

The (Mostly Harmless) Inconsistency of Knowledge Ascriptions
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Much recent epistemology attacks the question of what knowledge is through the semantics of the word ‘know’. Contextualists, relativists, and various kinds of invariantist each posit different kinds of rules for the truth of sentences containing the word ‘know’; and much of the dispute among these three parties concerns which rules best capture our actual use of the word ‘know’.¹ These parties share the presupposition that our use of the word ‘know’ will be best captured by *some* set of semantic rules that can always be applied consistently. This presupposition, I will argue, is false. Our use of the word ‘know’ is best captured by a set of inference rules that are inconsistent, which I will call collectively the *Knowledge Principles*.

This is a radical thesis, and it will require a fairly elaborate argument; even if the Knowledge Principles are intuitively appealing, it is *prima facie* less costly to reject one of them than to admit that ‘know’ lacks consistent semantics. However, the thesis is radical only at the theoretical level; it does not call for a radical revision of our practice of speaking of knowledge. In particular, even if knowledge-talk is inconsistent, we need not and should not abandon it. The cases in which the inconsistency might lead to actual confusion are rare enough that knowledge-talk is an efficient way of communicating. In cases of actual confusion, consistent constructions are available to clarify what is meant,

¹ Contextualist accounts have been offered by DeRose (1992, 1995), Lewis (1996), and Cohen (1988), among others. Subject-sensitive invariantism accounts have been given by Hawthorne (2004) and Stanley (2005). MacFarlane (2005a) has given a relativistic account.

but it would be inefficient to abandon the word ‘know’ wholesale in favor of these constructions. The inconsistency of ‘know’ is mostly harmless.²

Furthermore, its harmlessness is no accident. The cases in which inconsistency comes to the fore will arise only when a knowledge ascription that was made in a conversation with one purpose is applied in a conversation with another sort of purpose. It is not mere accident that those cases are rare; their rarity is bound up with the role of knowledge ascriptions in our lives. Indeed, it is possible to assign effective truth-conditions to most utterances involving ‘know’, depending on the kind of conversation in which the assertion is made. (As we will see, this assignment of truth-conditions to individual utterances is different from the way a contextualist theory assigns truth-conditions to utterances.) When it is natural to apply the Knowledge Principles in inconsistent ways, we are running up against the limits of the usefulness of our knowledge discourse. My inconsistency theory predicts that in these cases we will need to stop talking of knowledge *tout court* and clarify what is going on. This actually gives my theory an advantage over consistent semantics for knowledge, which declare that some *tout court* knowledge ascription is true in these circumstances; they are left with the problem of explaining why asserting the truth is unsatisfactory.

Still, to argue that ‘know’ is inconsistent I will have to argue that it behaves as we would expect an inconsistent term to behave. The first step, in section 1, is to enumerate

² My theory is to be contrasted with the eliminativism that MacFarlane describes as an alternative to contextualism, invariance, and relativism: “We can argue that our practice in using ‘know’ is so confused and incoherent that knowledge-attributing sentences cannot be assigned definite truth conditions. Instead of doing semantics, we can advocate reform, perhaps through the introduction of new, unconfused terms of epistemic assessment” (MacFarlane 2005a, p. 204). I argue that our practice is confused, but not *so* confused that we need to abandon it.

MacFarlane (2005a, p. 216) holds that eliminativism is a radical view that should not be adopted if there is a viable alternative, but my analysis is not radical at the level of ordinary practice. As I discuss in section 7, it may involve radical restructuring of our philosophical practice. However, that seems to me a much smaller cost (and one that MacFarlane’s relativism shares).

the Knowledge Principles and argue that they are individually intuitively appealing. I then provide a theory of inconsistent discourses adapted from (Gupta 1999) in section 2, and in section 3 discuss how utterances in inconsistent discourses can have effective contents. The effective content depends on the purpose of the conversation, so we should expect that when a conversation switches from one purpose to another it may leave a speaker with nothing sensible-sounding to say. I call such a situation an *aporia*.

