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ARTICLE

From SSI to contextualism

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Abstract

Subject-Sensitive Invariantism (SSI) and Epistemic Contextualism (EC) are rival theories in epistemology. Both involve shifting epistemic standards, but they differ in how they explain this shiftiness. SSI is primarily a metaphysical thesis about the knowledge relation, whereas EC is primarily a semantic thesis about knowledge attributions. This paper revisits some of the central problems faced by SSI, especially those concerning Dutch books and third-person knowledge ascriptions. The main aim is to show that existing responses that stay true to SSI do not succeed, leaving SSI in serious jeopardy. Some strategies put forward by, or on behalf of, SSI-friendly philosophers fare better. But these involve forsaking central features of SSI, ceding ground to EC, and falling back on a defense of impurism. I sketch what such an impurist fallback position might look like and argue that the more ground it cedes to EC, the more attractive it will be. It is shown that such an impurist, contextualist position can handle all the difficulties I discuss in relation to SSI. The paper concludes by briefly considering what new challenges this kind of position faces instead.

Keywords: Impurism; Epistemic Contextualism; Dutch Book; Baron Reed; Fantl and McGrath

1. Introduction

Subject-Sensitive Invariantism (SSI) and Epistemic Contextualism (EC) are rival theories in epistemology. Both involve *shifting standards*, whereby the strength of epistemic position a subject, S, must be in with respect to a proposition, p, for "S knows that p" to be truly said of her varies with context. The theories differ in how they explain this shiftiness. SSI is primarily a metaphysical thesis about *knowledge*. It affirms that knowledge is an *impure* relation in the sense of being sensitive to non-truth relevant factors. It claims that the standard for knowledge is sensitive to the subject's practical context, tending to become more stringent in more demanding contexts.[1] EC is primarily a semantic thesis about knowledge attributions. It maintains that the truth conditions of a knowledge attribution of the form "S knows that p" vary with the context *of the speaker*. Uttered by one person in a conversation with lax standards, it may express a true proposition, while uttered by another person in a high-standards conversation, it may express a different and false proposition.[2] The invariantist part of SSI is a rejection

[1]See e.g., Fantl and McGrath (2009), Hawthorne (2004), Hawthorne and Stanley (2008), Stanley (2005).
[2]See e.g., Cohen (1999) and DeRose (1992).

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of this semantic thesis. Moreover, EC is often accompanied by a rejection of SSI's impurist metaphysical thesis.[3]

This paper revisits some central problems SSI faces, especially those concerning Dutch books and third-person knowledge-ascriptions. The main aim is to show that responses to these problems which stay true to SSI do not succeed. Other strategies fare better, but these involve forsaking central features of SSI (the "I" (invariantism) and/or the "SS" (subject-sensitivity)), ceding ground to EC, and falling back on a defense of impurism. It is argued that the more ground such an impurist fallback position cedes to EC, the more attractive it becomes. I conclude by briefly considering what further challenges lay ahead for such a theory.

2. Subject sensitive invariantism

SSI is motivated by the idea that knowledge is *actionable*, which we may express with the following knowledge-action principle:

KA You know that p iff you can treat p as a reason for action.[4]

Being able to treat p as a reason for action implies being able to *treat p as settled*, *ignore doubts about p* and *rely on p practically without needing to gather stronger evidence* (Fantl and McGrath (2019)). KA leads to SSI if how much warrant you need to treat p as a reason for action varies with your practical context. Well-known case-pairs support this idea.[5] In Keith DeRose's (1992) famous Bank Cases, the subject can treat *the bank is open Saturday* as a reason for action when stakes are low but cannot reasonably do so when his strength of epistemic position regarding that proposition is identical but the stakes are high.[6] Given KA, whether the subject *knows* this proposition is sensitive to such practical factors.[7]

3. Unstable knowledge and Dutch books

A common worry about SSI is that it makes knowledge unstable, allowing it to come and go with ease (Hawthorne (2004, §4.4)). We can imagine a subject who knows that p at midday when not much hangs on it, doesn't know it moments later when p is an urgent matter, and knows it once again a few moments hence when the urgency passes, all without any change in her strength of epistemic position regarding p.

This instability seems objectionable in itself, but, worse still, it gives rise to Dutch book problems in which apparently irrational actions can be rationalized and one can be pumped for money. Baron Reed (2012) gives an example in which a subject, S, is invited by a stockbroker to move 25% of his assets into biotech stock, BXD.[8] The broker is extremely reliable, and she has told S that *BXD's stock is bound to go up* ("STOCKUP" henceforth). Since this isn't a high-stakes matter for S, it seems he is well-placed to *know*

[3]See, especially, DeRose (2009).

[4]Fantl and McGrath (2002, 2009) prefer a weakened principle with *knowledge-level justification* on the left-hand side. For simplicity, I stick with KA.

[5]Though see, e.g., Rose et al. (2019) and Turri (2017), for experimental work challenging this claim.

