

## 6

# Now You Know It, Now You Don't

### *Intellectualism, Contextualism, and Subject-Sensitive Invariantism*

In these last two chapters, we continue to evaluate objections to contextualism, and we critically compare contextualism with its rival, SSI, concluding that contextualism is the better view. The objections to contextualism we discussed in previous chapters, of course, are relevant to the comparison of the two views, and, indeed, some of those objections have been pressed by proponents of SSI. I am in part relying on my answers to those objections in drawing my conclusion in favor of contextualism here. In these last two chapters, we investigate areas where both contextualism and SSI can at least appear to face problems. In doing so, we will cover what strike me as SSI's two greatest problems. Chapter 7 will concern, among other matters, one of these two problems: SSI's inability to properly handle certain third-person attributions of knowledge. Here in Chapter 6 we are concerned with SSI's other great problem: its denial of intellectualism and its related susceptibility to what we can call 'now you know it, now you don't' objections.

### 1. Intellectualism, SSI, and Contextualism

As I explained back in section 11 of Chapter 1, along with Stanley, we are using 'intellectualism' to denote the view that the factors in virtue of which a true belief amounts to knowledge are exclusively truth-relevant, in that they affect how likely it is that the belief is true, either from the point of view of the subject or from a more objective vantage point. Thus, to recall the illustration I used back in Chapter 1, the intellectualist can agree with the plausible judgement that, in Ginet's barn example, whether or not Henry knows that he is now seeing a barn can depend on whether he is in a normal situation in

which all the objects that appear to be barns in the vicinity really are barns or is instead in an area teeming with convincing fake barns, such that what he is presently looking at is the only real barn in the region, even if, in the latter scenario, he is completely unaware of the fact that he is surrounded by fake barns. Though this difference has no effect on how likely it is from Henry's own very limited point of view that he is seeing a barn, since he is oblivious to the presence of the fakes in the second case, it does impact the likelihood that Henry's belief is true from a more objective vantage point. Thus, the intellectualist can allow that the difference between our two scenarios can matter to whether or not Henry knows that what he is now seeing is a barn. By contrast, the intellectualist cannot allow that such 'practical' matters as how important it is to Henry that he be right can similarly matter to whether or not Henry knows it is a barn.

We should quickly tighten up the notion of intellectualism a bit, to avoid a potential problem. Intellectualism should be construed so that, in addition to truth-relevant factors, what attitude the subject has toward the proposition in question—how confident she is that the proposition is true, how strongly she believes it—can matter to whether the subject knows. Stanley construes intellectualism such that only truth-relevant factors can matter to whether a subject's *true belief* amounts to knowledge, and if one thinks that the condition that the subject believes that *p* correctly and completely captures what is required attitude-wise for a subject to know that *p*, then one will think that, having specified that we are only dealing with true *beliefs* here, we don't have to worry any more about the subject's attitude toward *p* in our construal of intellectualism. However, it is highly questionable whether belief does so capture the attitude requirement on knowledge, and I, for one, doubt that it does: Perhaps it can happen that a subject believes a proposition, but isn't confident enough in her belief to count as knowing it, and so fails to be knower for purely attitudinal reasons.<sup>1</sup> I am suppressing that

<sup>1</sup> *S is certain that p*, I think, is a better candidate than is the ever-popular *S believes that p* for expressing the attitude requirement for *S knows that p*. Such expressions of 'personal certainty' do merely describe the subject's attitude toward *p*, and do not also evaluate the propriety of the subject's attitude, I believe: No matter how unjustified *S* is in her belief that *p*, if she has absolute, unshakable confidence that *p* is true, you cannot truthfully say, '*S* is not certain that *p*'. (Expressions of 'impersonal certainty'—'*It is certain that p*'—are of course a very different matter. These do contain an important element of epistemic evaluation. For my best attempt to analyze *these* expressions, see DeRose (1998), which is mainly concerned with expressions of epistemic possibility, but at section viii (78–9), explains how to extend my proposed analysis of epistemic possibility to expressions of impersonal certainty by taking '*It is certain that p*' to be the dual of '*It is possible that p*'.) I am far from certain that even this better candidate perfectly captures what is needed, attitude-wise, to know that *p*. Perhaps there is no common phrase in natural English that perfectly captures this requirement, in which case we may have to make do with calling it something like 'the attitude of knowledge'.

doubt in this book, mentioning it only here and in a few other places, and otherwise pretending, for ease of exposition, that belief really is the ‘attitude of knowledge’.<sup>2</sup> Intellectualism should not be construed so that it is demanded of all would-be intellectualists that they accept the dubious claim that belief is the ‘attitude of knowledge’. So we will instead understand intellectualism to be the thesis that, *in addition to factors concerning what attitude toward the proposition in question the subject has*, only truth-relevant factors can matter to whether the subject knows that proposition.

SSI is an anti-intellectualist view at its very core; it is driven by the thought that non-truth-relevant, practical factors can figure prominently in whether a subject knows something to be the case. What about contextualism?

Contextualism and SSI unite, against classical invariantism, in their rulings about the truth-values of knowledge attributions (and denials of knowledge) in *some* key test cases. In some first-person cases like the Bank Cases presented in Chapter 1, contextualism and SSI agree that the claims to knowledge in LOW are true, and that the admission that the speaker/subject doesn’t ‘know’ in HIGH are also true. How can both assertions be true, given that the speaking subject seems to be in an equally good epistemic position in the two cases? Since the cases are the same with respect to their truth-relevant features, contextualism and SSI both make non-truth-relevant, ‘practical’ matters relevant to whether the subject *counts as knowing* in her own context, where by this we mean that they make such factors relevant to whether *it can be truthfully said that the subject ‘knows’*.<sup>3</sup> Contextualism and SSI similarly unite

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps Stanley is similarly pretending when he gives his characterization of intellectualism. For ease of exposition, I myself have sometimes engaged in that pretense in written work in which I didn’t state I was doing so.

<sup>3</sup> Here I’m stipulating a semi-technical usage of ‘counts as knowing’. It is only semi-technical in that this is one thing that the phrase might naturally be taken to mean. In fact, given how I use the phrase in my talks and writings about contextualism, I think it is what most listeners and readers have (correctly) taken me to mean on occasions when I haven’t given an explicit explanation of my meaning. However, I am picking out one of several things such a phrase can mean in ordinary English, and when I have successfully used the term to convey this idea even without an explicit explanation, that success has been due to the set-up I provided for my use of the term: I would typically use a few long-winded and very explicitly higher-level statements about the truth-values or truth-conditions of sentences involving ‘know(s)’, before sliding into the shorter statements that use locutions like ‘counts as’ to more handily convey the same thoughts. Another thing one could mean by saying that a subject ‘counts as knowing’ something is, for instance, that they would be (rightly or wrongly) taken to know the thing by a certain group of people or in a certain setting: ‘Well, in Iowa I count as knowing that, despite its intractable problems, ethanol is the way to go.’ And sometimes, I think, ‘this counts as that’ is used to express that this *is* that. Thus, for instance, in the quotation we’re about to encounter in the next section, when Fantl and McGrath write, ‘My true belief cannot count as knowledge, and yours not, simply because you have more at stake than I do in whether p’, I think they are expressing the thought (with which they disagree) that a mere difference in stakes cannot yield a situation where one belief does constitute knowledge while another doesn’t.

against classical invariantism in the verdicts they issue about the truth-values of assertions involving 'knows' in certain third-person cases—for instance, cases in which subjects are being described as 'knowing' propositions (or not 'knowing' them) in connection with certain evaluations of (potential) actions of the subjects. (Such cases were mentioned back in Chapter 2, and we will focus a lot of attention on them in Chapter 7.)

Because contextualism unites with SSI in this way, it's tempting to think that, like SSI, contextualism is an anti-intellectualist view. But this temptation should be resisted, for it rests on a levels confusion and it overlooks crucial differences in how the two views treat the relevant cases, even though they end up assigning the same truth-values to the assertions made in those particular cases. The contextualist does not hold that whether a subject *knows* or not can depend on non-truth-relevant factors; he holds that whether a speaker *can truthfully describe the subject as 'knowing'*—whether, in our sense, the subject 'counts as knowing' in the speaker's context—can depend on such factors. Whether the speaker can truthfully describe the subject as 'knowing' can depend on such factors, according to the contextualist, because such factors can affect the precise content of the speaker's claim, *not* because they can affect whether the subject is such as to make true the proposition that the speaker is asserting about her. As Stanley astutely notes (2005: 2–3), contextualism results from accommodating the relevant intuitions about the truth-values of the assertions in such cases as these, *while upholding intellectualism*. It is precisely because the contextualist holds fast to the intellectualist assumption that the matter of whether a given proposition ascribing 'knowledge' to a subject is true can't depend on practical, non-truth-relevant matters that he is led to posit that different knowledge relations are denoted in some of the cases in question.<sup>4</sup> For the contextualist, exactly which proposition gets expressed by a knowledge-ascribing sentence will often be affected by 'practical' factors, but the particular proposition that does get expressed will not itself be at all about those factors: Whether that proposition is true is determined only by the subject's attitude and the truth-relevant factors of the subject's situation. On SSI, by contrast, the same proposition gets expressed no matter how the practical facts are arrayed, but the truth-conditions of that proposition are such that whether they are satisfied crucially does depend on the practical, as well as on the truth-relevant, facts of the situation. Roughly, whereas on contextualism a knowledge attribution expresses that a subject (has a true belief

<sup>4</sup> At least in part: Contextualists have other reasons for how they proceed here. Most notably, I, for one, am largely guided in my handling of these cases by what happens in other, very different, third-person cases. But an allegiance to intellectualism is certainly part of what has driven me—even when I didn't fully and explicitly realize that such an allegiance was at work.

and) meets such-and-such epistemic standards, where exactly which standards are invoked can be affected by practical factors, on SSI it expresses the thought that the subject (has a true belief and) meets the epistemic standards that are appropriate to her practical situation—and whether *that* thought is true depends in part on what the subject's practical situation is.

## 2. The Problem with Denying Intellectualism

It is no accident that contextualists tend to uphold intellectualism. Though anti-intellectualist contextualism is a coherent possibility, one of the intuitive attractions of contextualism is that it allows one to uphold intellectualism while delivering certain desired results about key test cases.

And intellectualism is an extremely plausible view, as some of its recent prominent attackers have recognized.<sup>5</sup> Thus, that SSI violates intellectualism while contextualism can uphold it is an important problem that SSI suffers from—and an important relative disadvantage it has in its competition with contextualism. We will presently begin to consider the cost that SSI incurs by its denial of intellectualism. Later, starting in section 7, we will address doubts some might have about whether contextualism is really unscathed by such considerations.

As intellectualism would have it, practical matters, like how important it is to the subject that she be right, seem capable of affecting whether the subject knows only if they have an effect on the subject's attitude toward the proposition in question or on some truth-relevant factor. (In a strange situation in which the fact that the matter is important to the subject constitutes good evidence to the subject that she's wrong about the proposition in question, then of course this importance can be relevant to whether she knows.) The thought that such practical matters might otherwise be relevant to whether the subject knows seems to do considerable violence to the concept of knowledge.

