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Two Purposes of Knowledge-Attribution and the Contextualism Debate

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In this chapter, we follow Edward Craig's (1990) advice: ask what the concept of knowledge does for us and use our findings as clues about its application conditions. What a concept does for us is a matter of what we can do with it, and what we do with concepts is deploy them in thought and language. So, we will examine the purposes we have in *attributing* knowledge. This chapter examines two such purposes, agent-evaluation and informant-suggestion, and brings the results to bear on an important debate about the application conditions of the concept of knowledge—the debate between contextualists and their rivals.

§1. First Purpose: Agent-evaluation

It is a familiar feature of daily life that we criticize and defend actions by attributing knowledge. Examples are easy to come by. The tub has a drip. Your spouse is applying great force to the cold-water handle. You finally say, "You know that's not going to work! Let's just call the plumber." Here you criticize your spouse's action by attributing a piece of knowledge. Or, to use an example of Jason Stanley's (2005: 10), suppose you and a friend are driving to a restaurant in a city you're visiting. At an intersection, you turn left toward a residential neighborhood instead of right toward a row of restaurants. Your friend looks at you skeptically. You say, "It's OK. I know this is the way to the restaurant." Here you defend your action by self-attributing knowledge.

Nor do we cease to attribute knowledge for these evaluative purposes when the stakes are high. On Friday (a few decades ago), when you see that the lines are long at Keith DeRose's bank, and you really *must* have that check deposited by Monday, you can defend your choice not to wait in the long lines by saying, "It's OK; I know it's open Saturday, I'll come back then." It might be harder to get away with a knowledge-

attribution in such practical environments, but the attribution can still be used to defend one's action. And to criticize as well. If Keith keeps checking and checking, at some point we will criticize him, "OK, Keith; now you know! You don't need to check anymore."

These examples given so far are first- and second-person present tense. But we can and do evaluate actions by using third-person and past-tense knowledge-attributions. On Monday, after the check has cleared, one might defend Keith's waiting to deposit it on Saturday by saying, "He was fine to wait; he knew it was open the next day." Keith might do so himself as well.¹ In speaking to his brother, my son might criticize me for continuing to apply force to the cold-water handle by saying, "Dad knows this isn't going to work" and he certainly can criticize me after it breaks—by saying, "Dad knew it wouldn't work! He shouldn't have kept trying!"

In each of these examples, knowledge is being attributed to an agent as a basis for an evaluative judgment about the agent's Φ -ing. The judgment may be a simple up or down on Φ -ing, as it is in the examples given above—someone "should" or "shouldn't" Φ or have Φ -ed—but it also might be more nuanced—there's a "reasonably good case" for the person to Φ or not to Φ . So, you might say, "Well, she knows the train costs twice what the bus does, so that is a factor in favor of the bus." We will focus on up or down judgments.

Knowledge-attributions can thus be used as bases for assessments of agents' actions. Of course, as Jessica Brown (2008b: 1139–40) remarks, for any sort of consideration, there will be some occasion on which it can be mentioned to evaluate action. To use one of her examples, you can mention the fact that a friend plans to run a marathon to criticize the cook's not giving her a larger portion of the soup or to defend my giving her a larger portion.

It's true that when first- or second-person present-tense knowledge-attributions are used for agent-evaluation one could often accomplish the same purpose by simply asserting the proposition said to be known—for example, "She is running a marathon later today; you should give her a bigger share of the soup!" (Arguably, this has much to do with the relations between assertion and knowledge.) But when one is speaking about someone not present in the conversation or speaking about an action in the past, very often the simple "P" will not be effective for evaluative purposes, because much will depend on the agent's epistemic or psychological state regarding P. Suppose we arrange that you'll pick me up from the airport at 8pm. If I arrive two hours early at 6pm I can hardly mount a serious criticism of you for not being there when I deplane. I could try to scold you, saying "I was there at 6pm and had to wait

¹ All these examples involve attributions rather than denials of knowledge. It's true that sometimes we do defend and criticize action by denying knowledge, and that we often defend and criticize belief this way. If we want to go to a certain neighborhood X in a city, we might say, "We can't just get on this bus; we don't know it goes to X." And certainly we sometimes say, in response to others' professed beliefs, "you don't know that." The matter merits attention, but we will consider only attributions of knowledge here.

two hours!” but it is all too easy for you to undermine it by appealing to your lack of awareness: “I had no idea; you didn’t call or text me.” Compare the criticism, “You knew I was arriving early! And yet you didn’t pick me up.” Agent-evaluation in such cases won’t stick, unless it is based on an attribution of some cognitive or epistemic relation between the agent and P.

How does this agent-evaluative purpose bear on the contextualism debate? Couldn’t all sides happily agree that the concept of knowledge is useful for agent-evaluation in these ways? The bearing on the contextualism debate becomes apparent when we look at ways of responding to knowledge-attributing agent-evaluations.

Consider a bank case, which could be high- or low-stakes. Keith decides to wait to deposit the check Saturday, rather than standing in the long lines to deposit it Friday. Suppose, in defense of Keith’s waiting, I point to Keith’s having good reason to think it’s open Saturday. I have in effect given a little argument:

Keith has good reason to think the bank is open Saturday, so he can just wait to deposit it then.

Suppose you reject the conclusion, and suppose in particular you reject it because you think some evaluative/normative contrary of it is true. So, suppose you claim Keith can’t wait till Saturday; he must stand in line Friday.² How might you object to my argument? You could reject its premise, of course. Alternatively, you could claim that, although the premise is true, still, the conclusion is false. That is, you could give a response of the form:

“Yes, Keith has good reason to think the bank is open Saturday, but he shouldn’t wait till then to deposit the check.”

Let us investigate this response further. On what basis might one make this response? We will discuss two.