[6]There is debate about how "stakes" should be understood and what role that concept should play in SSI (see Anderson and Hawthorne (2019) and Fantl and McGrath (2019)). I set that debate aside here to focus on other problems SSI faces.

[7]DeRose himself draws different, EC-friendly, conclusions from the example.

[8]Greco (2013), Rubin (2015), and Schroeder (2018) also offer Dutch book objections to SSI.

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STOCKUP and, given KA, to act accordingly by investing, which he does. Later, the broker offers to move another quarter of S's assets into BXD, again affirming STOCKUP. Again, S does so. This continues until the broker offers to move *all* S's assets into BXD. At this point, however, the stakes are too high – it's too risky for S to invest all his assets in one stock. He cannot rationally act on STOCKUP now and, by KA, no longer knows it. Consequently, he sells his BXD stock. Soon afterwards, the broker calls and starts again, affirming STOCKUP and offering to invest a quarter of his assets. Since the broker takes a fee for each transaction, a Dutch book has been opened against S and he is being pumped for money. What's more, it looks like SSI's unstable knowledge is to blame!

3.1. Fantl and McGrath's response

Fantl and McGrath (2012, pp.487–9) raise a number of points to resist this argument. First, they contend that it's unclear why S should sell *all* his stock at the final stage of the cycle. Certainly, KA doesn't imply this. After all, even if S no longer knows STOCKUP, he may still know that BXD will *probably* rise, and that may justify keeping much of his investment.

However, this response doesn't avoid the criticism. Suppose S has adopted the principle that he'll invest in BXD if and only if he *knows* it will go up. Again, a Dutch book can be opened against him given SSI. Besides, as Reed points out (2012, pp.469–70), given SSI, the broker can undermine S's knowledge that BXD will *probably* rise by offering a high-stakes bet on it, thus removing any rationale for staying invested.

Fantl and McGrath urge that, if the example is taken realistically, it's unlikely that S would *know* STOCKUP at all—our epistemic position on stocks isn't usually that strong. But they concede that we could imagine a case, which "needn't even be that unrealistic" (2012, p.488) where the evidence is stronger such that S *would* know. But in that case, they argue, S *would* be reasonable to invest *all* his assets when the broker invites him to do so. After all, we very plausibly know that our bank won't go belly-up and are reasonable to leave all our money in its care.

Fantl and McGrath's point seems to be that either S wouldn't know STOCKUP in the first place or, if he did, he'd be reasonable to invest all his assets. Either way, the Dutch book problem doesn't arise. This stance is hard to square with the central idea of SSI: that there can be case-pairs in which a "low-stakes subject" (as it were) knows that p while a "high-stakes subject" with the same strength of epistemic position fails to know it. Granting this, it seems possible for S to know STOCKUP when low-value investments are being considered but not know it when high-stakes investments are on the table. That's all we need for Reed's problem to take hold.

Fantl and McGrath argue the case (2012, p.488) by appeal to their principle KJ: *if you know that p, then p is warranted enough to justify ϕ-ing, for any ϕ*. This principle underpins their contention that *if S knows STOCKUP to begin with, he would be reasonable to invest all his assets*. They suggest that to resist this contention, one would need to resist their argument for KJ and complain that "... we're left in the dark [by Reed] about which step of the argument for KJ is supposed to go wrong." (p.488).

In fact, however, KJ doesn't support the contention in question at all. We can see this by considering how Fantl and McGrath themselves deal with KJ in relation to hypothetical gambles (2009, pp.226–9). They consider an example in which, when stakes are low, a subject knows *that her granddad smoked a pipe* ("PIPE" henceforth). Still, they accept that if she were asked to bet the farm on it, her warrant would fall short – the stakes would be too high. I.e., she would no longer know it if the stakes were significantly raised – exactly the kind of knowledge loss the Dutch Book problem relies on.

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What about KJ? That principle implies that if the subject knows PIPE to begin with, her warrant for it must be enough to justify any action, including betting the farm. So, now it seems that KJ commits Fantl and McGrath to *denying* that she could lose knowledge of PIPE through a change in stakes after all. What's going on?

Here Fantl and McGrath affirm that KJ *doesn't* have these implications. Given that the subject knows that PIPE when stakes are low, KJ implies that her warrant suffices to justify betting the farm *when stakes are low* (*and the gamble is merely hypothetical*). However, if she were *actually presented with such a gamble*, that would transform her practical context into a high-stakes one. Her warrant would *not* suffice to bet the farm in this context and she would *not* know that PIPE. Consequently, *even granting KJ*, somebody can go from knowing a proposition when stakes are low to not knowing it when stakes become high. The fact that they have warrant enough to bet the farm when stakes are low doesn't mean they have warrant enough to bet the farm when stakes increase.