Here are Fantl and McGrath expressing intellectualism (or what they there call 'epistemological purism') in terms very similar to the above paragraph, though they helpfully go on to make the issue vivid by asking us to compare two quite abstractly described subjects who differ only in terms of such practical matters. As I consider this expression of intellectualism, it certainly seems to me exactly right, not just about traditional *accounts of* knowledge, but about knowledge itself: traditional accounts seem right on this score. (Fantl and

<sup>5</sup> See especially Fantl and McGrath (2007: 580–1).

McGrath would seem to share this intuitive reaction: They treat intellectualism as something to be given up only under significant pressure. They just think there is significant pressure here, and go on to try to provide it.) But each reader should judge for herself:

According to received tradition in analytic epistemology, whether a true belief qualifies as knowledge depends only on purely epistemic factors—factors that are appropriately ‘truth-related.’ If my true belief that *p* qualifies as knowledge while yours does not, this must be because of some difference in our evidence regarding *p*, the reliability of the processes involved in our beliefs that *p*, our counterfactual relations to the truth of *p*, and so on. My true belief cannot count as knowledge, and yours not, simply because you have more at stake than I do in whether *p*. Raising the stakes may indirectly affect whether one satisfies the belief condition on knowledge (because of one’s worrying about the costs of being wrong, for example), but it cannot otherwise make a difference to whether one knows.<sup>6</sup>

Here, in judging the plausibility of intellectualism, we are going by our general sense of what is or can be relevant to whether a subject knows something to be the case, and the thesis of intellectualism seems to do a very good job of articulating what kinds of factors can and cannot matter to that.

### 3. Stakes and Confidence Levels

The plausibility of intellectualism, which I attempted to bring out in the previous section, depends in part on a certain way of construing what it is for a subject to have a certain level of confidence that a proposition is true. As I will put it, it is aided by a ‘stable’, as opposed to an ‘unstable’, construal of confidence.

Recall the Bank Cases from the beginning of Chapter 1. In Case B—the high-stakes, high-standards case—my wife informs me that we are in a high-stakes situation, with much to lose if we assume the bank will be open on the next day (Saturday) but turn out to be wrong, and she raises the possibility that the bank might have changed its hours in the last couple of weeks before asking me, ‘Do you know that the bank will be open tomorrow?’ Here again is the end of my presentation of that case:

Remaining as confident as I was before that the bank will be open then, still, I reply, ‘Well, no, I don’t know. I’d better go in and make sure.’

<sup>6</sup> (2007: 558). Here Fantl and McGrath seem not to be using ‘counts as’ in the way I do; see n. 3, above.

Note in particular the stipulation that my confidence is not decreased. Of course, this is a case I'm making up, and I'm free to stipulate features of it. But there's a certain way of thinking of confidence—the more 'unstable' way—that can make my presentation of the case hard to make sense of. One thinking of confidence in this unstable way is likely to object to my description of Bank Case B along the following lines:

How can it be that he is 'remaining as confident' as he was before?! Before he was aware of the high stakes of his situation, he was happy to just assume that the bank would be open the next day, to flat-out assert that it would be open, and to act on the assumption that it would be open, all without feeling any need to 'make sure' he's right. It seems that, even without further checks, he took himself already to be sure. But once he's aware of the high stakes, all of that seems to change, and we're now told that he is going to do something he's willing to call 'making sure' that the bank will be open before he'll go back to the confident attitude he had before he was aware of the high stakes of his situation. So it certainly seems as if his appreciation of the high stakes of his situation has diminished his confidence quite considerably indeed. So I'm not sure how to make sense of the statement that his confidence is not diminished.

What typically happens to our level of confidence that propositions are true when we find ourselves in high-stakes situations in which we're no longer willing to act forthrightly on those propositions? The above objection seems animated by an 'unstable' conception of confidence (in the truth of propositions) on which it commonly happens that our confidence is very significantly reduced in high-stakes situations. This unstable conception ties confidence closely either to the various types of behavior associated with certainty/uncertainty (Is the subject flat-out asserting the proposition in question? Is she forthrightly acting as if the proposition is true?) or with certain dispositions—which we might call 'local' dispositions—to such behavior (Is the subject presently disposed to flat-out assert the proposition if asked or if it otherwise becomes conversationally relevant? Is the subject presently disposed to act forthrightly as if the proposition is true?).

As opposed to the unstable approach that is described in the above paragraph and that animates the above indented objection, I've always found it more natural to construe confidence, at least in the way relevant to issues of knowledge, in a more 'stable' way according to which our confidence is *not* typically diminished much (if at all) in such high-stakes situations. (Explanation for why 'typically' is included here will be given in the next paragraph.) This more stable construal ties confidence to different dispositions that tend to

remain steady as a subject moves back and forth between high- and low-stakes situations. Whether a subject is in a high- or a low-stakes situation, she will typically have the same dispositions concerning whether she will flat-out assert a proposition should it happen that it is conversationally relevant and she is in a high-stakes situation. So, for instance, even in LOW Bank Case A, I'm disposed *not* to flat-out assert that the bank is open should it happen that that fact is conversationally relevant *and I'm in a very high-stakes situation*. Likewise, when I'm in HIGH Bank Case B, I still have the disposition to indeed flat-out assert that the bank is open on Saturday should it happen that that fact is conversationally relevant *and I'm in a low-stakes conversation* much like that exemplified in Case A. The 'stable' notion of confidence I find plausible here is the one on which the notion more closely tracks these more stable dispositions. On this more stable construal of confidence, if I'm a fairly normal person, I'm about equally confident in the truth of the relevant proposition in LOW and in HIGH, but the same level of confidence that produces confident behavior in LOW doesn't produce similarly confident behavior in HIGH, because that same level of confidence is not confidence enough to yield that behavior, given the gravity of the situation in HIGH. Since I think this more stable construal is the correct construal of confidence (at least as the notion is related to issues concerning knowledge), I'll use scare quotes to refer to 'confidence' as that notion is (mis)construed in the unstable way described in the preceding paragraph.

Though the more stable dispositions to which I'm inclined to tie the notion of confidence *typically* don't change much as a subject moves into a high-stakes situation, it is *possible* for them to be even drastically changed by such a move, and therefore for a subject to be made much less confident, even where confidence is construed in the more stable way, by finding herself in a high-stakes situation. It *could* happen that finding herself in a high-stakes situation really shakes up a subject in such a way that she's no longer disposed to act in the various ways associated with certainty even should she again find herself in more normal circumstances. But this would be a rather unusual occurrence.

The intuitive plausibility that intellectualism enjoys seems to in part depend on, or at least to be aided by, construing the notion of a subject's confidence that a proposition is true in the more stable way in which I'm inclined to construe it—as being such as to track the more stable dispositions, as opposed to what we are calling the more 'local' dispositions. For even the intellectualist can and should hold that non-truth-relevant factors can affect whether a subject knows something to be the case if they do so by affecting the subject's level of confidence that the proposition is true. So the key question dividing intellectualists from non-intellectualists on the relation between stakes



and knowledge is whether two subjects, *both of whom are equally confident* that a proposition is true, can differ from one another in whether they know the proposition in question just because one but only one of them is in a high-stakes situation in which it is much more important that she be right. Now, we can ask this question even if we are construing 'confidence' in the more unstable way in which it tends to track the more local dispositions. But on that construal, when we ask the key question, we are asking what happens in very unusual circumstances: We are asking about subjects, at least one of whose relevant local dispositions is wildly out of whack with what her situation is. And it is wise to be cautious in judging situations that are so far from what is normal. In addition to the doubt occasioned by the strangeness of the situation we are judging, there is also the following reason to think that two subjects of the relevant types might well differ from one another on the matter of whether they know a proposition to be true: It is not only *typical* for our level of 'confidence' (where confidence is construed in the unstable way, as tied to the local dispositions) to vary significantly as we move from a low- to a very high-stakes situation, but it seems that our level of 'confidence' (so construed) *should* vary considerably between the two types of situations. One who didn't become considerably less 'confident' (in this more unstable sense) as she moved into (what she can see is) a very high-stakes situation would not seem to have the appropriate level of 'confidence' toward the proposition. Thus, for instance, one of the subjects we are comparing might be in a low-stakes situation, and might be believing the proposition in question in just the way she ought to. When we then stipulate that the other subject, who is in a very high-stakes situation, is every bit as 'confident' in the truth of the proposition as is the subject in the low-stakes situation, our stipulation forces us to construe the subject in the high-stakes environment as having a very inappropriate attitude toward the proposition in question. And that wildly inappropriate attitude seems capable of resulting in the subject being, or at least seeming to be, a non-knower.

By contrast, when we ask the key question while construing confidence in the more stable way that I think is appropriate to issues of knowledge, we are construing the comparison in a way that involves quite normal subjects, whose 'local' dispositions do vary considerably in reaction to changes in the gravity of their circumstances, but whose dispositions of the more stable variety are not much affected by their being placed in a high-stakes situation. Here, the intuition seems quite strong that these two such subjects—who don't differ from one another in terms of any truth-relevant factor, and who are equally confident in the truth of the proposition—cannot differ from one another on the matter of whether they know the proposition in question.

#### 4. 'Now You Know It, Now You Don't' Problems

To many, the intuitive power of intellectualism becomes most apparent when they consider certain 'now you know it, now you don't' claims, as I've long called them. This class of claims is a bit broader than my label for them would indicate, because they can involve modal comparisons (where what is actually known or not known is compared with what would have been known or not known in a counterfactual situation, or in which two counterfactual situations are compared with one another), as well as temporal comparisons (in which what is known or not known at one time is compared with what is known or not known at another time). They are claims to the effect that matters were (or will be, or would have been) different with regard to whether a subject knows some fact when (or if) such-and-such was (or will be, or had been) the case, where the differences in circumstances being imagined between the two situations being compared (one of which is often the actual, present situation of a subject) concern only some non-truth-relevant matters. Though the same effect is achieved when the difference between the situations concerns other non-truth-relevant issues, our special interest in SSI makes it profitable for us to consider comparisons that allege that knowledge varies with the matter, crucial to SSI, of how high or low the stakes are for the subject; so consider:

She does know, but she wouldn't have known if more had been at stake

She doesn't know now, but she will know tomorrow, when less will be at stake

She knows on the weekends when she isn't on duty and is only wondering out of idle curiosity; but on weekdays, when much rides on whether she's right, she doesn't know.

Where there is no difference at all in any truth-relevant factors to ground the differences in knowledge alleged in these sentences (where, for instance, there's no difference in the subject's grounds for the belief in question), and there is no difference in the subject's level of confidence in the proposition in question, it is very difficult to believe that such sentences express truths. This is a nasty problem for SSI, according to which the practical matter of how important it is to the subject that she be right is crucially relevant to whether a subject knows, and according to which, it seems, such 'now you know it, now you don't' claims would very often be true about the situations in question (in which there is no difference in the subject's level of confidence in the proposition or in any truth-relevant matters).