Given this general theory of inconsistent discourses, the next step is to establish that knowledge-talk behaves like an inconsistent discourse. Since English contains no uncontroversially inconsistent discourse, I will discuss a situation in which we would expect an inconsistent discourse to develop, and argue that our knowledge-talk is like the discourse that develops in this situation. Accordingly, section 4 presents a science fiction tale in which people naturally develop an inconsistent discourse about time. Section 5 cashes out the analogy with this discourse, arguing that given the purposes of knowledge-talk conditions are ripe for it to be inconsistent in the same way as the time-talk is in the science fiction scenario.

I conclude by comparing the inconsistency theory to its nearest contextualist rival, in section 6, and draw some broader methodological conclusions in section 7.

1. The Knowledge Principles

An inconsistent discourse is not merely one in which generally accepted claims are inconsistent. Suppose that all the following claims are generally accepted:

(Jekyll-Hyde)

(a) Enfield knows that Jekyll has never killed anyone.

(b) Utterson knows that Hyde killed a passerby, merely for getting in his way.

(c) Lanyon knows that Jekyll and Hyde are one and the same.

(d) If anyone knows that p , then p is true.

These four claims are jointly inconsistent (plausibly), yet they do not reflect a deep inconsistency in our knowledge-discourse. Only (d) says anything about knowledge as such. Each of (a) through (c) is about particular propositions that we take someone to know; the inconsistency arises because these particular propositions themselves are inconsistent. The way to resolve the inconsistency is to conclude that we are mistaken about one of the particular propositions (most likely (a)), and this will not require changing anything about the way we talk about knowledge, except in this particular case.

So to show that our ‘knowledge’ talk is inconsistent I will have to show more than that we generally accept inconsistent Knowledge Principles. I will argue that these Principles are deep if not constitutive principles about the way we use ‘knows’. To use Eklund’s test (Eklund 2002), a speaker who is competent to use the word ‘know’ will have some disposition to accept these Principles. As we will see, if you reject one of the Principles, you will be forced to acknowledge as true some odd-sounding statements about knowledge.

I will focus on evidential standards for knowledge-that ascriptions, particularly as they are connected with practical reasoning.³ These standards are merely one factor in

³ In this way my account will differ from the account given in (Schiffer 1996), which also concludes that our talk of knowledge is inconsistent. Schiffer generates a paradox from the impossibility of reconciling our ordinary ascriptions of perceptual knowledge with the demands that lead to skepticism, and argues that there is no ‘happy-face’ resolution to the paradox, on which we can safely reject one of the inconsistent claims. As I will argue in section 5, my Knowledge Principles can yield inconsistencies based

our knowledge ascriptions, though they will be enough to generate inconsistency. Even if we assume that a belief is true and non-Gettiered, it must meet a certain evidential standard to count as knowledge.⁴ The dispute among contextualists, relativists, and sensitive and insensitive invariantists concerns how the standard is set. Insensitive invariantists think there is only one standard; sensitive invariantists, contextualists, and relativists think the standard is determined by, respectively, the circumstances subject to whom knowledge is ascribed, the context in which knowledge is ascribed, and the context in which the knowledge ascription is assessed. Frequently the standard is taken to depend on the practical stakes for some relevant person; knowledge requires evidence that is good enough for that person to act on, given what's at stake.^{5, 6} The Knowledge Principles capture the considerations that motivate each of these views, given our limited focus on evidential standards.⁷

These are the Knowledge Principles:

on practical considerations, as opposed to the academic considerations that lead to skepticism. Nevertheless, my account owes a debt to Schiffer's.

⁴ 'Evidential standard' should be construed as broadly as possible; I do not mean to rule out any particular view about what those standards are like. In particular, I do not mean to rule out relevant alternatives views.

⁵ See especially the practical environment view of knowledge put forth by Hawthorne (2004). On contextualist views, the relevant person need not always be the person who makes the knowledge ascription; see (DeRose 2005, p. 189) on this. Presumably a relativist can say the same thing; there are contexts of assessment in which the relevant person is not the assessor.