Parallel points can be applied in Reed's example. S knows that STOCKUP when it's a low-stakes matter of investing 25%. Given KJ, S's warrant for STOCKUP suffices at this point to justify investing all his assets in BXD. But when the broker *actually invites him to invest all his assets*, that puts S in a high-stakes situation. His warrant for STOCKUP no longer suffices to justify investing all his assets, and he no longer knows STOCKUP. Fantl and McGrath's appeal to KJ was meant to block this last point and establish that if S knows STOCKUP at the start, his warrant should justify "going all in" at the end. But it should now be clear that KJ has no such implication. Fantl and McGrath are at pains to point out as much in their discussion of hypothetical gambles. Hence, their Dutch book problem remains.

3.2. Beddor's response

More recently, Bob Beddor (2021) has argued that having a Dutch book opened against you through a series of bets does not necessarily imply that you are acting irrationally. If your evidence is being manipulated, you may be acting rationally *given the evidence available to you* throughout the process. If that's right, SSI might be off the hook. Perhaps its defenders can agree that S has been Dutch-booked in Reed's example but insist that it is an unproblematic, "perfectly rational form" (p.193) of Dutch book.

Beddor gives a convincing example involving memory manipulation (p.195-6). The subject in this example sees her colleague, Constance, enter the office and thereby acquires *Constance is in the office* ("OFFICE" henceforth) as part of her evidence. Moreover, she knows that conditional on OFFICE there's a 50% chance *that Constance parked on Main Street* ("PARKED" henceforth) and that PARKED is definitely false if OFFICE is. The subject is then offered a bet on PARKED – she wins $1 if PARKED is true and loses the same amount if it's false. It's reasonable for her to take the bet given her evidence. But then the bookie wipes OFFICE from the subject's memory. Now the bet looks much riskier. The bookie offers to release her from the bet for a penny. The subject, quite rationally given her present (lack of) evidence, pays up.

It is plausible that this subject is rational throughout her Dutch-booking. Beddor argues that Reed's example works in similar fashion by manipulating the subject's evidence, albeit through changing stakes rather than erasing memories. At the start, S's evidence includes STOCKUP since he knows STOCKUP at that time. Hence, he's rational to make the low-stakes investment. But when the stakes get high, that crucial evidence disappears, and it becomes rational for him to divest.

Beddor is right that given how manipulating the stakes affects S's evidence on SSI, S is responding rationally to his changing evidence throughout the Dutch-booking. But this

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doesn't *solve* the problem for SSI. It *is* the problem for SSI! In the PARKED example, it is clear that the subject loses the evidence that made her initial bet rational and so is rational to buy-out. But in Reed's example, it isn't plausible that S loses the evidence supporting his initial investments when the broker raises the stakes; nor is it plausible that he is rational to divest. Instead, it seems that his initial investments are just as well supported as ever and that the rational thing for him to do is keep those investments *but not increase them further*. The problem is that SSI cannot capture any of this but implies, implausibly, that the subject is rational to go through cycles of investing and divesting. This seems to be the point of Reed's remark that SSI "can rationalize actions that are intuitively quite irrational." (p.469) What's needed is a theory that *avoids* this consequence. Beddor merely doubles down on the result and fails to get SSI out of trouble.[9]

Beddor claims that the Dutch book problem confronts both SSI and EC. The next section shows that, unlike SSI, EC can escape the difficulty.

4. Multi-tasking and the Dutch book problem

Reed's Dutch book problem stems not just from the diachronic instability of knowledge but also from SSI's difficulty with "multi-tasking" cases. These are cases in which a proposition is relevant to multiple practical contexts which a subject faces simultaneously. In Reed's example, when the broker offers to invest 100% of S's assets, STOCKUP is relevant to S's high-stakes context of investing all his assets. But it is simultaneously relevant to lower-stakes contexts of continuing with his lower investments. While it seems right that S cannot rely on STOCKUP in the high-stakes context and so should not *go all in*, it also seems wrong that he should withdraw his prior investments. Rather, it seems that he can still rely on STOCKUP for the purposes of his earlier investments but just not for investing 100%. Why can't SSI say this?

4.1. Context-relative knowledge?

Given the knowledge-action link at the heart of SSI (KA: you know that p iff you can treat p as a reason for action) the above idea would imply that S knows STOCKUP and simultaneously does not know it, which is contradictory, or that he *knows it relative to one context* but *doesn't know it relative to another*. Some authors dismiss the idea of relativizing knowledge to different contexts out of hand. Jessica Brown (2014), having described the multi-tasking problem, writes:

[9]Could SSI avoid the problem by affirming that when invited to *go all in*, S still knows STOCKUP but this knowledge doesn't necessarily rationalize investing 100%? On this view, since S still knows STOCKUP, he isn't obliged to divest, and the cycle is blocked.

This view appears to reject the idea that knowing p suffices for being able to rely on p *tout court*. It isn't strictly speaking a rejection of SSI's central claim that knowledge is sensitive to practical context. But the crucial question now is: why *doesn't* S lose his knowledge when the stakes go up? If it's claimed that epistemic standards *never* shift when stakes rise, then it seems we have rejected SSI after all. If it's claimed instead that standards can so shift but never enough for somebody to lose knowledge, we get a seemingly pointless form of SSI. (Pointless because defenders of SSI rely on that very idea to explain case-pairs like DeRose's Bank cases which are a central concern of shifty epistemologies.) If it's claimed that subjects can lose knowledge through such shifts, but that this just doesn't occur in the BXD example, then the response merely deflects this particular Dutch book problem. The problem will arise again with examples in which a subject *does* lose knowledge when the stakes go up. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this query.