This problem for SSI is of course intimately related to the problem we looked at in section 2—so much so that it may be best to view these as two faces of a single problem. In section 2, I was noting and trying to make manifest the plausibility of intellectualism (and implausibility of anti-intellectualism) to our general sense of what is or can be relevant to whether a subject knows something to be the case. But these comparative sentences we are now considering might be able to tempt toward intellectualism those who don't have much of a general sense about what kind of factors can be relevant to knowledge, or who don't trust such a sense. For even those who don't have, or who don't trust, a strong response to a fairly abstract question about what kinds of matters questions of knowledge might turn on might be able to sense that there's something very wrong about these particular 'now you know it, now you don't' sentences. They bring to light the absurdity of thinking that certain types of factors are relevant to the issue of whether a subject knows something. So intellectualism is supported by two closely related considerations: its plausibility to our general sense of what kinds of factors can be relevant to knowledge, and its ability to explain why 'now you know it, now you don't' sentences seem so wrong about the relevant situations.

Briefly returning to the issue I pursued in the previous section, I think considering these 'now you know it, now you don't' sentences also tends to validate construing the notion of confidence, at least as it relates to issues of knowledge, in the more stable way I favor, rather than in the more unstable way in which it tends to track people's more 'local' dispositions to behave in confident/unconfident ways. When I presented the sentences here, I stipulated that they were being asserted about subjects whose level of confidence in the relevant propositions didn't vary between the two situations being compared in the sentences. But when that stipulation is not explicitly made, most people still find the sentences to be very problematic. When we consider these sentences, we imagine the subjects that they concern to have fairly normal psychologies, having not been told that there's anything weird about them. But the relevant 'local' dispositions of normal subjects do vary greatly between low- and very high-stakes situations. So, if we construed the notion of confidence (in the truth of propositions) in the more unstable way in which it tends to track those 'local' dispositions, we would be imagining subjects whose level of 'confidence' in the truth of the relevant proposition varied greatly between the situations being compared. And then, since the matter of how confident a subject is that the relevant proposition is true is clearly relevant to whether she knows that proposition, we probably wouldn't find the sentences to be so problematic. That we find the sentences to be quite problematic even when we're not explicitly instructed to think of the subjects involved as being

equally confident in the two situations, then, supports construing the notion of confidence in the more stable way I favor—in which it tends to track the dispositions that tend to be more stable in normal subjects as they move between low- and very high-stakes situations.

### 5. KAA to the Rescue?

Hawthorne attempts to handle SSI's problems with 'now you know it, now you don't' sentences much like the ones I mentioned by appeal to the knowledge account of assertion (KAA).<sup>7</sup> As Hawthorne points out, by utilizing KAA, we can explain why sentences like 'I don't know, but I did know before the stakes were so high' are so problematic without invoking intellectualism: If the speaker indeed doesn't now know the proposition in question, as is needed to make the first conjunct of the sentence true, then she also doesn't now know that her past belief in that proposition was true. Thus, since knowledge requires the truth of what's known, the speaker does not now know that she used to know—even if it's in fact true that she used to know. But if she doesn't know that she used to know, then, by KAA, she is in no position to assert that she used to know. On this explanation, the problematic sentence could well be true, but even where it is true, it is unassertable, and asserting it will involve the speaker in falsely representing herself as knowing that she used to know the proposition in question.

The problem with this escape is that it only helps with some of the problematic sentences that need to be handled, leaving other, equally troublesome examples untouched. For one thing, it only helps with first-person examples. But equally problematic are third-person sentences like 'Smith doesn't know, but he did know before the stakes were so high' or 'Smith doesn't know, but he would have known if the stakes hadn't been so high'. According to SSI, such a statement is often true about the relevant situations, where it seems very implausible: where Smith's level of confidence hasn't changed, and there is no change in Smith's evidence for the proposition in question or in any

<sup>7</sup> At (2004: 159–60), Hawthorne so addresses a sentence, based on an example Stewart Cohen gives, where one character says to another, 'Okay, Smith knows that the flight stops in Chicago, but we don't' (Cohen himself put a different sentence in his character's mouth). This is a bit different from the sentences I have considered here, because it is comparing different subjects, rather than the same subject at different times or in different situations. Still, this is the same basic problem as I have been considering: The reason the sentence seems so wrong is that the difference between Smith and the characters who are talking to one another is that it is far more important to the latter that they be right about whether the flight stops in Chicago, and there is no difference between them in truth-relevant factors.

truth-relevant matter. And not only is such a statement often true, according to SSI, but, for all we can see so far, it should also be perfectly assertable in many of the situations where it seems so wrong: So long as the speaker herself is in a low-stakes situation where, according to SSI, she does herself know the proposition in question, or, alternatively, if she has such strong evidence that she knows even by the standards relevant to high-stakes situations, it seems that by the lights of SSI, she should be in a position to assert this clunker. And even among first-person examples, this escape only works where it's the speaker's present, actual situation that is the high-stakes scenario in which, according to SSI, she doesn't know. The maneuver seems impotent when we reverse things, imagining that the speaker's present actual situation is the low-stakes scenario about which SSI rules she knows, and it's the alternative (past, future, or counterfactual) situation in which high stakes kill her knowledge, yielding sentences that, about the relevant situations (in which there is no difference in the subject's attitude, or in her evidence or other truth-relevant matters), sound just as implausible as the ones the maneuver can handle: 'I know now, but I didn't know yesterday when the stakes were so high', 'I know now, but I won't know tomorrow, when the stakes will be higher', 'I know, but I wouldn't have known if the stakes had been much higher'. The only way I can hear those sentences as making any sense is if I suppose that, for example, the high stakes in one of the situations being discussed diminish my confidence in that situation. So when I hold my confidence level and truth-relevant factors fixed over the comparisons these sentences concern, the sentences sound extremely implausible.

## 6. Does SSI Have Good Company in its Misery?

Following suggestions from Hawthorne, Stanley tries to mitigate this problem for SSI by claiming that other theories of knowledge have to endorse 'equally worrisome' sentences of the type in question. The example Stanley gives is that some versions of reliabilism imply that whether a subject knows that an object is a barn can depend on whether and how many fake barns there are in the vicinity, and thus license claims like: 'Henry doesn't know that's a barn, but if there were fewer fake barns around then he would know that's a barn.'<sup>8</sup>

However, I, for one, just don't find that claim so paradoxical. I guess that's because, as I explained back in Chapter 1, it just doesn't seem so implausible

<sup>8</sup> Stanley (2005: 113–14). Stanley credits the basic idea to personal communication he received from Hawthorne.

to suppose that whether a subject knows can depend on whether his way of telling is reliable in the particular surroundings he finds himself in, while, by contrast, I do find it hard to believe that whether a subject knows can depend on the practical facts that SSI claims are relevant. I suppose that any who *do* find the statement about Henry and the barns to be as jarringly implausible as are the sentences that cause trouble for SSI will likely avoid versions of reliabilism that would license such sentences about Henry. I think such people would be wrong to find the sentence about Henry so implausible, but, given that reaction, they would be reasonable in taking it to be a strong strike against a theory of knowledge that it endorses such a claim. But, likewise then, SSI's troubles here will be rightly held against the view by most who consider them, and I don't see how this attempt to find company for SSI's misery does much to mitigate that problem.

## 7. Contextualism and the Advantages of Intellectualism

Thus far, we have focused on the problems SSI encounters in connection with its anti-intellectualism. In section 1, I explained the way contextualism can uphold intellectualism: by making the matter of whether a subject knows some true proposition *p*, by any given standard for knowledge, depend only on the subject's attitude toward *p* and truth-relevant features of the subject's situation. But even such 'intellectualist' versions of contextualism (which would seem to include at least most of the forms of contextualism that are actually endorsed) typically make non-truth-relevant factors of the speaker's situation relevant to what proposition the speaker expresses when she says that the subject does or doesn't 'know'. They thus make such non-truth-relevant factors relevant to whether the subject *counts as knowing* *p* in the speaker's context, in the sense described in section 1: they make such factors relevant to whether the subject can be truthfully said to 'know' some fact by the speaker. Is this any better?

More generally: Does contextualism really enjoy the advantages of intellectualism? Or can those advantages be rightfully claimed only by classical invariantism, according to which neither the matter of whether a subject knows a proposition, nor the matter of whether they count as knowing it (in our current sense), can depend on non-truth-relevant factors? In the remainder of this chapter, I will argue that contextualism does enjoy the advantages of intellectualism.

## 8. Contextualism and Simple ‘Now You Know It, Now You Don’t’ Sentences: The Apparent Problem and Two Unsatisfying Contextualist Responses

First, contextualism avoids endorsing the problematic ‘now you know it, now you don’t’ sentences that plague SSI. This may not be obvious at first glance, because, though he can insist along with the classical invariantist that non-truth-relevant factors that don’t affect the subject’s attitude toward the proposition in question can’t affect *whether the subject knows* that proposition, the contextualist will admit something the classical invariantist will deny: that, in our semi-technical use of the phrase, such factors can affect whether *the subject counts as knowing* the proposition in a certain speaker’s context (where that speaker will be identical with the subject, in the case of first-person knowledge claims). However, as we’ll see, despite the feature of the view just admitted, the contextualist does not, and need not, endorse the absurd ‘now you know it, now you don’t’ sentences some apparently think would be licensed by contextualism.

We’ll discuss this by reference to an example that has long been the focus of my thoughts about this issue: Palle Yourgrau constructs the following conversation, and rightly observes that ‘something is amiss’ in it:

*Yourgrau’s Dialogue*

- A: Is that a zebra?  
 B: Yes, it is a zebra.  
 A: But can you rule out its being merely a cleverly painted mule?  
 B: No, I can’t.  
 A: So, you admit you didn’t know it was a zebra?  
 B: No, I did know then that it was a zebra. But after your question, I no longer know.  
 (Yourgrau 1983: 183)

Yourgrau’s target is a contextualist version of the relevant alternatives theory of knowledge (RA).<sup>9</sup> However, Yourgrau’s complaint would seem to apply equally well to *any* contextualist view according to which A’s question manages to raise the standards for knowledge so that B no longer counts as knowing. The general complaint is that B’s last line is absurd, but, because contextualism will hold that B no longer counts as knowing the animal is a

<sup>9</sup> Specifically, Yourgrau is targeting the contextualist version of RA that Goldman considers at Goldman (1976: 775–8); see especially Yourgrau (1983: 180–1). For more on RA, and especially its relation to contextualism, see sections 13–14 of Chapter 1.

zebra after A raises her question, that last line is what B should or at least could say if contextualism were correct.

But in fact contextualism does not at all license such a line. Before tackling this objection head-on in the following section by explaining the real reason why contextualism would have B say no such thing, in this section we will look at a couple of other, ultimately unsatisfying, ways in which the contextualist might try to wriggle off the hook here. (Most readers would do well to skip ahead to the start of the next section. The rest of this section is being kept in here for the benefit of those readers who just can't get enough of this stuff—and for those who might actually be wondering why I don't respond to this objection in one of the ways I'm about to discuss.)

The first way begins with the observation that there are fairly realistic ways of imagining the circumstances in which Yourgrau's dialogue takes place on which B's last line may well be true. A's bringing up the possibility that the animal in question is merely a painted mule might well shake B's confidence that it is a zebra,<sup>10</sup> or might diminish B's justification for believing it is a zebra. When someone asks you whether you can rule out some alternative to what you are claiming, that is sometimes because they have some special reason to think that the alternative is not all that unlikely. In this case, B might take the fact that A has asked her question about the painted mules to be some reason to think that the animals might well be painted mules. (Perhaps A has heard that, due to a zebra shortage, many zoos have adopted the deceitful practice of using painted mules in their zebra cages?) This could shake B's confidence and/or diminish her justification. And since B's levels of confidence and justification are clearly relevant to whether she knows, anyone—contextualist or not, intellectualist or not—should admit that in the circumstances we are now imagining, B's last line could well be true.

