as IRI and contextualism attempt to do, and seek to explain them thereby.

Relativism doesn't make *that* mistake. Someone who holds that "X knows that P" is assessment-sensitive has already discharged the realism about the knowledge relation that deflationism would counsel us against. But if the suggestion of the preceding section about the asymmetries between our apparent retractions of knowledge-ascriptions and apparent retractions of knowledge-disclaimers are correct, then the concept of knowledge we actually have betrays an (inflationary) invariantist tendency which relativism simply misdescribes. Of course it is open to a relativist to acknowledge this, and to present relativism as reformist. That proposal, however, stands in need of an argument that any purpose would be served by reform. The essence of the case for deflationism about "knows" is two-fold: negatively, that the combination of our tendency to allow the standards for its application to inflate indefinitely while unwilling to accept, with the sceptic, that it never applies, betrays a concept with certain inbuilt tensions and no determinate reference; positively, that the word nevertheless supplies the valuable resources that the variability phenomena reflect. The first part of that might suggest the desirability of reform. But that is compensated for by the second.

Such a general conception of knowledge—or better: of the function of "knows"—is nothing new,[18] although the present suggestion, that its correctness is the principal lesson which the variability phenomena have to teach us, may be so. If it is correct, there is a striking corollary: the idea that knowledge should come first in analytical epistemology could not be more misguided. Rather, knowledge—the putative substantive referent of "knows"—comes nowhere.

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Notes

1. I draw substantially on my 2017 "The Variability of 'Knows': An Opinionated Overview" in Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Contextualism*, Routledge. pp. 13–31.
2. This second aspect—Williamson's 'Knowledge First' programme—is of course strictly independent of and additional to the primitivism.
3. Cohen (1986), DeRose (1992).
4. Hawthorne (2004), Stanley (2005); see also Fantl and McGrath (2007).
5. Or sometimes: subject-sensitive invariantism.
6. MacFarlane (2005, 2014).
7. As MacFarlane terms it.
8. For experimentation with a version of this kind of view, see Cappelen (2008). Weatherson (2009) makes an interesting application of it to address certain puzzles with indicative conditionals.
9. This is different to—but perhaps not quite as clean cut as—Stanley's (2005) tactic which is to develop examples where a low-stakes ascriber does not know that the subject is high-stakes. For instance, suppose Chris does not notice Ashley and Bobbie join the queue. But Denny, Chris's partner, who has overheard the exchange, does and nudges Chris with a quizzical glance in their direction. Chris says: "Oh, I guess they must have remembered some reason why they can't come back tomorrow—after all, **they now know that the bank will be open then**." This time, we are supposed to have the intuition that the knowledge-ascription is false.
10. See DeRose (2009, chapter 7).
11. John Hawthorne (2004, chapter 4 at pages 162–166) attempts to enlist the help of what he calls the "psychological literature on heuristics and biases". Hawthorne's idea is that one lesson of this literature is that the becoming salient of a certain risk in a high-stakes situation (e.g. that of the bank's changing its opening hours) characteristically leads us to overestimate its probability in general and hence to project our own

ignorance onto subjects in low-stakes situations too. DeRose (2009, chapter 7, section 3) counters that the phenomenon to be explained—high-stakes agents' denial of knowledge to low-stakes subjects—extends to cases where the former take it that they *do* nevertheless know the proposition in question (because they take themselves to meet the elevated standards demanded by their high-stakes context). That seems right, but I do not see that Hawthorne needed the "projection of ignorance" component in his proposal in any case; a tendency to overestimation of the probabilities of salient sources of error would seem sufficient to do the work he wants on its own. The objection remains, however, that if an overestimation of the risk of a certain source of error underlies a high-stakes ascriber's denial of knowledge to themselves, the good standing of that denial is already compromised—whereas IRI requires precisely that the high-stakes context should validate it.

12. If evidence, too, were an interest-relative notion, then a possible direction of defence for IRI against these ugly-conjunctive commitments would be to try to make a case that variation in the interests of a subject sufficient to make the difference between her knowing that P and failing to do so must also affect what evidence she possesses, thus undercutting the assumption that evidence may remain constant for a subject at different times, or for distinct subjects when their interests differ. Stanley canvasses this suggestion (2005, p. 181). It misses the nub of the difficulty, however, since there will presumably be cases where the relevant evidence is known with certainty and hence must be reckoned to be in common no matter what the practical interests of the subjects, or subject at different times.
13. For discussion, see Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009, chapter 2).
14. Stanley (2005, chapter 3).
15. Schaffer and Szabo (2013). Their proposal deserves a properly detailed discussion. I believe the comparison is flawed but I have no space to enlarge on that here.
16. This objection should be contrasted with another made by Montminy (2009). His contention is that when *in a high-standards context* we disclaim knowledge that P, we will also judge that we will be wrong to reclaim knowledge that P in a subsequent low-standards context, even though—he allows—that is what we will do once such a context is entered into and relativism says we will be right to do so. I agree with the first part of that—namely, that we will take a dim view, while in the high-standards context, of the envisaged subsequent reclamation and that since relativism says that there is nothing wrong with the subsequent reclamation, there is here a tension between something we are inclined to think and what relativism thinks we ought to think. But, unless I misread

Montminy, I'm saying something different and stronger as well: namely that we *won't actually make a retraction* of the previous knowledge denial when we get into the low-standards context.

Knowledge relativism, in other words, mispredicts not just aspects of our attitudes to our practice with "knows" but our practice itself. (MacFarlane responds to Montminy in section 8.6 of his (2014), see especially p. 198 and following. His response does not engage the objection made here.)

17. See, for example, Williamson (2005).
18. The germ is famously present in Austin (1946, pp. 97–103) where a view is outlined on which utterances of the form "I know that such-and-such" serve a *performative* rather than a descriptive function, and the function of "I know" is in effect to offer a *promise* of truth, on the basis of which others are entitled to act, form beliefs, or claim to know in turn. Austin's ideas receive a thoroughgoing, sympathetic development in Lawlor (2013), though I do not know how far she would welcome the deflationism prefigured here.

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