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> On pain of supposing that the subject knows the proposition with respect to one action, but not with respect to another, it seems that a defender [of SSI] needs to specify one of the actions as fixing the level of probability required to know.(p.186)

Brown doesn't elaborate on why knowledge shouldn't be relativized to contexts (or "actions," as she puts it).

Reed is similarly dismissive of the "unappealing" (2012, p.468) suggestion and writes:

> "We never do say things like, "Relative to that guy, I know my BAC is under the limit. But, relative to the cop standing next to him, I don't know it." (p.468)

The contention here is that ordinary knowledge-talk shows no evidence of context relativity, and the fact that Reed's example sounds so strange is meant to count strongly against the idea.

Considering multi-tasking cases, Fantl and McGrath (2012) follow Brown's suggestion and affirm that *the more demanding practical context determines the knowledge standard*. Thus, in the BXD example, when the broker invites S to invest 100% of his assets, that high-stakes context determines the standard for knowing STOCKUP across the board. Consequently, S doesn't know, and cannot rely on, STOCKUP *period* (and so ought to divest).

4.1.1. Context-relative knowledge and DeRose's walking talker

Is the idea of context-relative knowledge really such a non-starter? DeRose (2009, pp.269–73) bases one of his objections to SSI on a multi-tasking example: the case of the walking talker. He begins by describing two single-tasking cases. In the first, Jane is asked over the phone by her friend, out of casual curiosity, where she will be next year. Jane flat-out affirms, truly and quite appropriately, it seems, that she will be back at her home university. Granting for present purposes that knowledge is the norm of assertion, this implies that Jane *knows* that's where she'll be, which, together with plausible assumptions, also seems right. In a second single-tasking case, Jane takes a five-minute walk across campus to get free life-insurance for her planned year abroad as a visiting professor. This behavior seems entirely rational. But, granting KA (*you know that p iff you can treat p as a reason for action*), this implies that Jane does *not* know that she'll survive the year ("SURVIVE" henceforth) – if she did know that, it wouldn't be rational to waste time walking across campus to get insurance she knows she won't use.

Finally, DeRose introduces the multi-tasking case by supposing that the phone conversation takes place while Jane is walking across campus for the life-insurance. Intuitively, Jane's assertion that she'll be back at her home university next year is just as appropriate as before. Plus, her walk across campus to sign-up for the insurance seems as rational as before too.

The question SSI faces is: does Jane know that SURVIVE or not? If she knows, her assertion is appropriate, but her trip across campus is irrational. If she doesn't know, then her trip across campus is rational, but her assertion is out of place. (This option is implied by Fantl and McGrath's approach of allowing the most demanding context to set the knowledge-standard). Either way, SSI seems to get things partly wrong since the assertion and the walk across campus are intuitively appropriate and rational, respectively.[10]

[10]I set aside a third option: that it is indeterminate whether she knows.

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DeRose concedes that there is no *obviously* right answer to the question of whether Jane does or does not know that SURVIVE: multi-tasking examples are just hard cases. Thus, he thinks it is not an especially strong objection to SSI to point out that, by implying that Jane does not know *period*, it fails to give an intuitively correct answer. However, dealing with multi-tasking cases this way is part of what leads SSI into the Dutch book problem, and that constitutes a more serious difficulty. Here is what DeRose suggests is a better way to handle the case of the walking talker:

> "What seems to *me* the best way to respond is to say something that involves explicit relativization of Jane's knowledge to the different standards involved, as in: 'Well, Jane does know that she'll survive the year and be back well enough to assert to her friend that she will be back, but she doesn't know that she'll survive with enough certainty to make it irrational for her to take the trouble to sign up for the special life insurance.'" (2009, p.272)

His idea, then, is that in multi-tasking cases, there are different standards in play simultaneously – e.g., a lower standard for the talking and a higher standard for the walking – just as there may be different standards in play at different times in other examples when stakes change, say, from low to high. Accordingly, rather than affirming that Jane knows (or does not know) SURVIVE *period*, we should say that she knows it well enough for one standard but not well enough for the other.

What does it mean to say that Jane doesn't know that SURVIVE *with enough certainty* for a given standard?[11] On a natural reading, this implies that the knowledge-standard[12] in question demands some minimum degree of (epistemic) certainty, that Jane's epistemic position regarding SURVIVE falls short, and, hence, that Jane doesn't know SURVIVE by this standard. This needn't be understood to imply that knowledge always entails certainty. It only implies that in at least some (*high standard*) cases, knowledge requires some degree of certainty. And it doesn't preclude Jane's knowing SURVIVE well enough by some weaker standard.