Now, I think it's clear that Yourgrau did not intend for his dialogue to be understood in such a way. Rather, we're to suppose that A has no particular reason, and no more reason than B has, for thinking that the animal is or might well be a painted mule, and that B realizes all this. Yourgrau intended to be raising a problem specific to contextualists, and so would want the circumstances to be such that it's a particular commitment of contextualism that generates the endorsement of the absurd line. We are now in a position to be more explicit than Yourgrau was able to be about the particular commitment of contextualism that is supposed to be generating the problem: that, according

<sup>10</sup> Note that this can plausibly diminish the subject's confidence even where confidence is construed in the more stable way I am inclined to construe it, and not just as confidence in the more unstable way that I reject (as these construals are explained in section 3, above).



to contextualism, as opposed to classical invariantism, whether a subject counts as knowing something (in our semi-technical sense) can depend on non-truth-relevant factors of a speaker's context that don't affect the subject's level of confidence. But then it's vital to letting Yourgrau make his intended point that we imagine the case in such a way that A's raising the possibility of painted mules does not diminish B's level of confidence nor constitute evidence that the animal may well be a painted mule. And that's why, being cooperative readers, we understand Yourgrau's dialogue to be such that A has no particular reason to think the animal is or may well be a zebra, and that B realizes this.

But next we note this interesting fact: When we imagine the dialogue transpiring such that A's question *does* greatly diminish B's level of confidence and/or justification (when we imagine it in the way Yourgrau did not intend), that last line *still* sounds absurd. However, we're now imagining that last line occurring under circumstances in which it might well be true. Thus, there is *something* here that makes that last line *sound* absurd even when it is in fact true. And *whatever* accounts for this strange phenomenon of a true claim sounding absurdly false might also be operative when the dialogue transpires in the way Yourgrau intends it to be understood. Or so the contextualist can suggest: Sure, that last line *sounds* absurd, but it sounds that way even where it's just plain true.

And the contextualist might make similar defensive suggestions about variants of Yourgrau's dialogue. Consider, for instance, a third-person variant of the dialogue. In an attempt to sidestep issues about whether A's question might be diminishing B's confidence or justification, the anti-contextualist might utilize a variant of the dialogue in which A and B are talking about some other subject who is not present at their conversation as they say:

*Third-Person Dialogue*

A: Does Mary know that that's a zebra?

B: Yes, she knows.

A: But can she rule out its being merely a cleverly painted mule?

B: No, she can't.

A: Ah, so you admit now that she didn't know it was a zebra?

B: No, she did know before your question that it was a zebra. But after your question, she no longer knows.<sup>11</sup>

Since we've now placed the subject whose knowledge is in question out of earshot of our dialogue, we don't have to worry that A's raising of her question

<sup>11</sup> I utilized just such a third-person variant of Yourgrau's dialogue to sidestep issues concerning whether the asking of the question might be diminishing the subject's confidence at DeRose (2000: 94).

diminishes the confidence and/or justification of the subject's belief. The anti-contextualist will correctly note that B's last line sounds crazy, and will charge that the contextualist will have to endorse it. However, the contextualist could again claim that an endorsement of that last line might not be so bad, since the last line of Yourgrau's original first-person dialogue also sounds absurd even where we're construing the situation so that the last line there is perfectly true, and whatever is making the last line of Yourgrau's dialogue misleadingly sound so absurd even where it is clearly true can also be operating here when we consider the third-person dialogue.

Of course, it's far from clear that whatever it is that accounts for why the last line of Yourgrau's dialogue sounds so bad even where it's true will also account for why it sounds so bad when we imagine the dialogue transpiring as Yourgrau intended it to, or for why the last line of the third-person dialogue sounds so bad. The contextualist is just suggesting a possibility here. Consequently, this is a fairly weak defense. What's more, I believe that the reason the last line of Yourgrau's dialogue sounds absurd even where it is true does not generalize to the other situations,<sup>12</sup> so the escape from trouble for the contextualist that we are now considering does not provide the relief the contextualist needs here.

Above we were considering a way that the contextualist might suggest that it is not a very bad problem if he has to endorse the last line of the dialogues we've been considering. The other attempted escape we will consider in this section is one by which the contextualist argues that he doesn't really have to endorse that suspect line in the first place. The reason the objector thinks the contextualist is committed to the problematic line is that the contextualist will hold that A's question has made the subject in question (B in Yourgrau's original dialogue, Mary in our third-person version) no longer count as knowing that the animal is a zebra. And on the possible escape we're now discussing, the contextualist can accept a version of contextualism on which A's question will not have that effect.

Some contextualists may think that, although the standards for knowledge can vary according to conversational context, it's not all that easy to change the standards, and, in particular, that the mere mention of a bizarre alternative like painted mules is not sufficient to render that alternative relevant. I have

<sup>12</sup> That reason is that, even where that last line is true, since B no longer knows that the animal was a zebra (which is needed to make the second sentence of the last line true), B also doesn't know that her earlier claim to know it was a zebra was true (since knowledge requires truth). But then, by KAA, B is not in a position to assert the first sentence of the last line, and in asserting that first sentence, she falsely represents herself as knowing that she used to know that the animal was a zebra. This is similar to explanations we will discuss below in section 10.

a lot of sympathy for the thought that the mere mention of the alternative is not sufficient for making it relevant, but note that in our dialogues we do have more than the mere mention of the alternative. When A mentions the possibility of cleverly painted mules, there are various ways for B to resist allowing that alternative in as relevant. B could reject that alternative by, for example, saying 'Painted mules?! C'mon! That's absurd! Get outta here with that crazy idea!' Following a remark of David Lewis's, a possible contextualist view (and one that we looked at in section 8 of Chapter 4) is that the mentioning of an alternative makes that alternative relevant *if one gets away with making that alternative relevant*, where one fails to get away with making it relevant if one's interlocutor rejects the alternative's relevance in some way like we've just imagined. But in our dialogues, B does not resist allowing the alternative in as relevant. A does seem to get away with making the cleverly painted mule hypothesis relevant. So we have more than mere mentioning in our example; we have mentioning plus some form of non-rejection. (Indeed, beyond mere passive non-rejection, we seem to have some sort of positive acceptance.)

Still, on some possible contextualist views, even that may not be enough. Some contextualists may think that standards can only be raised if elevated standards are somehow appropriate to the context.<sup>13</sup> So, for instance, many contextualists seem to think that higher-than-usual standards are appropriate when the stakes are unusually high, where it's unusually important that the person in question be right. On one such possible contextualist view, mentioning a heretofore irrelevant alternative may make that alternative relevant only if the stakes are high enough to make it appropriate to allow that alternative in as relevant. Some such contextualists may deny that A's mentioning of the painted mule hypothesis, even together with B's apparent acceptance of that possibility, makes that alternative relevant. Such a contextualist can escape Yourgrau's problem by claiming that A has failed to raise the standards for knowledge to such a level as to make B count as a non-knower, and thus B has no business saying she no longer knows.

However, *any* contextualist will allow that under *some* circumstances, the standards for knowledge can be raised to unusually high levels by contextual or practical features of the speaker's situation that are not truth-relevant factors of the subject's situation. And regardless of what a particular contextualist thinks does manage to raise the standards, she will face a Yourgrau-like dialogue, ending with an absurd-sounding last line of the form 'I did know then, but I no longer know now that...', where the line is completed by whatever

<sup>13</sup> See for instance the various 'reasonableness' views discussed in section 9 of Chapter 4.

non-truth-relevant factor it is that the contextualist in question thinks does manage to raise the standards. I propose, then, that contextualists not respond in the way we've been considering. So let's just suppose (or pretend, if need be) that A has managed to raise the standards for knowledge in our dialogues to the point at which B and Mary no longer count as knowing that the animal is a zebra. It will turn out that, even so, there really isn't a good objection here.

### 9. Why Contextualism Does Not Endorse the Simple 'Now You Know It, Now You Don't' Sentences

Contextualism simply does not predict that speakers will say the absurd lines we are considering in the cases in question. The relevant cases are ones in which speakers are initially employing epistemic standards that the subject they are talking about meets, but then move to higher standards that the subject does not meet. (Alternatively, they can begin with the high standards the subject does not meet, but then lower them to a level that the subject does satisfy.) These are indeed cases in which, in our semi-technical sense, the subject first *counts as knowing* in the speakers' context, but then no longer *counts as knowing* in their context (or, in the alternative scenario, first doesn't count as knowing, but then does so count). But that doesn't mean that the speaker should or can say anything along the lines of, 'Well, she knew, but she no longer knows.'

Charging contextualism with countenancing these absurd lines would seem to be based on the assumption that, in describing someone's past condition, the standards for knowledge are set by what the conversational context was at the time being talked about. But it's open to the contextualist to hold that when a speaker describes a past time, the standards that govern such talk are those set by the speaker's conversational context at the time of the speaker's utterance. Indeed, this option is more than just *open* to the contextualist. Given what happens with at least many context-sensitive terms, we should *expect* the operative epistemic standards to be set by the context at the time of utterance. Though it's possible, I suppose, for there to be a context-sensitive term which operates in the way the objector to contextualism assumes (when describing a past situation, the term takes on the sense that would be determined by the context at the time being talked about), that's not how context-sensitive terms usually seem to work. For instance, in describing my past location, the meaning of my use of 'here' seems at least usually to be fixed by my

present location, not by what my location was at the time being talked about. As I now say in New Haven, ‘When I was in Houston last year, David was here’, competent speakers of English know that by ‘here’, I mean New Haven (my present location), not Houston (my location at the time I’m talking about).

‘Here’ is often grouped with ‘I’ and ‘now’ into a special class of context-sensitive terms—the ‘core indexicals’ as I’ve heard them called—which in various ways have fairly special properties, and ‘know(s)’ doesn’t belong in that special class. But it’s not only ‘core indexicals’ that behave in the manner in question. Modifying an example of Stanley’s,<sup>14</sup> consider, for instance, this dialogue involving ‘possible’:

- A: Is it possible to fly from London to New York City in 30 minutes?  
 B: No flights available to the public now get from London to New York that quickly. It’s not possible to do that.  
 A: Well, I believe that, though it is not yet available to the public, technology that would allow such fast flights does now exist. So it is possible to make the flight in 30 minutes.  
 B: Yes, I’ve heard of that technology, too.  
 A: Ah, so now you admit that it was possible to fly from London to New York in 30 minutes?  
 B: No, before you started talking about all existing technology, it wasn’t possible to fly from London to New York in 30 minutes, but now it is possible to make the flight that quickly.