One is on the grounds of what we’ll call *deliberative weight*. So, for instance, you might concede that Keith has good reason to think the bank is open Saturday but insist he can’t just wait till then because, for instance, his relatives will be visiting then and it would be too much of an inconvenience to drive to the bank then, or perhaps because the lines are often even longer on Saturday than on Friday. You might also mention epistemic considerations concerning the relation between the bank’s being open Saturday and Keith’s depositing it Saturday, for example, by saying “Keith doesn’t realize the bank accept deposits on Saturdays.” In offering any of these responses, you are in effect suggesting that the issue of whether the bank is open Saturday isn’t or shouldn’t be the decisive issue for Keith in his decision-making. In effect, you’re suggesting that even if you “give” Keith *the bank*

² Here “can’t” expresses impermissibility rather than inability. As Chase Wrenn points out in personal communication, grammarians tend to discourage this usage.

will be open Saturday as a premise to work with, this wouldn't settle the question for him of what to do.³

Another basis on which you might accept the premise but deny the conclusion of the above argument concerns the agent's epistemic relations to the target proposition. You might claim that although Keith has good reason to think the bank will be open Saturday he shouldn't wait till then because he needs better reason/evidence/grounds to think it's open Saturday if he is to wait to deposit the check then rather than standing in line on Friday. You might say, "Yes, Keith has good reason to think it is open Saturday; but he shouldn't wait till then because he doesn't have good enough reason to think it's open Saturday." Let's call this way of responding to my little argument *the epistemic objection*.

Side note. The epistemic objection needn't be raised using the notions of *evidence, grounds, and so forth*. Epistemologists often use a generalized notion of "epistemic position" to cover a range of factors which all bear on knowledge, including *externalistic* factors such as how reliable one's p-relevant belief-producing processes are as well as how safe one's indications of p are.⁴ One way to raise the epistemic objection against the above defense of Keith's waiting to deposit the check Saturday is to concede that Keith has good reason to think the bank will be open then but to claim that he shouldn't wait till then because his epistemic position with respect to *the bank is open Saturday* isn't strong enough. Having said this, we will mainly focus on factors such as *evidence, reasons, grounds*.

In general, where "V" is a cognitive or epistemic verb phrase, and "Φ-ing" picks out an action or omission which would count as *acting on P*,⁵ let's say that to raise the epistemic objection to the argument:

S Vs that P, so S can Φ

is to concede that S Vs that P but claim that S can't—or ought not/mustn't/shouldn't—Φ because S doesn't have a strong enough epistemic position with respect to P. Epistemic objections to other V-based evaluations such as the below are understood accordingly:

S Vs that P, so S must Φ

S Vs that P, so S mustn't Φ

S Vs that P, so S need not Φ

as well as past-tense versions of these.

In raising the epistemic objection in this way, one is conceding that the subject has the relevant cognitive or epistemic status—the subject Vs that P—but questioning

³ Whether a particular "deliberative weight" objection succeeds will depend on the sort of evaluation at issue, whether it is an evaluation of the agent's reasonableness or of something more objective.

⁴ See DeRose (2009: 7) and Fantl and McGrath (2009: 27–8).

⁵ In Φ-ing, one is acting on P, then, just if in Φ-ing one is using P as a reason to Φ.

whether the subject is positioned epistemically well enough with respect to P in order to act on P reasonably. One is questioning this because Φ -ing in the circumstances counts as acting on P.

It should come as no surprise that it is harder to make the epistemic objection against a knowledge-based evaluation of an action that it is against evaluations based on attributions of *having some reason* or *belief*. This is because knowledge, presumably, is logically stronger than these.⁶ What is a surprise—or is at least noteworthy for epistemology—is that it is harder to make the epistemic objection than one would expect it would be if the orthodox *moderate invariantist* view of knowledge-attributions were true.

Moderate invariantism is invariantism about knowledge-attributions⁷ conjoined with the thesis that knowledge is, as Rysiew (2007, 632) puts it, *ho-hum knowing*: it consists of something like justified true belief + something to cope with the Gettier problem, where for a belief to be justified is for it to meet moderate epistemic standards, not necessarily demanding ones (the standards could be construed internalistically or externalistically). In high-stakes cases in which much turns on an agent's action, an agent might well ho-hum know that P even though there is too much of a risk that P is false for the agent to act on P. So, for instance, in the high-stakes bank case, Keith would ho-hum know that the bank is open Saturday even though there's too much of a risk that it isn't open Saturday for him to plan on coming back then. So, if knowledge = ho-hum knowing, one would expect knowledge-attributing agent-evaluations in cases like the high-stakes bank case would be vulnerable to the epistemic objection. And if they were vulnerable, we would expect ordinary folk to seize on this vulnerability. So we would expect to find, at least when high-stakes subjects are under discussion, that the epistemic objection to such knowledge-attributing agent-evaluations is (i) *familiar* and (i) putting skepticism aside, *sometimes unproblematically correct*. All that is meant by “unproblematically correct” is that the statements making up the objection—the concession of knowledge and the evidence-based agent-evaluation—are true and unproblematically so (i.e., they are clearly, plainly true).

However, consider the epistemic objection in the case of knowledge:

Right, Keith knows the bank is open Saturday, but he needs more evidence that it is open Saturday if he is to wait to deposit the check then.

It is not a familiar part of our epistemic lives to find people saying such things even in high-stakes cases (contrast the epistemic objection with knowledge with one concerning good reasons to think it is open). Nor is it unproblematic, skepticism aside,

⁶ Thanks to a referee for Oxford University Press for emphasizing this in comments on an earlier draft.

⁷ Here we follow DeRose (2009: 2) in understanding invariantism as holding that knowledge-attributions do not vary in their truth-conditions across contexts of attribution. With DeRose, we will also assume that variation in truth-conditions suffices for variation in content. This could be challenged, but let us put aside those matters here.

that the objection is correct in such a case. However, presumably this is exactly the sort of case in which the objection would be unproblematically correct if it ever is. This is not to say that the objection *isn't* correct, only that it isn't unproblematic that it is. The objection, "I agree, he knows that P, but still he needs more evidence to act on P" isn't unproblematically true.⁸ If knowledge = ho-hum knowing, one would expect that it would be unproblematically true in this sort of case if ever unproblematically true.