This view saves the intuition that Jane's assertion is appropriate and that her behavior is rational. It might be urged, however, that Fantl and McGrath's approach can go some way to accommodating this intuition too. Strictly speaking, since Jane doesn't know that she'll be back next year, her assertion, on this view, is not appropriate. Still, Jane's conversation is, presumably, casual, and her violation of the knowledge norm of assertion appears to be fairly insignificant. This might be thought to explain the intuition that what she says is acceptable even though, on this view, it is strictly speaking unwarranted.[13]

However, the real advantage of DeRose's approach is not just in vindicating intuitions about the walking talker. It is in facilitating a solution to Reed's Dutch book problem. The approach allows us to say about that example that when the broker invites S to *go all in*, S doesn't know STOCKUP well enough to accept. But that doesn't oblige him to start divesting. He still knows STOCKUP well enough to retain his earlier investments. So, he is rational both to continue his earlier investment and not to invest the remainder. The Dutch book is avoided. Fantl and McGrath's approach doesn't achieve this. It affirms that S doesn't know STOCKUP *period* when invited to *go all in*. This removes the rationale for his earlier investments, trapping him in the Dutch book.

[11]Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this question.

[12]Or "knowledge"-standard on a contextualist picture.

[13]See Williamson (2000, pp.255–60) for discussion of the knowledge norm and casual conversation. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

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4.2. Context-relative knowledge and SSI

Two questions arise here. Is relativizing knowledge really plausible—recall the earlier dismissals from Brown and Reed? And, if it is, is it a really an option for SSI?

Starting with the first, we saw that Reed finds this strategy "unappealing" because, "We never do say things like, "Relative to that guy, I know my BAC is under the limit. But, relative to the cop standing next to him, I don't know it." However, granting that this way of talking sounds strange, it's not clear that the strangeness is due solely to the relativized knowledge claims. For one thing, the BAC example is described very briefly. To give relativization a fair shot, we'd want a fairly realistic example in which there seem to be multiple, clearly distinguishable practical contexts in play where different practical standards seem clearly to be operative. Now, one can imagine different standards applying to the question of whether one is under the alcohol limit when dealing with a police officer as compared to chatting with friends. But it may be hard to apply different standards in a case like Reed's where there is a "cop standing next to" your friend. In that situation, the higher standard might naturally come to dominate thereby making it seem inappropriate to make Reeds' relative knowledge claims.

Another problem with Reed's example is that the speaker relativizes his knowledge to different *people*, which sounds strained, rather than to different *standards* or *situations* or *actions*. He says that he knows it relative to *that guy* but not relative to *that cop*. In contrast, DeRose affirms that Jane knows she'll be back next year *well enough to assert it to her friend* but not *with enough certainty to make it irrational to take the trouble to get the insurance*. Here, Jane's knowledge is relativized to certain kinds of behavior, which sounds more felicitous.

Consider an adaptation of another of DeRose's examples (2009, pp.4–5). Louise, in her brief visit to work one day, sees that John's hat and coat are hung inside his office and overhears conversations strongly suggesting that John is at work (which he in fact is). In the tavern later that day, Louise claims correctly and appropriately to know *that John was at work* ("JOHN" henceforth) in order to claim her winnings in a low-stakes bet on whether John would show up to work that day. Later, when questioned by the police in relation to a very serious matter about which the question of whether JOHN is of great importance, Louise claims not to know, reflecting that she never actually *saw* him at work. We can imagine that, while the officer scribbles in a notebook, Louise's friend, who paid-up in the bet at the tavern, pulls Louise aside and starts protesting: "Wait a minute, you just admitted you don't know that John was at work! So you can't claim your winnings from me!" And we can imagine Louise replying: "Oh come off it; you can't be serious! I'd have to be really certain to testify to the police that John was at work. I don't know it by *those high standards*. But, *for the purposes of the bet*, of course, I know he was at work! I saw his hat and coat in the office and heard people talking about him like he was there. He clearly was there, and I'm fully entitled to my winnings."

Louise's reply sounds far less jarring than what is said in Reed's example. This time, the knowledge claim is relativized not to people but to standards and practical contexts (though, as with Reed's examples, the contexts involve a police-officer and an ordinary civilian.) Plus, the example is described in more detail than Reed's. The different practical contexts involved are made clear, as is the fact that different standards seem appropriate to them. Consequently, Louise's relative-knowledge claims are much more intelligible than Reed's. To my ear, while Reed's relative-knowledge claims sound jarring and hard to make sense of, what Louise says seems acceptable and easy to understand.[14]

[14]This discussion suggests a response to Ram Neta's (2007) longstanding objection to SSI. Recall his case in which Kate is stood at the intersection of Main Street and State Street. She is equally confident that she is on Main Street and that she is on State Street (with confidence sufficient for knowledge provided other

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Our next question was: is DeRose's relativization of knowledge an option for SSI? DeRose defends EC. Quite generally, on his view the truth-conditions of knowledge-attributions of the sort "S knows that p" are determined by contextual factors. "S knows that p" might be true relative to one conversational context and at the same time false relative to another even though "S" and "p" are used to pick out the very same person and proposition respectively. Hence, knowledge ascriptions are already implicitly context-relative for EC.