In her first line, B is talking about what is possible, given what is available to the public—a perfectly fine use of ‘possible’. But then A switches the exact content of ‘possible’ so that anything that is possible given all existing technology is encompassed—another perfectly fine use. (Depending on what it takes to change the content of a context-sensitive term, A’s success here may depend on the fact that B acquiesces in this change in meaning.) In our terminology, flying from London to New York in 30 minutes *does not count as possible* at the beginning of the dialogue, but *does count as possible* after A’s switch. Still, while we can probably figure out what she is there *trying* to say, B’s last line is intuitively wrong (to put it kindly). Why? Because if, as we are supposing, the content of ‘possible’ at the end of the dialogue is such as to encompass anything that is possible given all existing technology, whether or not the technology is available to the public, then, since it was in that ‘thin’ sense possible to fly from London to New York in 30 minutes even before A said

<sup>14</sup> Stanley (2005: 53); I present and discuss Stanley’s actual dialogue in n. 12 of Chapter 5.

anything, B has no business saying that it 'wasn't possible' to fly that quickly before A mentioned all existing technology. B's use of 'possible', even when she is describing what was 'possible' at past times, is governed by her context at the time of her utterance.

Similarly, the contextualist claims that our uses of 'know(s)'—and its past tense—are governed by the epistemic standards that are in place at the time of a speaker's utterance, not at the time being talked about. Thus, in our dialogues concerning 'know(s)', after A's question raises the epistemic standards of the conversation so that the subject being talked about no longer counts as knowing or as having known the item in question, then B should not say the subject 'did know' before A asked her question. For even at the time before A asked her question, the subject did not meet the higher standards that are operative as B issues her last line.

### 10. The Fortified Objection: 'What I Said'

'Aha!', it may be (and, I've found, often is) objected: 'While contextualism may not license the last lines of the dialogues we've seen *so far*, the spirit of the objection lives on, for it does countenance the clunking last line of the following':

*Fortified First-Person Dialogue*

A: Do you know that that's a zebra?

B: Yes, I know it's a zebra.

A: But can you rule out its being merely a cleverly painted mule?

B: No, I can't.

A: Ah, so you admit now that you were wrong when you said you knew?

B: No, what I said—"I know it's a zebra"—was true. But now I wish to add this: I didn't know that it was a zebra.<sup>15</sup>

For isn't it precisely the contextualist's view that B's initial claim to 'know', made when the epistemic standards are relatively low, just is true? So, it seems, the contextualist would have to approve of the first half of B's last line: 'What I said—"I know it's a zebra"—was true.' There, it seems, B just is expressing the contextualist position on the truth-value of her earlier claim. But it would also seem that the contextualist would have to approve of the second half

<sup>15</sup> This objection was first raised to me some time in 1990 or 1991 by an anonymous referee for a philosophical journal in an evaluation of DeRose (1992). Essentially the same objection has been raised to me many times since then.

of B's last line as well, for there B is using 'know' (at the object level), and since A has raised the standards for knowledge to a level B does not meet (we are supposing), the contextualist would counsel B to say that she doesn't 'know'—just as she does in the second half of her last line. And, in a similar vein, it can be objected that the contextualist must accept a similarly 'fortified' third-person dialogue, with this last line:

*Fortified Third-Person Dialogue—Last Line:*

B: No, what I said—'She knows it's a zebra'—was true. But now I wish to add this:  
She didn't know that it was a zebra.

The contextualist could utilize KAA to account for the wrongness of B's last line in the fortified first-person dialogue: Since B doesn't count as knowing that the animal was a zebra by the high standards that govern her last line (as is needed to account for the second half of that line), she also doesn't count as knowing, by those same high standards, that her earlier (low-standards) claim to 'know' that fact was true, since the truth of *p* is always required for the truth of 'S knows that *p*'. Thus, B is in no position to assert the first half of her last line. Indeed, in asserting the first half of her last line, she represents herself as knowing, by the high standards governing her last line, that her earlier knowledge claim was true, which, in turn, commits her to the position that she knows by the high standards that the animal was a zebra, which flatly contradicts what she goes on to say in the second half of her last line. No wonder that line sounds so bad!

However, this appeal to KAA cannot explain what's wrong with the last line of the fortified third-person dialogue, at least on some ways of construing it,<sup>16</sup> nor can it handle an alternative version of the fortified first-person case, reversed so that the speaker was using the higher standards that she didn't and doesn't meet in her earlier claim, but has moved to the lower standards that she did and does meet when she issues this last line:

*Reversed Fortified First-Person Dialogue—Last Line:*

B: No, what I said—'I don't know it's a zebra'—was true. But now I wish to add this: I knew that it was a zebra.

<sup>16</sup> KAA can be used to explain what's wrong with the fortified third-person line if it is somehow being assumed that B is in the same epistemic position as is the subject being talked about with respect to the animals being zebras. But if we assume that, unlike the subject being talked about, B is in a strong enough position to meet even the higher standards for knowledge that are in place as she issues her last line, that last line still sounds awful, and the appeal to KAA we're considering cannot explain why.

These lines sound quite problematic, too,<sup>17</sup> and the appeal to KAA we have been considering won't explain what's wrong with them.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> There does seem, at least to me, to be a perceivable difference in the exact kind of problem involved here: The last line of the original fortified first-person dialogue seems to quite sharply 'clash', in the way discussed in Chapter 3: It sounds like a contradiction. And this contrasts with the last line of the reversed first-person dialogue, and of the fortified third-person dialogue, which do not in the same way seem to clash. And I believe this difference in appearance is one rightly accounted for by the KAA explanation we've been considering, according to which, in the case of the original, but not the reversed, version of the line there is a contradiction between something B asserts (namely, that she didn't know that the animal was a zebra (by the standards that govern her last line)) and something that B merely represents as being the case (namely, that she does know that same fact by those same standards).

I realize that in cases like these—where the sentences involved are a bit complicated, as opposed to more simple clashes like 'Dogs bark, but I don't know that they do'—many will not be able to discern clashes from other problems, and will not find this perceivable difference in how the original and the reversed version of the last line of the fortified first-person dialogue sound to them: To many, both of these lines will just sound bad, with neither of them any more than the other seeming to 'clash'. And some of these folks may be suspicious of my sorcerous ways when I claim to detect a difference here, suspecting that I don't have a sense for this difference that my theory (KAA) then accounts for, either. Rather, the suspicion will go, it's because I'm theoretically committed to there being a clash here that I tend to hear the one, but not the other line, in a 'clashing' way.

Indeed, in reporting this difference in how these two lines sound, I do feel a bit like one of the few remaining practitioners of an ancient, dying religion. But in a couple of seminars I took from Rogers Albritton at UCLA, I was initiated into the (or at least a) practice of discerning clashes from other ways that conjunctions can be problematic. So—to use examples that we discussed in the seminar, inspired by White (1975), which someone in the seminar was reading, and that I have since dealt with (DeRose 1991: 601–5)—there is to me a discernible difference between

(a) It is possible that X Vs, but it is not possible for X to V  
and

(b) It is possible for X to V, but it is not possible that X Vs.

To use a couple of advanced terms of art, while (a) clashes, (b) is just clunky. I have an explanation (based on KAA) for why (a) would clash (see DeRose 1991: 604), but the difference between these two is something I can just perceive (hear)—or so I think. That (a) clashes, and does not just clunk like (b) does, functions for me as a datum to be explained. (Similarly, though David Sosa's '*P* but I don't know whether I know that *P* and the conjunctions Sosa considers later in (forthcoming) seem odd, they do not clash). How did I come to have this ability to perceive such differences? After hearing Albritton and some more advanced graduate students discuss many examples for less than half an hour, I felt like I could join in: 'Yes, this one clashes; that one is just a bit clunky; nothing at all wrong with this other one.' And I don't think I was following any theories in making the distinctions involved: Those that I ruled were clashers really did just come to strike me in a different way from the others. Of course, one can't help but start formulating theories, or at least proto-theories for why some clash and others don't. But I do not think my reactions were being guided by the proto-theories I was inclined toward, because there were surprises: cases where one gets a result that goes against the prediction one's proto-theory would issue: 'Oh, that one does clash. That's interesting. I wouldn't have expected that.' Afterward, I went back to the examples in my notes, and found that the distinction I was inclined to draw between those that clashed and those that didn't aligned fairly closely with other differences between the two camps that were formed. For instance I could come up with situations about which (b), except for being an awkward way of putting things, seemed a good description: in this case, situations in which it is clear that X has the capacity to V, but it is certain to the speaker that X does not exercise that capacity. By contrast, I couldn't come up with situations about which (a), though it is logically coherent, seems a good description. There indeed can be cases in which X in fact does not have the ability to V, but in which it is uncertain to the speaker whether X V's (presumably in part because it is also uncertain to the



To explain with any confidence exactly how these last lines go wrong would require me to be far more confident than I am about the semantics of sentences involving such phrases as ‘what I said’ (which seem quite similar to the likes of ‘I never said that’, which we looked at back in Chapter 5), and, especially, how such locutions work where context-sensitive terms are involved in what was said at the earlier time. Nevertheless, we can see that the wrongness of these last lines doesn’t provide a good reason to doubt contextualism about ‘know(s)’ by observing that analogous lines involving obviously context-sensitive terms sound wrong, as well. Consider these last lines (the reader should by now be able to construct the rest of the dialogues that lead up to these last lines for herself):

No, what I said—‘It’s not possible to fly from London to New York in under 30 minutes’—was true. But now I wish to add this: It was possible to fly from London to New York in under 30 minutes.

No, what I said—‘Reeves is tall’—was true. But now I wish to add this: Reeves wasn’t tall.

None of these fortified last lines—the two immediately above and the ones we’ve been discussing involving ‘know(s)’—are things any competent speaker would say. Though the first half of such a statement seems to be a claim about the truth-value of an earlier claim involving the relevant key term, and only the second half involves an object-level use of that term, with the possible

speaker whether X has the ability to V). However, it seems somehow wrong, and not just awkward, for the speaker to assert (a) even in such scenarios.

Though the last lines of the third-person fortified dialogue and the reversed first-person fortified dialogue don’t clash, they do sound (in some other way) quite bad. The defense of contextualism I’m about to give should be sufficient for those who hear no difference between these lines and the last line of the original fortified first-person dialogue. But those who do possess ‘golden ears’ and discern a special problem with the last line of the original fortified first-person dialogue can account for this clash by the explanation, involving KAA, that I’ve already given.

<sup>18</sup> This objection is originally due to Shelly Kagan. In a series of talks I gave at various philosophy departments in the years 1996–2001, I presented the objection based on the fortified first-person dialogue, together with my response based on KAA, thinking, at least when I first gave the talk, that that solved the problem. However, at one of these talks, at Yale University, Shelly Kagan raised what I’m here calling the Reversed Fortified First-Person Dialogue, plausibly objecting that its last line also sounds very implausible, and that the KAA-based account cannot handle it. I *believe*, though I’m not certain of this recollection, that Kagan claimed that the last line sounded *just as bad* in its reversed form. I do (and did, as I recall) disagree with that, for the reason given in the previous note. However, it does sound very implausible, and the fact that my KAA-based solution to the original fortified objection couldn’t explain what’s wrong in the reversed dialogue cast a considerable shadow over that account. Thus, when much of the material of the talks eventually found its way into print in my 2002a (which constitutes the basis for Chapter 3 of this volume), the material on the fortified dialogue was cut out and shelved until I could come to grips with the last line of the Reversed Dialogue.

exception of some examples involving core indexicals, it still seems *somehow* wrong to so jam together, without clarification, two such statements where there is a crucial difference in content between what the key term meant in the earlier statement and what its current content is. Instead of the above, speakers should say something very roughly along the lines of the following (though there are many different ways of formulating such attempts at reconciling earlier claims with what is to be said relative to different standards that are in play as a statement is made):

No, what I was claiming before was that nothing currently available to the public would allow one to fly from London to New York in under 30 minutes, and that was and still is true. But if we're now talking about what's possible relative to all existing technology, whether or not it's available to the public, then, yes, it is in that sense possible to fly from London to New York in under 30 minutes.