⁶ This practical orientation means that skeptical invariantism will not be a serious contender. Almost no one is ever in a situation in which rational action requires addressing skeptical doubts, and in our actual knowledge-discourse we ascribe knowledge when skeptical doubts have not been addressed. This is one respect in which my account of knowledge differs from Schiffer's "unhappy-face solution" to paradoxes of knowledge (Schiffer 1996); see note 3 above. See also the remarks about skepticism in section 7.

⁷ A wider focus would require considering other principles for knowledge. For instance, since knowledge requires *true* belief, the factivity of knowledge is a principle governing our use of 'know' (as in (d) of (*Jekyll-Hyde*)); other principles may be necessary to account for various Gettier cases.

(*Disquotational Principle*) An utterance of “S knows that p” at time t is true iff at time t S knows_{tenseless} that p.⁸

(*Practical Environment Principle*) S’s evidence that p is good enough for knowledge just when S’s evidence for p is good enough to make it rational for her to act on the assumption that p.⁹

(*Parity of Evidence Principle*) If S and T have the same evidence that p, then S’s evidence for p is good enough for knowledge iff T’s evidence that p is good enough for knowledge.¹⁰

The following principle is not as fundamental to our ‘knowledge’ discourse as the first three. It also involves the concept of testimony, so that a competent user of the word ‘knows’ might perhaps demur from it depending on her theory of testimony.

(*Testimony Principle*) If S knows that p, then T would be in a position to know that p if S were to tell her so (assuming that S is generally trustworthy and there is nothing else that interferes with the transmission of knowledge).¹¹

As we will discuss, the Testimony Principle requires a *ceteris paribus* clause; testimony can fail to transmit knowledge. But it is basically a special case of the Parity of Evidence Principle. Plausibly, *ceteris paribus* the evidence that the hearer gets from testimony is just as good as the evidence the teller has, at least if we are measuring whether evidence

⁸ Compare Hawthorne’s Disquotational Schema for ‘Knows’ (Hawthorne 2004, p. 101) and the disquotational discourse reports discussed in (Cappelen and Lepore 2005), p. 95.

⁹ Compare Hawthorne’s Practical Environment Constraint (Hawthorne 2004, p. 176). This supplies one direction of the biconditional; Hawthorne endorses the other direction at (2004, p. 30).

¹⁰ Note that this principle concerns whether the subjects’ evidence is strong enough for knowledge rather than whether they actually have knowledge. On some natural conceptions of evidence it can happen that S and T have the same evidence that p although S knows and T doesn’t, for instance if T’s evidence is Gettierized. Still, such a case should not be a violation of the Parity of Evidence Principle, because T’s evidence is good enough for knowledge in that T would know if her evidence were not Gettierized.

¹¹ (MacFarlane 2005b) uses a similar principle in an argument against sensitive invariantism.

is good enough for knowledge. Then it follows from the Parity of Evidence Principle that the teller knows if and only if the hearer does.

The Knowledge Principles are inconsistent, given only the truism that different people can have different practical stakes. Take a Bank Case (DeRose 1992), in which Hanna and Leila each have the same rather good evidence that the bank is open Saturday, but a mistaken belief would harm Hannah much more than Leila. *Hannah* is in a *high-stakes* context, *Leila* in a *low-stakes* context. The Practical Environment Principle, which entails that Leila knows that the bank is open and Hannah does not, here generates an inconsistency with the Parity of Evidence Principle, which entails that Leila knows if and only if Hannah does. The Practical Environment Principle is also incompatible with the Testimony Principle, which entails that, if Leila were to tell Hannah that the bank is open, Hannah would be in a position to know if Leila is (the *ceteris paribus* clause should be satisfied). Later we will see how the Disquotational Principle can also cause trouble.

In section 2 I will discuss how a term that is governed by inconsistent inference principles can still be of use. First, however, to argue that these Principles are in fact deep principles about knowledge. Knowledge-talk that violates a Principle sounds odd, because competent speakers are inclined to govern their talk by the Principles. The arguments that have been made against various theories of knowledge are a rich source of these oddities.

For instance, the Disquotational Principle is used to attack contextualism, by invariantists and relativists alike. Cappelen and Lepore observe that it sounds odd to tell a story in which we say “Rupert doesn’t know he is 30 years old” and “Still, when Rupert utters... ‘I know am 30 years old’ what he says is true” (Cappelen and Lepore 2005, p.