One might object: maybe factivity is the key. Maybe the epistemic objection simply can't unproblematically be made in response to agent-evaluations appealing to factive epistemic states. Knowledge, of course, is a factive attitude.⁹ However, it is a familiar part of epistemic lives that ordinary speakers raise the epistemic objection against factive epistemic states, especially in third-person or past-tense cases. If you and I are discussing Keith and the bank, and I say that Keith held a correct belief about the bank's being open Saturday, you could easily raise the epistemic objection: "Yes, his belief was correct, but he didn't know it was—he needed better evidence before planning on coming back Saturday." We often say this sort of thing. We often criticize people for acting on beliefs that are true but not well justified. Suppose I don't look for traffic when I approach a wide and typically busy street. Assuming no car is coming, I let my children walk across the wide street by themselves. Suppose no car passes by. My belief was true. Even still, my wife can and will make the unproblematically correct epistemic objection: "Sure, you turned out to be right there was no traffic in this case, but you didn't know that; there could have been; you shouldn't have let them cross without much better evidence." It is not hard to imagine my wife objecting in a similar vein while conceding—in effect—that I had ho-hum knowledge. Suppose I say, "I looked once, and no car was coming; and in any case, the road was blocked off to traffic; so I was fine to let the kids cross!" My wife could reply, "Sure, you turned out to be right that no car was coming, and there was no *actual* risk because the road was blocked off; but there could have been a car coming for all you knew; you shouldn't have let the children cross without looking twice." This would be unproblematically correct. Contrast this with "Yes, you knew no car was coming, but you shouldn't have let the children cross without looking twice." Some will insist the last is correct. Again, the claim is only that it is not unproblematically correct. Nor is a familiar part of our epistemic lives (in contrast to my wife's raising the epistemic objection for ho-hum knowing).

Next, a second and related surprise, if moderate invariantism is true: even in practical situations in which one must meet very strong epistemic standards with respect to P if one is to act (permissibly) on P, speakers appeal to *knowledge* to dismiss epistemically based worries about their acting on P. If epistemic worries are

⁸ In what I believe is the first piece of experimental philosophy to compare knowledge-attribution with attributions of actionability (Buckwalter and Turri, manuscript), a very strong correlation was found.

⁹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this concern.

in the air about whether it's too risky to plan to come back Saturday to deposit, Keith might well say he knows that it's open Saturday precisely to dismiss these worries. But suppose knowledge = ho-hum knowing. Ho-hum knowing is perfectly compatible with not meeting the requisite very strong epistemic standards. Why should saying that one meets *pretty good or better* epistemic standards for P be a preferred way of dismissing epistemic worries about acting on P in situations in which it's clear that one must meet *very strong* epistemic standards for P if one is to act on P reasonably?

These two facts about knowledge-attributing evaluations of action pose a challenge to the moderate invariantist orthodoxy: (1) assuming the truth of moderate invariantism, we *would* expect the epistemic objection to be familiar in high-stakes cases and in some such cases unproblematically correct in response to knowledge-attributing agent-evaluations; this expectation is unfulfilled; and (2) assuming the truth of moderate invariantism, we *wouldn't* expect to find knowledge-attribution being widely used as a tool for dismissing epistemic worries about acting on P even when discussing high-stakes cases in which the subject needs to meet very strong epistemic standards with respect to P in order, reasonably, to act on P; yet, we find just this.

There are responses on behalf of moderate invariantism, and we will consider them later in the chapter. This section has given us a workable account of what the agent-evaluative purpose of knowledge-attributions is and of features of that purpose that are initially perplexing if moderate invariantism is true. We next turn to the second purpose, informant-suggestion.

§2. Second Purpose: Suggesting Informants

Craig proposes that the point of the concept of knowledge is to flag good informants. The plan of his book is to “creep up” on the concept of knowledge by examining a subjectivized version of the concept of a good informant—the concept of a good informant for me here now—and then considering the results of the objectivization of such a concept (1990, 83–4). However, not much attention in the book is paid to the examination of the actual use of knowledge-attributions as a basis for suggesting or suggesting informants. The focus here will be on this use, with which we are all familiar. We will be concerned particularly with the way we use knowledge-attributions to suggest informants to or for particular recipients or groups of recipients.

To suggest someone as an informant to a recipient is to suggest that the recipient treat that person as an informant. There are a number of ways to do this. I might treat you as an informant for me on whether P even if I know that you are undecided on the matter yourself but have evidence bearing on the question that I don't. (You saw next week's weather forecast and I didn't.) I might treat you as a good informant, again, if I know you would make a more educated guess on whether P than I would. (You know the company better than I and can make a better guess of whether its stock value will rise.) In this section, we will consider a stronger way in which one

may treat someone as an informant. It is expressed in ordinary talk of “taking it” from persons. To take it from a person whether P is to treat her word on whether P as settling for oneself the question of whether P. I take it from the coffee store proprietor that the shop is closed Sunday. I take it from an acquaintance in a casual conversation that she just got back from London. I do not take it from the person offering a tip on a stock that the stock will rise in value; at best I take it from her that there’s reason to think it might; or maybe that it’s more likely than not. Nor do I take from the weather forecaster that it will rain a week from today. In those cases, I do not take the relevant issue—whether P—to be *settled*, either in favor of P or in favor of \sim P, by the informant’s word.

To illustrate the informant-suggesting purpose to be discussed, consider once again a high-stakes bank case. Suppose, in such a case, you feel you can’t simply wait till Saturday to deposit the check. Enter Sally. If I say to you, “Oh, good, here’s Sally. She knows whether it’s open Saturday,” I can thereby suggest Sally to you as an informant on the question of whether it’s open Saturday—I suggest you can take it from her.