No, what I was claiming before was that Reeves is tall for a high school player, and that was and still is true. But he certainly isn't tall for an NBA center.

Even where clearly context-sensitive terms are involved, the analogues of our problematic last lines, which contain no such clarifying explanations of the differences in content, seem quite wrong to assert—even though it seems they might well be true. And I would add that for me, and for many others, the appearance of wrongness feels at least roughly comparable to the appearance of wrongness in the last line of our fortified dialogue concerning 'know(s)'. (But reactions here vary in ways I will discuss two paragraphs below.) Thus, it should be no surprise, even if 'know(s)' is context-sensitive, that we find it behaving similarly, so that the last lines of our various fortified dialogues involving 'know(s)' also sound wrong.

Well, it may be asked: What could B say instead in the case of 'know(s)'? How could she use 'clarifying devices' to *correctly* express something along the lines of the somehow incorrect last lines of our fortified dialogues? I think there are many locutions by which speakers clarify what they meant and mean by 'know(s)', and many of them would work just fine here. For several examples and discussion (and also a reference to Ludlow 2005, where many more examples can be found), see the appendix to Chapter 5. But the objection to contextualism we're now considering is that the last lines of the fortified dialogues—lines that don't employ any such clarifying devices—sound very wrong in a way that we wouldn't expect given contextualism. In response, we are noting that analogous lines involving terms that are clearly context-sensitive sound quite awful as well. These

objectors need to revise their expectations about the behavior of context-sensitive terms.

I should convey that some (but far from all) who have reported their reactions to fortified last lines involving ‘know(s)’ and their analogues involving less controversially context-sensitive terms seem to find varying degrees of wrongness here. Perhaps over-generalizing a bit, the pattern seems to be this: the more obvious is the context-sensitivity of the key term involved, the more likely it is that *some* respondents will find the last line to be less egregiously wrong than other examples. Indeed, in the extreme case of ‘core’ indexicals, many (but far from all) respondents don’t find the relevant lines to be wrong at all.<sup>19</sup> Part of the problem, of course, is an issue concerning whether listeners are understanding the material that is inside the dashes to be a higher-level metalinguistic statement. Much as I dislike the gesture, I tried the examples both with and without making ‘air-quotes’ with my fingers at the relevant time. I tried it both with and without writing the sentences on the blackboard and then also saying them. I tried it both with and without inserting the word ‘namely’ right before the quoted material. Still trying to give the objection every chance, I also tried the lines while completely omitting the material inside the dashes—making do with just ‘what I said’, trusting the respondent to remember what was said earlier in the dialogue. None of this seems to yield what our objector needs. With the exceptions of some comparisons involving core indexicals, there seems to be no good way of constructing the last lines so that they are even close to seeming clearly wrong where ‘know(s)’ is involved, but clearly all right in the case where another context-sensitive term is used. That would appear to be because these are all just stupid ways of speaking. Frankly, many respondents just professed to be confused: ‘Huh?!’

At any rate, I don’t think there’s any objection worth worrying much about here. Competent speakers just won’t say anything like these last lines. When we imagine speakers incompetently saying such things, we *at least* very often find the resulting assertions quite problematic—even when the assertions involve *genuinely context-sensitive terms*. To the extent that the term involved is obviously context-sensitive, we can perhaps sometimes see past the problematic nature of the assertion to judge that it is nonetheless true. But the sense that there

<sup>19</sup> It seems to promote the response that the lines aren’t wrong at all if the examples involving the core indexicals are presented first. If they’re presented after analogous lines involving other terms, respondents are more inclined to find the last lines involving core indexicals to be at least to some degree wrong. I should also note that the last lines involving core indexicals seem to go down more smoothly if unusually heavy stress or intonation is put on the indexical term: ‘What George said—“I’m tired”—was true. But now I wish to add this: **I** wasn’t tired’; ‘What I said—“The book is here”—was true. But now I wish to add this: The book wasn’t *here*.’

is something wrong with an assertion of the type in question that involves a term that is not so obviously context-sensitive should not tempt us to conclude that the term isn't really context-sensitive, if a similar intuitive appearance is produced by the assertions that involve genuinely context-sensitive terms. What competent speakers do is utilize clarifying explanations about what they meant and mean by the terms in question on different occasions. And when effective clarifying explanations are used in the examples involving 'know(s)', the resulting claims don't give any strong appearance of being wrong. On the contrary, though invariantists might have theoretically motivated objections to the resulting claims, they *seem* to be perfectly fine examples of good English sentences that explain at least to some extent what a speaker takes herself to have meant and to be presently meaning by her claims involving the term in question. (Again, see the appendix to Chapter 5 for a discussion of clarifying devices for 'know(s).')

## II. Elusive Knowledge?

As we saw in section 9, contextualism won't counsel speakers to say things like 'First I knew, then I didn't' in the relevant situations where those lines sound absurd—situations in which there's been no change in truth-relevant factors between the two times being talked about. Since there seems to be considerable confusion about the matter, it's worth making the closely related point that contextualism doesn't imply that any knowledge appears or vanishes as conversational context changes.

It seems to many that contextualism renders knowledge unstable or elusive in the sense that it would make our knowledge come and go—be gained or lost—as conversational context changes. And to many, this can seem a very problematic implication of contextualism, since it seems to them that knowledge in fact doesn't appear and disappear due to changes in conversational context. I agree: Knowledge isn't in that way elusive. But, I insist, contextualism doesn't make knowledge elusive in that way. Here I have to contend with friends as well as foes of contextualism. One of contextualism's most prominent advocates, David Lewis, in his contextualist manifesto 'Elusive Knowledge' (Lewis 1996), makes many comments about the elusiveness of knowledge, including the following (emphasis added in all cases), which I've numbered for ease of reference. One bit of background: Lewis contends that engaging in the practice of epistemology typically has the effect of raising epistemic standards. He writes:

1. Maybe epistemology is the culprit. Maybe the extraordinary pastime *robs us of our knowledge*. Maybe we do know a lot in daily life; but maybe when we look hard at our knowledge, *it goes away*. (1996: 550)
2. In the strict context of epistemology we know nothing, yet in laxer contexts we know a lot. (1996: 551)
3. Unless this investigation of ours was an altogether atypical sample of epistemology, it will be inevitable that *epistemology must destroy knowledge*. That is how knowledge is elusive. Examine it, and straightway *it vanishes*. (1996: 560)
4. Imagine two epistemologists on a bushwalk. As they walk, they talk. They mention all manner of far-fetched possibilities of error. By attending to these normally ignored possibilities *they destroy the knowledge they normally possess*. (1996: 565)

I certainly wouldn't want to say any of the above. (Lewis, though he does write all the above, does in a way seem to take it back at the end of his essay, as we'll see below in the following section.) If contextualism really implied that knowledge vanishes (3), is destroyed (3, 4), goes away (1), or is robbed from us (1) by means of conversational developments (often in conversations we're no party to) that have no effect on how strongly we're positioned with respect to the beliefs in question, then I'd be very tempted to reject contextualism. Thus, I can't be surprised that others, who think contextualism has such implications, reject the view on those grounds. And I can't be surprised that foes of contextualism think the view underwrites remarks such as those above, when one of contextualism's strongest friends is the one making the remarks.

But let's get clear, once and for all, about contextualism's implications as the standards change so that a subject who used to meet them no longer does. To increase clarity, let's consider a case involving third-person, rather than first-person, knowledge-ascribing sentences. So: Fred's over there, very confidently believing the true proposition *p*. Far away from him, and quite out of earshot, Wilma and Betty are talking about whether he 'knows' that *p*. Contextualism is true (we'll suppose). To make things uncomplicated, let's suppose that just two sets of standards come into play in Wilma and Betty's conversation—'low' and 'high'—and that throughout the story the strength of Fred's epistemic position with respect to *p* remains constant at a level at which he meets the low, but not the high, standards. Initially, Wilma and Betty were in a context that selected the low standards, so they spoke the truth when they said, 'Fred knows that *p*'. Now, however, their conversational context has changed; they're now in a high-standards context. So Wilma and Betty can no longer truthfully say that Fred 'knows', and in fact can now truthfully

deny that Fred 'knows'. Let's suppose they have now done just that: They have truthfully said, 'Fred doesn't know'.

What has Fred lost? What has gone away, been destroyed, been robbed from him? 'High' knowledge? No, he never had that. 'Low' knowledge? No, that he still has.

Knowledge? Knowledge simpliciter? Well, if what's meant by 'knowledge simpliciter' is knowledge according to the one-and-only standards that ever govern attributions or denials of knowledge, then, of course, there's no such thing on the assumption that contextualism is correct. (And if there were such a thing—if contextualism were wrong—then *wherever* those one-and-only standards are set, whether those uniquely correct standards are high or low, Fred has not lost this simple knowledge by means of Wilma and Betty's conversational shenanigans: he either has it all along, or never had it.)

If you mean knowledge by *our* current standards, then, of course, it's hard to say whether Fred has knowledge or lacks it, in part because it is difficult to discern what our current standards are in this rather funny context in which I am discussing contextualism in writing, and in part because my example has not been very fully described. All I've specified so far about Fred is that he met (and meets) the 'low' standards set by Wilma and Betty's old context, that he fails to meet their current 'high' standards, and that the strength of Fred's epistemic position didn't change: he went from meeting to failing to meet the speakers' standards due entirely to a change in their standards, and not at all because of a change in the strength of Fred's epistemic position. No matter. We needn't bother with more detail, nor need we fret over what our current standards are. Though we can't yet tell whether or not Fred knows (whether or not he meets our current standards), we are already in a position to say whether or not Fred has lost knowledge of *p*. He hasn't. Whatever our standards are right now, and however strongly or weakly Fred is positioned with respect to *p*, given only that the strength of his epistemic position hasn't changed (and *that* we have been given), we can ascertain that Fred hasn't lost knowledge. He of course hasn't changed from meeting the standards we are currently employing to failing to meet those same standards because of anything that transpired in Wilma and Betty's conversation! He either knew and knows, or didn't and doesn't. Either way, he hasn't lost his knowledge that *p* and no knowledge has gone away, been destroyed, or been robbed from him.

What Fred *has* lost is a certain relation to Wilma and Betty's context. He has gone from meeting the standards they were utilizing to failing to meet the standards governing their conversation. Using phrases like 'Wilma and Betty's standards' fluidly, so that we may speak of those standards as changing

over time (rather than as rigidly referring to the particular standards they are employing at a particular time), he has lost the property of satisfying Wilma and Betty's standards. But because this 'loss' is due to a change in Wilma and Betty's standards, and not at all because Fred's epistemic position has been diminished, this 'loss' doesn't mean that there is any variety of knowledge that Fred has lost.