DeRose affirms that his response to the walking-talker example "seems available whether SSI or contextualism is accepted." (2009, p.272) But, on reflection, that doesn't seem correct. Adopting DeRose's response would mean conceding that if two speakers separately asserted, "Jane knows that she'll survive the year," one could assert a true proposition by speaking with Jane's phone conversation in mind while the other could assert a false proposition by speaking with the life-insurance in mind. Thus, the truth conditions of the assertion would prove to be context-dependent in a way which is incompatible with the *invariantism* of SSI. (Recall: invariantism is a rejection of EC's semantic thesis that the truth conditions of knowledge attributions vary with context.)

Defenders of SSI might be willing to cede ground here. When discussing a different problem which also impugns invariantism (one relating to third-person knowledge ascriptions, to be discussed below), Fantl and McGrath consider surrendering SSI and falling back on a defense of impurism:

> DeRose does not distinguish SSI in his paper from impurism. One can accept impurism without accepting SSI. Although we have taken no stand on the matter, perhaps DeRose is right that . . . one shouldn't be an invariantist—and so shouldn't accept SSI . . . But that wouldn't refute impurism. The impurist, too, can reach into the contextualist's playbook to cope with these cases. (2009: pp.55)

As we've seen, that's *not* the option they take in response to multi-tasking cases. But, given the Dutch book difficulties that beset their preferred strategy, it may be advisable to "reach into the contextualist's playbook" to handle these cases too.

conditions are satisfied), and her evidence in each case is her clear view of the street signs displaying the street names. Being on Main Street is a high-stakes matter for Kate while being on State Street isn't important for her. Given SSI, it seems that Kate doesn't know she's on Main Street (the stakes are too high). But does she know she's on State Street? Since the stakes are low, SSI seems to imply that she does. Neta claims that this is highly implausible.

Like Reed's example, I think this case is under-described and that the result Neta claims is implausible can seem entirely acceptable when additional details are added. Imagine that Kate needs to be on Main Street next week to save the world. She also needs to be on State Street a few hours hence to retrieve somebody's pet cat from kidnappers. She says to her sidekick, "I'm pretty sure this is Main Street, but I'm not certain enough to know given the stakes. The sign could be wrong. We should visit City Hall tomorrow to make sure." Her sidekick replies, "What about State Street? Should we check at City Hall this afternoon before pick-up time?" But Kate replies firmly, "No, no. There's no need for that. We know this is State Street well enough to get Mittens. Let's grab lunch and come back to State Street at the appointed time." Kate's claims to know in the one case and to not know in the other seem entirely in order. (It might be felt that Kate's confidence levels can't be the same in this version of the case otherwise she would claim to know (or not) in both cases. I don't think that follows. But we can consider a version in which Kate claims to know she's on Main Street too and tells her sidekick in both cases that there's no need to check at City Hall. On this version, her claim to know she's on Main Street would seem false and rash while her claim to know she's on State Street would seem sensible as before.). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising the issue of Neta's example.

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4.3. Impurist EC

How might that work exactly? Here is a sketch. Impurists might argue that knowledge is a *three-place* relation, relating a subject to a proposition *and a practical context the subject faces*. If the knowledge-standard is affirmed to vary with features of the subject's practical context, that would make it an *impure* relation, as desired, as well as being a *subject sensitive* relation. A modified version of the knowledge-action principle might then be offered along the following lines:

> KA* S knows that p in a context, C, iff S faces C and can treat p as a reason for action in C. [15]

Turning to semantic matters, impurists might affirm that utterances of "S knows that p" implicitly assert that S knows that p *relative to a practical context salient to the speaker*. Such utterances might be claimed to be true if and only if S knows that p relative to that context (as explained in KA*) and false otherwise. This yields the contextualist thesis that the truth conditions of knowledge attributions vary with context. One person asserting, "Jane knows she'll survive the year," where Jane's phone conversation in salient would assert correctly that Jane knows SURVIVE relative to her phone conversation, while another person making the same utterance where Jane's signing up for life-insurance is salient would assert incorrectly that Jane knows SURVIVE relative to *that* context. This approach also accommodates the more explicitly context-relative knowledge claims DeRose employs dealing with the walking talker (along the lines of "S knows that p well enough for *this context* but not well enough for the standards relevant to *that context*.") It thereby provides a way to avoid the Dutch book problem: S knows STOCKUP and can rely on it relative to low-stakes contexts but doesn't know it and cannot rely on it relative to *going all in*. Thus, he can sensibly keep his initial investments but cannot sensibly invest the remainder.

More details would need to be filled in. But this sketch suggests one way that those sympathetic to SSI might develop a fallback, impurist theory to handle multi-tasking cases and the Dutch book problem while ceding ground to EC.

5. DeRose's "Killer objection" to SSI

According to DeRose (2009, pp.273–6), however, even if defenders of SSI follow his lead on multi-tasking cases by relativizing what Jane knows to different contexts she faces, they'll still stumble over third-person knowledge attributions.