In saying “Sally knows whether it’s open” as a basis for suggesting you can take it from her whether it’s open, I’m making a little argument, “Sally knows, so you can take it from her.” If you deny my conclusion (“No, substitute: I can’t take it from her”), you can respond to my argument in a number of ways. You could deny the premise that Sally knows whether it is open; or you could claim that even if she knows, she is a liar, or won’t tell, and so on, and so you can’t take it from her (deliberative weight, again). Alternatively, you could raise the *epistemic objection*: you could concede that the informant “knows whether P” but insist that her grounds/reasons aren’t good enough for you to take it from her.

Now, assuming moderate invariantism is true, we would expect the epistemic objection to be familiar and sometimes unproblematically correct when the relevant stakes are high. We also wouldn’t expect, at least when the relevant stakes are high, to find speakers appealing to knowledge that P in their informant suggestions precisely to dismiss epistemic worries about taking it from the subject that P. These two surprises, like those concerning agent-evaluation, pose a challenge for moderate invariantism.

One might worry here, even more than with agent-evaluation, that factivity is doing the work. If I say, “Sally has the right answer whether P; you can take it from her,” it would be very odd if you replied by giving the epistemic objection. If the recipient agrees that Sally bears a factive cognitive relation to the question whether P, then the recipient must think that by believing what Sally believes on the matter the recipient would be believing truly on the matter. But this looks like a decisive reason to believe P if the informant says P and believe \sim P if she says \sim P, and so to take it from the informant whether P.

But factivity does no such work in informant-suggestions *for* recipients not part of the conversation. Suppose you and I are watching a riveting film called *The Bank*

Cases. In the film, the protagonist, Keith, needs an informant about whether the bank is open on Saturday. Suppose, also, that Keith needs quite good grounds before taking it as settled either way whether the bank is open Saturday. His stakes are high, and there is a back-up “safe” option for him—just coming back Saturday to deposit the check. Suppose I say about Sally, another character in the film, “Sally knows whether it’s open Saturday, so Keith can take it from her.” Now, if we replaced “know” with the equivalent of ho-hum knowing-whether; that is, “has a correct answer” or “has a reasonable correct answer”—and add something about the lack of Gettier-like objective risk—would it be at all unusual for my claim to be met with the epistemic objection? I don’t think so. “Sure, Sally has the right answer about the bank’s Saturday hours—she’s relying on its past Saturday hours, and it turns out, as is usual, it hasn’t changed those hours; but Keith’s whole future is at stake; he needs better evidence than Sally’s assurance can provide if he is to wait till Saturday to deposit the check.” The same goes for ho-hum knowing. However, raised against a knowledge-attributing informant-suggestion, the epistemic objection is unfamiliar. And it is hard to find cases in which it is unproblematically correct.

§3. Implications for the Contextualism Debate

We have discussed two purposes of the concept of knowledge: agent-evaluation and informant-suggestion. We have seen that the way the concept of knowledge serves these purposes is surprising on the assumption of moderate invariantism. If knowledge were ho-hum knowing, we would expect the epistemic objection to be familiar and unproblematically correct in at least some high-stakes cases; and we wouldn’t expect that appealing to a subject’s knowledge that P in a high-stakes case would be such an effective way of dismissing epistemic worries about the subject’s acting on P. Moderate invariantism, then, faces a challenge. Proponents of alternative theories, including varieties of “shifty” theories such as contextualism and subject-sensitive invariantism, see openings.

The main sides in the contextualism dispute are these:¹⁰

Skeptical invariantism—skeptical-standards invariantism.

Moderate invariantism—moderate-standards invariantism. Knowledge = ho-hum knowing.

Subject-sensitive invariantism (SSI)—takes the invariant conditions on knowledge-attributions to include a strong within-subjects connection between knowledge and action: if you know P, P is *actionable* for you—that is, you have sufficient evidence/grounds to act on P reasonably. SSI is a form of fallibilism, and so allows knowledge to coexist with an epistemic deficiency that could make a difference to actionability in

¹⁰ Noticeably missing is assessment relativism. See footnote 19 below for an argument that the claims made about contextualism apply to relativism as well.

some possible practical environments. Thus, SSI holds that which standard one must meet to know P varies with one's practical situation (the stakes, the available actions, etc).

(*Mainstream*) *contextualism*—affirms three claims:

- (i) the standards that comprise the truth-conditions for knowledge-attributions vary across contexts of attribution;
- (ii) “internalism” about standard-determination; that is, what determines the operative standard in any context is simply what beliefs, presuppositions, and assumptions the speaker or conversational parties have;
- (iii) in any context of attribution there is a single standard that comprises the truth-conditions for any knowledge-attribution.

A few clarifications on contextualism. First, standards here are understood as *intellectualist* in Stanley's (2005, 6) sense. That is, standards do not discriminate between subjects with the same strength of epistemic position with respect to a given proposition: they either both or neither satisfy the same standard. Thus, the sorts of conditions the SSIers take to be conditions of knowledge (e.g., P's being actionable for the subject) do not count as standards, because they sometimes vary across subjects with the same strength of epistemic position for the target proposition. Second, internalism about standard-determination, affirmed in (ii), claims that speakers “call the shots” when it comes to which standards they are ascribing to subjects. How things stand with the subject, if the subject is not the speaker, is irrelevant to which standards comprise the truth-conditions of knowledge-attributions concerning him. Finally, (iii) has the welcome effect of guaranteeing the invariant truth of intellectualism about knowledge: “no difference in knowledge without a difference in strength of epistemic position.”¹¹ Mainstream contextualism is *standards-based*, *internalist*, and *intellectualist*.

In adjudicating the sides in this dispute, we will be concerned with questions of explanation: assuming such-and-such side is correct, would there be a good explanation of the way in which knowledge-attributions serve the purposes of agent-evaluation and informant-suggestion, in particular for the unfamiliarity and absence of unproblematically correct instances of the epistemic objection as well as the use of knowledge-attribution, even in high-stakes cases, to dismiss epistemic worries about whether the agent can reasonably act on the proposition in question or whether the recipient can reasonably take it from the informant? Often I'll formulate these questions as questions about explaining the two purposes themselves, but this is just shorthand for explaining the relevant data just mentioned.