## 12. Lewis and Semantic Ascent

At the close of his paper, Lewis acknowledges that there's something fishy about his saying such things as that knowledge vanishes or that we first know and then fail to know:

But wait. Don't you smell a rat? Haven't I, by my own lights, been saying what cannot be said? (Or whistled either.) If the story I told was true, how have I managed to tell it? ... I said that when we do epistemology, and we attend to the proper ignoring of possibilities, we make knowledge vanish. First we do know, then we do not. But I had been doing epistemology when I said that. The uneliminated possibilities of error were *not* being ignored—not just then. So by what right did I say even that we used to know?

Lewis then admits that he 'bent the rules' in making those comments—and I presume the same would go for the other comments we've been looking at. He then goes on to explain:

I could have had my say fair and square, bending no rules. It would have been tiresome, but it could have been done. The secret would have been to resort to 'semantic ascent'. I could have taken great care to distinguish between (1) the language I use when I talk about knowledge, or whatever, and (2) the second language that I use to talk about the semantic and pragmatic workings of the first language. If you want to hear my story told that way, you probably know enough to do the job for yourself. (1996: 567)

And we do have to do the job for ourselves, for 'Elusive Knowledge' comes to a close just one sentence later.

But it's not hard to engage in a little semantic ascent and find substitutes for the object-level phrases I've been objecting to. Fred's knowledge doesn't *vanish*. He doesn't first know and then fail to know. Rather, to be quite tiresome, we can say:

(A) First, Fred was such that the proposition expressed about him by the sentence 'Fred knows' in Wilma and Betty's conversation was true of him. But then, because their context changed so that 'Fred knows' came

to express a more demanding proposition, Fred was such that the (new) proposition that would have been expressed by 'Fred knows' in Wilma and Betty's context was not true of him.

But we don't have to be that tiresome. There are devices for engaging semantic ascent that don't involve explicitly putting knowledge-attributing sentences in quotation marks and explicitly saying things about the truth-values or truth-conditions of those sentences. With just a little set-up, I think one can, as I've been doing in this very book, achieve that same effect by simply saying things along the lines of:

(B) First Fred met the epistemic standards set by Wilma and Betty's context and then, because their standards went up, he failed to meet the standards set by their context.

Or, to be even less tiresome, we can say:

(C) First Fred counted as knowing, then he didn't,

which really is only minimally more tiresome than is 'First Fred knew, then he didn't'. In this book, I've tried to be explicit about my semi-technical use of 'counts as knowing', but in papers and talks, I have used the phrase in that sense without explicit explanation, and it seems that, by first saying something more explicit about satisfying the truth-conditions of particular uses of sentences involving 'know(s)', and then switching over to talk about what 'counts as knowledge', this use has been successful: Listeners and readers have understood me correctly. And, to explicitly deal with the numbered passage from Lewis's 'Elusive Knowledge' that I haven't mentioned since displaying it, instead of Lewis's

2. In the strict context of epistemology we know nothing, yet in laxer contexts we know a lot,

we could instead say the only slightly more tiresome,

(D) In the strict context of epistemology we count as knowing nothing, yet in laxer contexts we count as knowing a lot.

Lewis explains that he is engaging in an 'expository shortcut, to be taken with a pinch of salt' (1996: 566). But contextualists can utilize the likes of (B)–(D) in expository shortcuts to achieve the same effect as saying such truly tiresome things as (A). (B)–(D) build the tiresome 'semantic ascent' of the likes of (A) into easy little phrases like 'standards for knowledge', and 'counts as knowing', which, when spelled out, amount to higher-level claims



about the truth-conditions and truth-values of the relevant sentences. I've found that, in presenting contextualism, one or two (A)-ish statements (in which knowledge-ascribing sentences are explicitly mentioned and something about their truth-conditions is explicitly stated) at the start of a paper or talk is all that's needed for listeners or readers to be ready to correctly understand the likes of (B)–(D). That way we can quite painlessly avoid rule-bending (breaking?) shortcuts of the likes embodied in phrases like Lewis's 1–4.

### 13. The Fallacy of Semantic Descent

But why shouldn't we use rule-bending shortcuts like Lewis's? When I sent a copy of the then just published DeRose (2000)—the paper on which much of this chapter is based—to him, Lewis wrote back to me, defending his use of such locutions in quite strong terms:

Competent readers know (except perhaps when they're in a philosophy seminar) that they're expected to interpret what's said in such a way as to make the message make sense. So when they read (outside the seminar) that genes are selfish, they know to take it as a metaphor. And when they read (outside the seminar) that France is hexagonal, they know that what's meant is not that France is a perfect hexagon. And when they read (outside the seminar) that tomorrow never comes, because when it comes it will no longer be tomorrow, again they understand perfectly well. And so on. Authors are entitled to rely on readers to exercise just this kind of interpretive competence. But all too many philosophers seem to abandon their interpretive competence when they enter the philosophy room. They turn themselves into literalists and simpletons—or, more likely, they pretend to be literalists and simpletons when really they know better. I think that if this silly habit leads them to misunderstand—or more likely, pretend to misunderstand—that's their problem. Instead of pandering to such silliness, and reproaching those who refuse to do likewise, you might better reproach the silliness itself.<sup>20</sup>

In a more rational philosophical world, there might be no harm in using locutions like Lewis's. But in our less reasonable actual world, the use of such shortcuts seem to illicitly cloud the evaluations of contextualism of many philosophers in a way I'll now try to explain.

<sup>20</sup> Personal correspondence of 9 November 2000, copyright The Estate of David K. Lewis, used by permission of Stephanie R. Lewis. I very much hope that much of Lewis's philosophical correspondence will be published in the near future. I benefited greatly from my exchanges with Lewis, and am anxious to see what he wrote to others, especially since I understand he had many philosophical correspondents, several of whom he wrote to quite extensively.

We might call the mistake of holding it against a theory or view that it has a certain implication, when in fact its real implication is not what one thinks, but is rather some related higher-level statement, the ‘fallacy of semantic descent’.<sup>21</sup> Theories according to which various types of sentences are held to be context-dependent in meaning are often subject to objections that depend on this fallacy. To get a feel for the fallacy in action, consider a fanciful case in which the higher-level statement (the actual commitment) is uncontroversial. I assume we all believe that the phrase ‘this room’ works in such a way that the following is true:

- (E) It can happen that one person can truthfully say, of a physical object, A, ‘A is (wholly) in this room,’ while, at the very same time, another person (who is in another room) can truthfully say of the very same physical object, ‘A is not (wholly) in this room.’

Now, suppose that someone objected to this view of yours by first claiming that, according to your view,

- (F) One and the same physical object can at one and the same time both be and not be wholly in this room,

and then going on to suggest that (F) is absurd, counter-intuitive, or implausible. The proper response to this objection, I take it, is to reject (F), to point out that it’s (E), and not (F), that you accept, and to point out that (F) does not follow from (E). To hold it against you that you are committed to (F) is to commit the fallacy of semantic descent.

It is not always easy to determine whether the fallacy of semantic descent is being committed: Potential candidates seem to positively revel in illicitly lurking in the shady borderland between holding the apparent object-level ‘commitment’ against the theory and just using the object-level statement as a rule-bending shortcut to refer to the higher-level statement. That is, it is sometimes unclear whether the objector is really confusing his target’s commitments or whether she is rather, to use Lewis’s words, using the object-level statement as an ‘expository shortcut, to be taken with a pinch of salt’ to express her target’s commitments. In our above example, we might wonder whether our objector really thinks we believe or are committed to (F), or whether she’s just using (F) as a rule-bending device by which she hopes to express our real commitment, (E). After all, we could—though it seems inadvisable—more or less explicitly *agree* to use (F) as a handy piece

<sup>21</sup> Unger calls this fallacy, or at least one much like it, the ‘fallacy of conflating contexts’ (Unger 1995: 16).

of rule-bending shorthand by which we'll express (E). But in that case, we should all remember that that's what's going on, and we should be careful not to come to doubt (E) because of how bad (F) sounds or how absurd (F) seems. After all, we had to break the rules to use (F) as a device for expressing (E). If (E) implied something that seems absurd, that would be grounds for doubting (E). But it casts no legitimate shadow on (E) that an absurd-sounding statement can, through a rule-bending piece of shorthand, be used to express (E). At any rate, in the absence of any such explicit agreement, we might be left to wonder whether our objector is really committing the fallacy of semantic descent, or whether he rather just considers (E) itself to be crazy. The problem with the first interpretation is that one is ascribing blatantly bad reasoning to the objector; the problem with the second interpretations is that it's hard to see why (E) itself would seem crazy to someone—unless it was being somehow confounded with F.

Moving to cases about which someone might actually be misled by our fallacy, let's now consider a sample published example, whose target is not contextualism regarding knowledge-ascribing sentences, but is rather a theory according to which a certain type of modal expression is held to be such that its 'meaning is relative to the person who uses it'. In his essay 'Certainty', G. E. Moore (the target) considers statements of the form 'It is possible that p is true'. Engaging in some not-all-that-tiresome semantic ascent (note his talk about the meaning, truth-conditions, and truth-values of such statements), Moore writes the following:

The expression 'It is possible that p is true' is, though it looks as if it were impersonal, really an expression whose meaning is relative to the person who uses it. If I say it, that I should not know that p is false, is a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition for the truth of my assertion; and hence if two people say it at the same time about the same proposition it is perfectly possible that what the one asserts should be true, and what the other asserts false: since, if one of the two knows that p is false, his assertion will necessarily be false; whereas if the other does not know that p is false, his assertion may be, though it will not necessarily be, true. (Moore 1959: 241)

Now Moore's main claims in the above passage are pretty clearly correct.<sup>22</sup> But Alan R. White objects to Moore's account, writing, for instance, of 'Moore's mistake ... of supposing that, since what is not known to me may be known to you, the same thing may be both possible and impossible' (White 1975: 52). But Moore himself would not say or write that 'the same thing may be

<sup>22</sup> For a vindication of Moore's claims, see DeRose (1990: 58–72).

both possible and impossible'. At least I've never caught such a statement in his writing. What Moore does write is:

(G) If two people say it ['It is possible that p is true'] at the same time about the same proposition it is perfectly possible that what the one asserts should be true, and what the other asserts false.

And there are cases that establish that he's absolutely right about that.<sup>23</sup> And (G) simply doesn't imply any statement like

(H) The same thing may be both possible and impossible

I'm uncertain whether White is committing the fallacy of semantic descent here. I'm inclined to think that he is—largely because I'm unable to come up with a reading of his reasons for rejecting Moore's views here which makes them any more convincing. (But read the first fifty-two pages of White 1975 and judge for yourself.) That is, I suspect that White thinks that (H) is something Moore is committed to, and that he denies Moore's theory in part because (H) sounds implausible to him. But maybe I'm wrong and White realizes perfectly well that Moore is not really committed to (H). Perhaps White is just 'bending the rules' a bit and using (H) as an 'expository shortcut' by which he hopes to express Moore's real commitment, which White clearly realizes is just (G). But in that case, I don't understand what White has against Moore's account. Unless White considers (G) *itself* to be crazy, even where he's not at all confounding it with (H). Could that be it? I suppose it's largely because I really can't see why anyone would think that (G) itself is clearly false that I suspect that White rejects Moore's account at least in part because he is confounding (G) with (H).