To see this, take the example in which the police ask Louise if she knows whether JOHN (i.e., *John was at work that day*). In DeRose's original example, having said that she doesn't know, the police then ask Louise if her colleague, Lena, knows whether JOHN. Louise knows that Lena has exactly the same evidence for JOHN that she herself has. On the basis that this doesn't suffice for knowledge in her current context, Louise replies, appropriately and correctly, it seems, "Lena doesn't know either."

Notoriously, SSI has a hard time here. Supposing that Lena is in a low-stakes context with respect to JOHN, Louise's utterance about Lena will be false on SSI, since Lena's evidence *does* suffice to know that JOHN in low-stakes contexts. The impurist fallback position sketched above fairs no better. It gets the intuitively right verdict but for the wrong reason: "Lena doesn't know" comes out true simply because Lena doesn't face the

[15]Fantl and McGrath's KJ principle could also be modified to KJ*: *if you know that p in C, then p is warranted enough in C to justify ϕ-ing, for any ϕ.*

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context (salient to Louise) with the police, *not* because Lena's evidence doesn't suffice for knowledge in Louise's conversation.

This is what DeRose (2009, p.233) calls "the killer objection." Fantl and McGrath consider two responses. The first offers an error-theory whereby SSI's verdicts are correct and it's our intuitive judgements which are faulty (2009, pp.56–7). The error-theory relies on an egocentric version of Fantl and McGrath's principle, *Action*: if you know that p, you are proper to act on p. By *Action*, Louise can reason that since it is not proper for her to act on JOHN (given the high stakes), she (Louise) does not know that JOHN. Their suggestion is that Louise may implicitly reason in relation to Lena according to an "egocentric" version of *Action*: if Lena knows that JOHN, then I (Louise) am proper to act on JOHN. Louise may then mistakenly conclude that since she herself cannot properly act on JOHN (given the high stakes), it follows that Lena doesn't know that JOHN. This proposal draws on the *epistemic egocentricism bias* according to which sophisticated subjects (with more knowledge of a situation) tend to evaluate naïve subjects (whom they know to have less knowledge of the situation) as though those naïve subjects had the same knowledge and concerns as themselves.[16] Thus, Louise judges whether Lena knows based on features of Louise's own practical situation which she knows Lena isn't aware of.

This response faces DeRose's (2009, pp.234–5) criticism of Hawthorne's earlier error-theory: it doesn't handle a modified case in which Louise meets the high standards of her own context (e.g., by having seen John at work) and still judges, in a way that seems appropriate and correct in her high-stakes context, that Lena doesn't know that JOHN since Lena didn't see him.[17] Louise *can* act on JOHN here, so she cannot be understood as reasoning from her own *inability* to act on JOHN to the conclusion that Lena doesn't know that JOHN. This criticism might be met by appealing to a modified egocentric version of *Action*: if Lena knows that JOHN, then I (Louise) would be proper to act on JOHN *on the basis of Lena's testimony*. Using this principle, Louise might reason (in either case) that since she (Louise) wouldn't be proper to act *on that basis* (after all, Lena didn't actually *see* John), Lena doesn't know.

A more serious problem is that in standard cases of the epistemic egocentricism bias, agents' evaluations of naïve subjects are unduly influenced by information the agents possess *which is clearly irrelevant to the evaluations*. For example, in Baron and Hershey's (1988) study, agents evaluating doctors' treatment decisions appreciate that the treatment outcomes are irrelevant to evaluating doctors' decisions, yet the evaluations they offer are still biased by their knowledge of outcomes (Nagel 2010).

It is doubtful that the third-person cases at issue are like this. When Louise denies that Lena knows, Louise's judgement is influenced by the high-stakes police-context Louise faces. It's hard to imagine that Louise would regard that context as relevant to whether she herself knows that JOHN *but entirely irrelevant to whether Lena knows*, as SSI would have it. Rather, the very point at issue in Louise's conversation would seem to be what Louise and Lena know *for the purposes of the police enquiry*. That makes the police-context seem equally and centrally relevant to whether Louise knows and to whether Lena knows.

To do justice to the example, SSI would have to explain not just why Louise's high-stakes context influences her judgement about what Lena knows, but why it also seems (wrongly, according to SSI) highly relevant to that judgement. This demands *an*

[16]See, e.g., Royzman et al (2003).

[17]See DeRose (2009, pp.234–8) for criticism of error-theoretic explanations in defense of SSI by Hawthorne (2004, pp.164–6) and Stanley (2005, pp.100–1).

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additional error-theory. The epistemic egocentricism bias explains undue influence of privileged information. It doesn't explain confusions about what is and isn't relevant.