¹¹ This is a sloppy formulation, since it ignores the belief condition on knowledge. A better formulation is this: if S1 and S2 have the same strength of epistemic position with respect to P, then either both or neither is positioned to know P.

Skeptical Invariantism

If knowing requires meeting the skeptical standards, then an agent's knowing P would entail that the subject's epistemic position is strong enough for the subject to act on P. Thus, it wouldn't be at all surprising, if skeptical invariantism is true, that the epistemic objection is unfamiliar and never unproblematically correct in response to knowledge-attributing agent-evaluations. The same goes for knowledge-attributing informant-suggestions. If the subject does indeed meet skeptically high standards for P, then the subject's epistemic position is good enough for the recipient's purposes, regardless of the recipient's stakes. Skeptical invariantism does very nicely, then, in explaining this data. It also does well in explaining why appealing to knowledge in agent-evaluation and in informant-suggestion would be a way of dismissing epistemic worries about the agent's action or the recipient's taking it from the informant. Knowing entails meeting skeptically high standards, and so if these are satisfied for P then there is no basis for epistemic worries about relying in action or inquiry on P.

The only problem is that knowledge-attributions would seem to be mostly false.¹² The little arguments "S knows the bank is open Saturday, so S can just come back then" and "S knows whether the bank is open Saturday, and so you can take it from S concerning the matter" would have false premises. They would thus not establish their conclusions, even if their conclusions were true. It would be like suggesting someone as a basketball center on the basis of the claim "he's 7 feet tall," when in fact he's only 6 ½ feet tall.

One might claim that even though knowledge-attributions are almost always literally false, they are regularly close enough to being true. Granted, the argument, "S knows the bank is open Saturday, so S can just come back then" fails to establish its conclusion because its premise is false. Still, the speaker manages to mean or impart an argument that does establish its conclusion, one having the form "S meets condition C with respect to the bank being open Saturday, so S can just come back then." C might be an anti-intellectualist condition (as per SSI) or it could be an epistemic standard selected in such a way as to guarantee that the argument's conclusion is true if its premise is. The principal task of the skeptical invariantist is to explain how the "right" argument gets imparted when the semantics give us the "wrong" argument, and to explain this by appealing to general conversational principles rather than specialized principles about "knows." This is not an easy task to pull off.¹³

¹² It might be replied that even if this is so, a vast number of our beliefs that we don't bother to claim to know are actionable in *any* practical environment and so wouldn't be disqualified from being knowledge on this basis. Think about *Obama didn't live in the seventh century, I'm not married to Aristotle*, etc. Still, knowledge is scarcer than one would have thought. See Davis (2007, 424) for an explicit endorsement of the claim that knowledge in general suffices for actionability in any practical environment.

¹³ See Davis (2007) for a sustained attempt to carry out this task, although Davis would not call his account a skeptical one.

Moderate Invariantism

What can the moderate invariantist say in response to the challenge we have raised? One option is to give an error theory: we are simply wrong about knowledge. We will put this possibility aside, provisionally, for the same reason DeRose (2005, 173) does: we should presume that in cases in which speakers do not rely on some “mistaken belief about an underlying matter of fact” that claims they make with “perfect propriety” are true. A more appealing option is to dispute the claims about what we would expect if moderate invariantism is true. In the first part of this chapter—the claim would be—we were ignoring the *pragmatics* of knowledge-attribution. Once we get straight on the pragmatics, we can indeed explain the relevant data.

A good pragmatic account should appeal to relatively general features of conversational pragmatics, together with the semantics, to explain the postulated pragmatic phenomena. The best moderate invariantist account available is due to Brown (2006) and Rysiew (2007), who base their accounts on the maxim of relation (“be relevant”). The claim is that knowledge-attributions, when made in certain sorts of cases (precisely the ones at issue), pragmatically impart or “implicate” propositions about the knower having sufficient grounds for P. The account is roughly as follows (here we focus on agent-evaluation). Suppose the issue in a given conversation is whether an agent meets a very high standard, for example, high enough for the agent to act on P reasonably in a high-stakes case. Suppose, as per moderate invariantism, that knowledge is ho-hum knowing. Why would saying that the agent knows that P implicate that the agent meets the high standards? The idea is this: if you say that the agent knows you are saying that the agent meets *at least good standards*, and your interlocutors, to make sense of your utterance, need to see your statement as relevant; they can do so by (and only by) taking you to think that the agent does indeed meet high standards. In effect, the moderate invariantist appeals to a relevance-implicature.

The problem with this account, if used to explain the data, is that the knowledge-attribution could well be relevant in the suggested way *and yet also* susceptible to the epistemic objection. Consider the defense “Keith has good reason to think that the bank is open Saturday, and so he’s fine to come back then.” In order to be relevant, this “good-reason”-attribution must communicate that the reason is very good, good enough for actionability. But this doesn’t protect against the epistemic objection. It is perfectly familiar and often unproblematically correct to say, “Yes, he has good reason, but not good enough; he needs to wait in line today.” So, we can agree with Rysiew when he writes:

The more general point here is this: given the presumption of relevance, and given that attributing knowledge involves ascribing an epistemic entitlement, in attributing knowledge to S the speaker takes on commitments as to S’s epistemic position (the status of S’s beliefs) that go beyond what the ho-hum conditions on knowing might themselves require. (2007, 643)

But we should also note that this same point holds for attributions of good reasons as well, and yet the epistemic objection for such attributions is familiar and in many cases unproblematically correct; not so for knowledge.