There are places in the published literature where it at least seems that the fallacy of semantic descent is being committed against contextualism about knowledge.<sup>24</sup> But in conversation, in my philosophical travels, I believe that, even among philosophers of language and of mind, objections based on the fallacy of semantic descent form the single most common type of objection I've encountered. That is, the most common type of objection—at least as I'm inclined to divide types—is roughly of the form 'According to you ...', or 'According to contextualism ...', where the complaint is completed by filling in

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, DeRose (1991: 582–4).

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, I'd count us as having witnessed an example in this chapter: I would count Yourgrau's use of his dialogue as an example of the fallacy. The contextualist is not committed to licensing B's crazy last line. That line is just an object-level analogue of some metalinguistic statements that, according to contextualism, B could appropriately and truthfully utter. Some other examples involve claims that contextualism implies statements of the types we've encountered in our Lewis passages 1–4.

some pretty implausible-sounding statement that I would in fact reject, that my views would lead me to reject, and which is such that the best explanation for why it's being attributed to me is that it's being confused with (or mistakenly taken to follow from) some higher-level statement which I really do accept.

Let me quickly give one quite common example that's a bit unlike the other examples of the fallacy that we've seen in this paper, in that it doesn't involve Lewis-like statements about knowledge 'vanishing' or 'going away', etc. I've frequently heard, occasionally from some *very* smart philosophers, roughly this: 'According to you, whether or not *Fred* knows depends on *our* context. But how can *Fred's* knowledge depend on *our* context?!' Now, I would never say,

(I) Whether or not Fred knows depends on our context.

In fact, my views would warn me against saying any such thing. What I would say is such things as,

(J) Whether we can truthfully assert various knowledge-attributing and knowledge-denying sentences about Fred depends (at least in part) on our context,

This is because the content of those assertions are context-dependent, according to me. And, using our semi-technical terminology of 'counts as knowing', I would say:

(K) Whether Fred counts as knowing in our context depends on what standards govern our context.

Now, maybe some of these objectors realize that I really reject (I) and are just using (I) as what they hope is an obvious expository shortcut to express my real view, (J) or (K) (where, for (K), 'counts as knowing' is used in our semi-technical sense). This is unlikely, though, because when I do tell such objectors that, like them, I reject (I), they're typically quite surprised by this. I have to suspect that such objectors are at least usually, and at least to some extent, committing the fallacy of semantic descent.

It is surprisingly and frustratingly hard to stamp out the negative influence of this type of objection to contextualism. This gives me cause to wonder whether I might be misunderstanding the objectors somehow. Maybe they have something more reasonable in mind which I've just been unable to discern? But I've tried very hard for a very long time to better understand, and haven't come up with anything. At this point, I think the best strategy is to make the charge that the fallacy is being committed, and see if anyone can then explain what, if anything, is going on instead. To do that, I'll focus on one

recent prominent example of what I take to be the fallacy being committed in the literature.

#### 14. Dretske and the Fallacy of Semantic Descent?

So, here is the rightly renowned epistemologist Fred Dretske describing in print what he takes to be some of contextualism's 'bizarre' features:

In ordinary contexts in which knowledge claims are advanced, one knows (such things as) that there are cookies in the jar and (at the zoo) zebras in the pen. In such ordinary contexts one normally has all the evidence needed to know. One sees the cookies and the zebras and, given the absence of any special reason to doubt, this (for reasonably experienced adults) is good enough to know. So skepticism is false. Do these reasonably experienced adults also know, then, that they are not being deceived by some kind of fake? That the sensory evidence on which they base their judgments is not misleading? Well, yes (so closure is preserved), but—and here is the kicker—only as long as they don't seriously consider these heavyweight implications or say that they know them to be true. For once they think about them or say they know them to be true, the context in which knowledge claims are evaluated changes and knowledge evaporates. In this altered context (no longer an ordinary context) one doesn't know that one is not being deceived because new alternatives (that one *is* being deceived), possibilities one cannot evidentially eliminate, have been introduced. Therefore (closure forces one to say) one no longer knows that there are cookies in the jar and zebras in the pen. One gets to know about cookies and zebras only as long as one doesn't think about or claim to know what, according to closure, one has to know in order to know such mundane things. According to this way of dealing with skepticism, philosophers who spend time worrying about heavyweight implications (How do I know that I'm not dreaming? How do we know there is a material world?) are the most ignorant people in the world. Not only don't they know these heavyweight implications (maybe no one does), they don't (like everyone else) know the things (that there are cookies in the jar, zebras in the pen) that imply them. This, of course, includes almost everything they thought they knew.

This result, it seems to me, is pretty bizarre—*more* bizarre, in fact, than abandoning closure. It is a way of preserving closure for the heavyweight implications while abandoning its usefulness in acquiring knowledge of them. One knows (or is evidentially positioned to know) heavyweight implications so long as one doesn't think about them or say that one knows them to be true. (Dretske 2005a: 18–19)<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> There might be *possible* views that Dretske's words here can accurately describe. That he intends to be describing contextualism as we're here construing it, and as it's held by Lewis, Cohen, and myself, seems to be indicated by a note he attaches nearby to the passage I quote (Dretske 2005a: 24 n. 3), and is also indicated by the facts that, just before the material I quote, Dretske introduces the view he is about to describe as a 'popular maneuver' (2005a: 18) among philosophers, and that when John Hawthorne

Note first that Dretske ascribes to contextualism just such commitments as I've been denying here (and have been denying for years). Dretske's contextualist holds, for instance, that:

- (L) Our *knowledge evaporates* when we move into demanding contexts
- (M) Believers know various ordinary propositions *only as long as they don't seriously consider* some of the 'heavyweight implications' of those beliefs such as that they're not being deceived in various ways.
- (N) Philosophers who spend much time seriously considering such 'heavyweight implications' *are the most ignorant people in the world!*

Dretske's contextualist sounds a lot like Lewis. The first two of these three statements are very much of a piece with the Lewisisms, (1)–(4), that we have already discussed.

But note secondly that Dretske not only takes these commitments to be implausible in the extreme, but is pretty clearly presenting his claim that the contextualism has these 'bizarre' results as a reason to reject the view. Here he departs radically from Lewis, who knows better. On contextualism, no knowledge evaporates when we move into demanding contexts: one still has all the 'knowledge'-by-low-standards that one had before, and one never had the 'knowledge'-by-high-standards that one now lacks. And if it is the case that some philosophers spend more time than other people utilizing extremely high standards for knowledge that are almost never met, they are not thereby rendered more ignorant than other people any more than NBA scouts (and those who study skyscrapers and mountains) are rendered shorter (or are rendered more often short) than other people by the fact that they spend a lot of time using relatively hard to satisfy standards for 'tall' and relatively easy to satisfy standards for 'short'. One who tried to increase her knowledge by employing the ostrich-like strategy of scrupulously avoiding any conversation that employs high epistemic standards would utterly fail to protect anything that can rightly be called 'knowledge', for she would still lack all of the 'knowledge'-by-high-standards that she lacks in the case in which she's less careful about the conversational company she keeps.

What's going on here? Does Dretske fully realize that, for instance, contextualists don't really think that the philosophers in question are the most ignorant people in the world? Is he perhaps just 'bending the rules' a bit and

points out that Dretske has misconstrued the 'standard' version of contextualism (Hawthorne 2005: 39), Dretske's response to this complaint (Dretske 2005b: 44–5), to the extent that he does respond, contains no element of explaining that he never meant to be targeting such contextualist views.

using (N) as an 'expository shortcut' by which he hopes to express the *real* 'bizarre' implication of the contextualist's view? But what then is that? Perhaps something along the lines of:

(O) Philosophers who spend much time seriously considering such 'heavy-weight implications' of their beliefs are the people in the world who most frequently use 'know(s)' in contexts in which it is governed by epistemic standards that they themselves do not meet!

But then I don't see why someone would take (O) to be 'bizarre'. (There are other candidates for the real feature of the contextualist view that Dretske might be using the likes of (N) to express, but none of these candidates that are fair presentations of the contextualist's views seems much more bizarre than does (O).) So I suspect that, but am far from certain that, Dretske is committing the fallacy of semantic descent here.<sup>26</sup> Now, if what's really going on is that Dretske fully realizes that the contextualist doesn't actually accept anything like (L)–(N), and Dretske is only using the likes of (L)–(N) as 'expository shortcuts' by which he hopes to express the contextualist's real commitments, but Dretske does find those actual commitments—the likes of (O)—to themselves be 'bizarre', then no such fallacy is responsible for Dretske's own personal revulsion for contextualism. (In that case, at least by my lights, his 'bizarreness detector' is just wildly out of whack.<sup>27</sup>) But even so, he should stop using the likes of (L)–(N) to express the 'bizarre' features of the contextualist view to others, who might just think that contextualists really accept such things as (L)–(N).

In light of this sad situation, I think it unwise to engage in any rule-breaking expository shortcuts to express the contextualist's views and commitments.

<sup>26</sup> For those interested in digging deeper to figure out what Dretske's own thought is here, a potentially relevant passage to consider is Dretske (2005b: 45–6). For reasons similar to those I am pursuing here, Hawthorne makes the charge that in the passage of Dretske (2005a) that we've been considering here, Dretske betrays 'a flawed understanding of contextualism' (Hawthorne 2005: 39). In his response to Hawthorne (Dretske 2005b), Dretske mentions this charge of Hawthorne's at the top of (2005b: 45), and may be responding to it at (2005b: 45–6). I myself have great difficulties understanding Dretske's response, and, though he mentions Hawthorne's charge, I am not certain that he intends to there defend himself from the charge of misunderstanding contextualism. (He can be read as simply standing by his construal of contextualism, I think. He certainly does not admit that he got it wrong.) Some of what he writes may perhaps point to the interpretation that he finds the correct, higher-level statements of the contextualist view to themselves be bizarre. However, he continues to present the contextualist's views in what strike me to be badly inaccurate ways. So in the end, I'm very unsure about how to understand him here.

<sup>27</sup> Note that I wouldn't say this about someone who merely claimed to find the likes of (O) somewhat implausible. I would then just say that my initial intuitions about (O) differed from such a person. By my lights, such a person's 'implausibility detector' would seem to be misfiring here, but wouldn't seem to be 'wildly out of whack'.



If folks find the contextualist's actual commitments—like (J), above—to be wildly implausible, then, while I can't myself understand why they think this, I guess that's fair enough. But given what seems to be a general tendency to be misled by the fallacy of semantic descent, so far from actually using the rule-bending shortcuts, like (I), to express the contextualist's ideas, we should instead be explicitly warning folks to keep those misleading statements out of their minds as much as possible as they evaluate contextualism. If one does use the relevant rule-bending 'expository shortcuts' to express the contextualist's commitments, then, in light of all the (at least potential, and I suspect, often very real) confusion that surrounds these issues, one should explicitly state that one is doing just that, and clearly and forcefully warn readers not to hold it against contextualism that it sounds implausible when it's put in such terms.