Fantl and McGrath's second response to third-person cases cedes ground to EC. To quote from them again:

> [P]erhaps DeRose is right *that third-person cases* show that one shouldn't be an invariantist – and so shouldn't accept SSI . . . But that wouldn't refute impurism. The impurist, too, can reach into the contextualist's playbook to cope with these cases. (2009, pp.55, my emphasis)

Here, Fantl and McGrath consider dropping the subject-sensitivity feature of SSI (the "SS") which ties the truth-conditions of knowledge-ascriptions to the situation of the subject. Fantl and McGrath don't elaborate on the details. Perhaps the idea would be to treat first-person cases strictly in accordance with SSI, but to treat third-person cases differently, along impurist but contextualist lines. The resulting theory would be gerrymandered though, and it would still face the Dutch book problem owing to its treatment of first-person cases. So, a more uniform account dropping SSI altogether and explaining both first- and third-person cases along impurist but contextualist lines would seem the better option.

The impurist EC account from §4.3 can easily be modified to handle third-person cases. Roughly put, by dropping the stipulation that S knows that p in C only if C is *a context S faces*, subjects can be allowed to know propositions relative to contexts they don't face.[18] S may be said to know that p relative to C provided S's epistemic position regarding p suffices for the standard appropriate to C. The semantics will work as before, but utterances of "S knows that p" will be true if S knows that p relative to the context salient to the speaker even if that isn't a context S actually faces.

This approach will deliver the verdict that, when speaking with the police, Louise *correctly* judges that Lena doesn't know that JOHN since Lena's evidence doesn't suffice for the standard appropriate to the police-context. No need to explain-away the intuition that Louise speaks correctly via error-theories. If this approach is applied to first- and third-person cases, we get a uniform account combining a contextualist treatment of "knowledge" (i.e., of knowledge-talk) with an impurist treatment of the knowledge relation.

6. Unstable knowledge again

This impurist EC handles all the problems for SSI discussed in this paper, including the one with which we began concerning unstable knowledge. Recall that, given SSI, a subject might go from knowing that p to not knowing it and back again in a short period as her practical context varies, without any change in her strength of epistemic position. This not only seems bizarre but is partly responsible for the Dutch book problem.

On the impurist EC, this problem falls away. As the subject's practical situation changes, her knowledge stays constant. She continuously knows that p relative to the low-stakes context that comes and goes. And she continuously does not know that p relative to the high-stakes context that comes and goes. There is no flip-flopping of knowledge as practical context changes.

Nonetheless (as those familiar with the literature might anticipate), this view still seems to license some bizarre sounding knowledge-ascriptions. On impurist EC, it seems

[18]This can include *merely possible contexts*, whereby S knows that p relative to an unrealized state of affairs.

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like the subject whose practical context thus oscillates could correctly affirm, when the stakes become low again, "I know that p now, but I didn't know it a moment ago even though my evidence now is no better than it was then." The first conjunct is true since "I know that p now" affirms that the subject knows that p relative to the low-stakes context salient to her when asserting that conjunct, while the second conjunct also seems true because "I didn't know that p a moment ago" seems to affirm that she did not know that p relative to the high-stakes context which obtained moments earlier and which is salient to her when asserting the second conjunct. So, even if the knowledge relation itself doesn't flip-flop, it still seems possible to truly assert bizarre sounding "now you know it, now you don't"-sentences, as they are often called.

This is a familiar difficulty for both SSI and EC. I will not tackle the problem here because DeRose (2009, ch.5 §8 and appendix and ch.6 §§8–13) has offered a thorough treatment of its many permutations as faced by his version of EC, and the solutions he offers are, I believe, available to the impurist EC sketched (with minor amendments.)

Conclusions

We have seen that attempts to defend SSI from central criticisms fail. This throws serious doubt on the viability of SSI. We have seen that the best strategies in response to those criticisms involve dropping SSI and defending a fallback impurist position which borrows from "the contextualist playbook." That includes DeRose's suggested strategy on behalf of SSI to deal with multi-tasking cases and Fantl and McGrath's secondary strategy to deal with third-person knowledge attributions. A fallback position of this sort was sketched and shown capable of handling all the problems for SSI described in this paper.

However, this impurist EC faces challenges of its own. A purist version of EC might insist that "know" expresses 2-place epistemic relations between a subject and a proposition; that there are many such 2-place epistemic relations – *knowledge relations*, as it were – differing in the strength of epistemic position they demand; and that each such relation is epistemically pure in that whether it is instantiated depends only on truth-relevant factors. On this type of view, when a speaker asserts "S knows that p," which proposition is expressed, and which epistemic relation invoked, depends on features of the speaker's conversational context. If high standards are operative in the conversation, the utterance will express that S bears a high-standard 2-place knowledge-relation to p. If looser standards prevail, it will express that S bears a low-standard 2-place knowledge-relation to p.

Such a purist version of EC may avoid all the problems discussed in this paper too. So, impurists embracing EC will need to show that their theory has advantages over purist forms of EC. It might be suspected that there is really no substantial difference between these "alternative" purist and impurist versions of EC, despite one positing multiple 2-place, pure knowledge-relations and the other positing a single 3-place, impure knowledge-relation. That's a further concern impurists opting for this fallback position may need to address.[19]

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