The relevance account would also fail to explain why speakers find it so useful to speak of knowing that P in their attempts to dismiss epistemic worries about acting on P (or relying on the informant that P). In saying one knows that P, one would be *imparting* that one has a good enough epistemic position for P. Imparting that one's epistemic position is good enough is, in general, a good way to address concerns that it isn't. But imparting this through an assertion that one's position is "pretty good or better" opens the door to interlocutors accepting what one asserts but denying what one implicates. This is a familiar feature of implicatures. If I am trying to imply that X's philosophical abilities are good enough to make X hireable, and I say, "X is a good philosopher," you, seeing my aim, can say, "it's true X is a good philosopher, but not good enough." It might not be a polite thing to say, but it is available. (It is available, even if more impolite, when 'good' is stressed: X is a *good* philosopher.) If you want to shut down a certain worry, a better tactic is to *assert* something that your interlocutor can't simply concede while denying what you want to impart. But if moderate invariantism is true, asserting knowledge is asserting something that your interlocutor *can* simply accept while reasonably denying that your epistemic position is good enough for action (or for someone else to take it from you).¹⁴

SSI

SSI is of course tailor-made to give a simple explanation of the agent-evaluation purpose of knowledge-attributions. It does this nicely. When I say that S knows P, what I'm saying entails that P is actionable for S, and so it is no surprise that the epistemic objection is unfamiliar, that there are no cases in which it unproblematically is well taken, and that speakers wanting to dismiss epistemic worries about whether the subject can act on P should do so by saying the subject knows that P. All looks fine on the agent-evaluative purpose.¹⁵

¹⁴ See Dimmock and Huvenes (2014), Fantl and McGrath (2012a), and DeRose (2009, 117–27) for further objections to the moderate invariantist relevance accounts and for general negative assessments of the prospects of giving pragmatic accounts to handle the data about knowledge-attributions.

¹⁵ One might suggest that in some cases the epistemic objection isn't unproblematically incorrect, but if SSI were true, we would expect it would be. Couldn't we revise some of Jessica Brown's (2008a) cases (e.g., SURGEON or AFFAIR) to come up with what are at least not unproblematically incorrect epistemic objections? If so, isn't this just as much trouble for SSI as the absence of unproblematically correct epistemic objections is for moderate invariantism?

My response is two-fold. First, something which I haven't emphasized thus far: the epistemic objection doesn't merely seem to be a case in which the intuitive jury is out as to whether it is true; it seems *intuitively* incorrect. Perhaps it isn't incorrect. Perhaps there is a good argument that the epistemic objection is very often correct. But this is not how it seems. Second, unlike moderate invariantism, SSI has a good account of why knowledge-attribution would be such a useful means of dismissing worries concerning action based on a risk that P is false.

However, as DeRose has emphasized (2009, ch. 7), the going is not so smooth when it comes to the purpose of informant-suggestion. Suppose the recipient (Keith) is in a much higher-stakes situation than the informant (Sally). In order to act on P reasonably, Keith needs very strong grounds for P, stronger than Sally needs for her to act on P. Now, if what I'm claiming in saying "Sally knows whether P" is something like *Sally's epistemic position is good enough for her to act on P reasonably*, then clearly my knowledge-attribution can be true even if Sally's epistemic position isn't good enough for Keith to act on P reasonably. So, it seems the epistemic objection ought to be easily made: "Yes, Sally knows, but Keith can't take it from her."

SSIers therefore need a story about why within-subjects knowledge/actionability connections should lead us to talk and think as if across-subjects knowledge/actionability connections hold. SSIers might be tempted to turn to pragmatics. The natural way to go is, again, to the appeal to the maxim of relation. But this is no more promising for the SSIer than it was for the moderate invariantist; in fact, it is even less promising. It just isn't at all clear why the fact that the informant's epistemic position is good enough for *her* should be relevant to whether the informant's epistemic position is good enough for the recipient, given they can differ dramatically in their practical environments. And even supposing this relevance could be explained, if what one asserts is something that could be reasonably accepted without accepting what is implicated, we would expect the epistemic objection to be familiar and often unproblematically correct, which it isn't.

For all these reasons, it seems the SSIer must turn to an error theory to explain the informant-suggestion purpose.¹⁶

Contextualism

SSI takes the subject (her practical environment) to "call the shots" and so explains the agent-evaluation purpose but struggles to explain the informant-suggestion purpose. One might think that since mainstream contextualism takes the speaker (what she finds salient, what practical environment she is thinking of) to call the shots, it will explain the informant-suggestion purpose but struggle with the agent-evaluation purpose. One might therefore fear a "big ugly tie" which might compel us to postulate an ugly ambiguity in "knows." But DeRose (2009, 240) assures us contextualism comes out on top:

Fortunately, the big ugly tie is broken by the realization that, on contextualism, speakers' own conversational interests can lead them to apply to subjects the standards that are appropriate to the practical situations faced by those subjects.

¹⁶ See Hawthorne (2004, 164) and Stanley (2005, 101–4) for error theories, and DeRose (2009, 234–8) and Cohen (2004, 489–90) for doubts. For an account of the relevance of empirical psychology to knowledge ascriptions, see Nagel (2010) and (2012).

The leading idea is that when we take certain conversational interests—agent-evaluation, in particular—we can select standards appropriate to the subjects' practical situation.¹⁷

However, speakers can make mistakes about subjects' practical situations. Suppose my wife, Frances, unaware of the high stakes involved, evaluates my waiting in line at the bank for an hour on Friday, "Come on, Matt, you knew you could deposit it Saturday without a line; you wasted your time." Suppose we are assessing Frances' criticism, and she is not a party to our conversation. If contextualism is true, then let's ask how we could reject her argument's conclusion, which we must do. We would argue as follows: what Frances said when she said Matt "knew" he could deposit the check Saturday was true but due to the high stakes—much higher than Frances realized—Matt needed more evidence if he was to wait to deposit the check Saturday. This is a version of the epistemic objection. We're accepting the knowledge-attribution but rejecting the evaluation of the action on the grounds that more evidence was needed. We have ascended a level, discussing not whether Matt knew but whether Frances' remark that Matt knew was true. However, the same problems arise: if contextualism were true, we would expect such higher-level versions of the epistemic objection to be familiar and sometimes (as in this case) unproblematically correct, which they are not.

The contextualist can point out that her account does at least ensure the following: if a speaker attributes knowledge that P as a basis for an evaluation of an agent's action, then *if the speaker's assumptions about the agent's practical situation are correct*, then if the speaker's knowledge-attribution is true, then P is actionable for the agent. So, anyone who accepts that knowledge-attribution and accepts the speakers' assumptions about the agent is committed to thinking that P was actionable for the agent. This commitment lapses only when these assumptions are brought into doubt. But does the commitment lapse even under these conditions? It seems not. It isn't a familiar feature of our epistemic lives to find ordinary speakers conceding the truth of claims like Frances' claim while insisting more evidence was needed for Matt to act. Nor do such combinations of claims seem unproblematically correct. Frances herself will likely retract not merely her criticism of Matt but her knowledge-attribution once she finds out the facts about Matt's practical situation. But on the contextualist view in question, this retraction would be the retraction of something that is perfectly true. Such retractions ought, therefore, to be familiar and sometimes unproblematically correct.

Unless the mainstream contextualist appeals to an error theory, or adds a pragmatic twist, it seems that she cannot explain all the data concerning the agent-evaluation purpose.

¹⁷ See also Greco (2008) and Henderson (2009) for similar accounts.

Similar points hold for the informant-suggestion purpose. Suppose I know Tom needs an informant on whether P. But I'm wrong about his stakes. They're much higher than I think. I say, "Sally knows whether P. Tom can take it from her." Here, again, it seems the contextualist must say—at least assuming that my assumptions about Tom's stakes are determinative of the epistemic standard expressed by his use of "knows"—that my knowledge-attribution was true but still Sally's evidence/grounds for P aren't good enough for P to be actionable for Tom. So, it ought to be familiar and unproblematically correct for me, after being apprised of Tom's high stakes, to say, "What I said when I said Sally 'knows' was true but she didn't have good enough evidence for Tom to rely on her." However, again, this is neither familiar nor unproblematically correct.

Here, we should note the shortcomings of the sort of contextualist view Fantl and I have sympathetically explored (Fantl and McGrath, 2012b), namely internalist subject-sensitive contextualism. This view makes the actionability of P for an agent an invariant condition of attributions to the agent of knowledge that P, but allows the truth-conditions of such knowledge-attributions to vary across contexts of attribution insofar as when certain practical situations are salient in a context of attribution it takes more to be truly described in that context as "knowing."¹⁸ Such a sensitive contextualism gives a good account of the agent-evaluative purpose, but because it relies on an internalist contextualist element it cannot do the same for the informant-suggestion purpose.¹⁹

So far, I've only considered versions of mainstream contextualism, and in particular ones embracing *internalism* about standards-determination. On this sort of contextualism, if the speaker assumes that a subject is in a low-stakes situation, and the purpose of the conversation is agent evaluation, the standards would be low,

¹⁸ So, according to Fantl and McGrath (2012b), if P isn't actionable for S, then any attribution of knowledge that P to S is false; however, if P *is* actionable for S, there might be some contexts in which an attribution of knowledge that P to S is true and others in which an attribution of knowledge that P to S is false.

¹⁹ Mainstream assessment relativism holds that knowledge-attributions vary in truth-value across contexts of assessment. Consider a standards implementation of this view, together with internalism about how the standards are determined. Call this mainstream assessment relativism. Can this view do better on the two functions of knowledge-attribution?

Recall the case of Frances' criticism of Matt waiting in line: "Matt knew the bank was open Saturday, so he should have just come back then." Suppose, again, that Frances has falsely assumed that the stakes were relatively low. Now, if assessment relativism is true, then what Frances said is true relative to her context of assessment. So, isn't the following a way to raise the epistemic objection: "What Frances said in saying Matt knew is true in her context of assessment, but Matt had insufficient evidence to do what he did"? We don't of course ordinarily discuss contexts of assessments *per se*, but we do ordinarily discuss something like them. We say: "What Jack said when he said it is winter is true for him in Australia." If mainstream assessment relativism were true, then we would expect the likes of "What Frances said in saying Matt knew is true for her [in her situation] but Matt needed more evidence to do what he did" to be familiar and in some cases unproblematically correct. We find neither.

Finally, just as one can move to externalist versions of contextualism, one can move to externalist versions of assessment relativism, and I suspect, but will not explicitly argue, that the dialectic would be quite similar.

even if this assumption is false and the subject is in a high-stakes situation. But if we give up internalism about standards-determination, we can avoid this consequence. The guiding idea would be that the speaker manages to load into the truth-conditions of her utterance the standards that are *in fact* appropriate to the agent's practical situation, not merely the standards that would be appropriate if the speaker's assumptions about the agent's practical situation were true. Thus, when Frances says, "Matt knew that he could deposit the check Saturday; he wasted his time standing in line Friday," her knowledge-attribution is true only if Matt meets the high standards appropriate to his situation, and not merely the low ones which Frances thinks (falsely in this case) are appropriate to his situation. A similar move is possible for the informant-suggesting purpose. When I'm wrong about your practical situation, and it's much more urgent than I think, then I'm in fact applying high standards in asserting "Sally knows whether P," even if I think I'm applying only low standards.

We can clarify all this by appealing to Kaplan's (1978) *dthat* operator. Here we understand "dthat," in a familiar way, to function as follows: it is an operator that takes a definite description and produces a term that directly refers to the thing that satisfies the definite description if there is one. When Frances says "Matt knows that P," she manages to assert that Matt meets *dthat* (the standard that Matt must meet for P to be actionable for Matt). The proposition Frances asserts has a particular standard loaded into it—namely, the one Matt in fact must meet to have this proposition as a reason. A similar account would apply in the case of informant-suggestion.

This proposal, which I'll call *direct-reference contextualism*, seems to give us exactly what we want. When, in evaluating an agent, I assert, "S knew that P," what I say will be true only if P was actionable for S, and so if you accept it, you commit yourself to thinking this. If we ordinary speakers have a sense of this, we can see why the epistemic objection is neither familiar nor unproblematically correct (it predicts that it is always *incorrect*). The same applies to informant-suggestion. Suppose I suggest an informant for Keith by asserting, "Sally knows whether P." What I assert will be true only if Sally's evidence/grounds for P (or not-P) are strong enough, if transferred to Keith, to make that proposition actionable for Keith. Again, this account seems to explain the unfamiliarity and absence of unproblematically correct epistemic objections.

There is one hitch. Direct-reference contextualism abandons the *raison d'être* of contextualism, or at least the main motivating factor behind most flesh-and-blood contextualists: the upholding of intellectualism (DeRose, 2009, 25). The fact that the standards are determined externally and agent-by-agent will yield counterexamples to intellectualism. Suppose I'm evaluating two subjects, Mary and John, at once. I think, falsely, that they face the same sort of practical situation. I also think, falsely, that Mary's evidence is better than John's. In fact, Mary and John have equally strong evidence but Mary's practical situation is a humdrum low-stakes one whereas, unbeknownst to me, John's is a high-stakes one. I might claim, "Mary knows that

P, but John doesn't know that P." What I'm really claiming is *Mary meets X and John doesn't meet Y*, where X and Y are determined by their actual practical situations. Given the actual facts, Mary does meet X, since X is a low standard, but John doesn't meet Y, since Y is a very high standard. Thus, my claim "Mary knows that P but John doesn't know that P" comes out true. A further claim is also true in my context, even if I think it isn't; namely, "Mary and John have the same strength of epistemic position with respect to P." It follows that in my context a sentence asserting a counterexample to intellectualism about knowledge is true.

Thus, the only view we have been able to find, short of skeptical invariantism, which provides a satisfying explanation of the two purposes of knowledge-attribution, and does so without an error theory—direct-reference contextualism—cannot sustain intellectualism.²⁰ Perhaps this is a price we should be willing to pay. However, this is not the end of the story.

§4. Final Thoughts

In the previous section, direct-reference contextualism emerged as the leading candidate for explaining the two purposes of knowledge-attributions we have been concerned with. However, in this last section, I want to suggest that general epistemological considerations may well point us in a different direction.

Note a crucial feature of informant-suggestion purpose. There is no coherent non-skeptical story to be told about how, in general, one party's knowledge that P should make P actionable for *any other subject*, however high her stakes. We should therefore not accept a theory that builds such a condition on knowledge into the invariant truth-conditions of knowledge-attributions. So far, no threat to direct-reference contextualism. It does not try to build any such condition *invariantly* into the truth-conditions of knowledge-attributions.

By contrast, there is an apparently coherent non-skeptical story to be told about how, in general, a subject's knowledge that P should make P actionable for *that subject*.²¹ If this story is acceptable, this gives us a good reason to build into the

²⁰ In comments on an earlier draft, John Greco suggested that the contextualist has another option. She could say, as Greco suggests in his (2012), that the attributor context picks out *one* practical environment, where a practical environment is defined by a set of relevant practical tasks, attaching, perhaps, to several actual and/or potential actors. Standards are determined by the practical environment so defined. In my case of Mary and John, since the purpose is agent-evaluation, some single practical environment that one of them was in would serve to set the standards, and so we wouldn't get the anti-intellectualist result.

However, I don't see what mechanism would ensure that the "right" practical environment determines the standards. In a case in which the speaker thinks the practical environments of Mary and John involve only low stakes, and in which indeed Mary *is* in a low-stakes environment, why would the standards be determined by the higher-stakes environment of the other subject?

²¹ The story Fantl and I favor, in brief, goes like this. Knowing that P suffices to make P warranted enough for the subject to be a reason she has for belief. What is warranted enough to be a reason a subject has for belief is warranted enough to be a reason she has for action. Thus, knowing that P makes P warranted enough for the subject to be a reason she has for action. But what is warranted enough to

invariant conditions on knowledge-attributions the condition that what is “known” is actionable for the knower.

And if we do build actionability into the invariant truth-conditions for knowledge-attribution, direct-reference contextualism must be rejected, not merely moderate invariantism and mainstream contextualism.²² The problem is as follows. Suppose a subject S is in a high-stakes situation, but neither P nor not-P is actionable for her. A speaker says, “S knows whether P,” suggesting her as an informant to a low-stakes recipient. Direct-reference contextualism requires that the knowledge-attribution comes out true (assuming S has a true belief whether P, etc.). But then the utterance “S knows whether P” is counted as true even though neither P nor not-P is actionable for S. This violates the invariant truth of “If a subject knows that P, P is actionable for her.”²³

What the above reflections show us is that the Craigian attempt to get at knowledge through a study of the purposes of the concept of knowledge is in principle constrained by general epistemological considerations. A good account of knowledge-attributions balances Craigian “practical explication” with traditional epistemological argument. The balancing act may require willingness, in some cases, to postulate *mistakes* by ordinary competent uses of the concept about its application conditions. Like DeRose, I accept a presumption against the postulation of such mistakes. In some instances, though, general epistemological considerations can give us a defeater for this presumption. If I am right that general epistemological argument can give us good reason to accept a within-subjects knowledge/actionability connection, then this is one such instance.²⁴

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be a reason for action is warranted enough to be a justifying (a “winning”) reason for action. Thus, knowing that P makes P warranted enough for the subject to be a justifying reason for action and so actionable for the subject. See Fantl and McGrath (2009) for a sustained defense of the premises and steps of this argument.

²² Greco’s (2012), too, would have to be rejected.

²³ It is assumed, here, that “S knows whether P” is true in a context of attribution only if either “S knows P” or “S knows not-P” is true in that context.

²⁴ I would like to thank audiences at the University of Nebraska, Stirling University, the University of St. Andrews, and the University of Oslo for helpful discussion, as well as David Henderson, Jonathan Ichikawa, John Turri, and especially John Greco for written comments on earlier drafts of the chapter. Thanks, also, to an anonymous referee for Oxford University Press.

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