110). Similarly, Stanley observes that someone who says “I know that that’s a zebra” before the possibility that it is a painted mule is made salient will not say “I didn’t say I know that that’s a zebra” even after that possibility is made salient (Stanley 2005, p. 52). If the Disquotational Principle were violated, we would sometimes say “Jones spoke truly when she said, ‘Smith knows that *p*,’ even though Smith didn’t know that *p*”; but this sounds on its face odd.

Contextualists argue that there are situations in which it is unnatural to disquote; I will discuss these arguments in sections 5 and 6. For the moment, it seems very unlikely that anyone would reject the Disquotational Principle without being exposed to some situation in which disquotation has problematic consequences, taken together with the other Principles. Those will be situations in which it is natural to reject some principle that in general will be intuitively acceptable.

The Practical Environment Principle has also been used against contextualism. What is rational for a subject to do seems as though it must depend only on the subject’s situation, not on that of someone who ascribes rationality or assesses the rationality-ascription. Hawthorne argues that this counts against contextualism about knowledge, because if contextualism were true knowledge could not be deeply connected to rational action (Hawthorne 2004, pp. 85-91). (The point tells equally well against relativism about knowledge.) This is effectively an invocation of the Practical Environment Principle; the idea is that one of the main purposes of calling a belief knowledge is to pick it out as worthy of being used as a practical premise.

Indeed, Hawthorne argues that contextualism leads to linguistic oddity: when I am in a high-stakes situation and you are in a low-stakes situation, I can truly say “You should

rely on propositions that you don't know to be true in your practical reasoning"

(Hawthorne 2004, p. 88). This oddity occurs whenever the Practical Environment Principle is violated. If what Jones has good enough evidence to know comes apart from what it would be rational for her to act on, one of the following will be true:

(1) Jones knows that p , but Jones ought not to rely on p in practical reasoning.

(2) It is the case that p , but Jones does not know that p . Still, Jones ought to rely on p in her practical reasoning.

If non-epistemic factors are at work, (1) or (2) may make sense. For instance, if Jones was told that p in confidence, it may be that she ought not to act on it even though she knows it; and if Jones needs to make a decision in the face of inconclusive evidence, it may be that she ought to act as though p even though she does not know it.¹² But (1) and (2) will sound odd in the absence of such non-epistemic factors. This oddity indicates that we do take the Practical Environment Principle as a guide for our knowledge-talk.

Linguistic oddities aside, the Practical Environment Principle is the one that keeps our knowledge-talk from being purely academic. The idea is that the concept of knowledge should have some application to practical reasoning and evaluating someone's practical rationality. We wouldn't have much everyday use for a concept of knowledge if it couldn't be so applied. This is at the root of the variation of standards in knowledge that sensitive invariantism, contextualism, and relativism are meant to capture.¹³ In fact,

¹² If Jones has extremely good evidence for p but p is false, it may be that she ought to rely on the assumption that p even though she does not know it. This case, however, will not be a violation of the Practical Environment Principle, which deals only with whether the subject's evidence is good enough for knowledge irrespective of the truth of her beliefs.

¹³ At least, as discussed in this paper; for the most part we are bracketing any variation in standards that may arise from considering or mentioning alternative possibilities. See note 6 above.

the examples used to argue for this variation in standards intuitively support to the Practical Environment Principle. If we consider the low-stakes Bank Case, it seems plausible to say “Leila knows that the bank is open”; if we consider the high-stakes Bank Case separately, it seems plausible to say “Hannah does not know that the bank is open.” These ascriptions vary with the subject’s practical environment, not with our own.¹⁴

Even an explicitly contextualist presentation of the Bank Cases reinforces the intuitive appeal of Practical Environment Principle, once we grant the intuitive appeal of the Disquotational Principle. DeRose (1992) presents the Bank Cases with himself as the subject; I shall call the subject of the “story-DeRose,” and the party that tells the story “philosopher-DeRose.” Philosopher-DeRose cites the following as intuitive data.

It seems to me [philosopher-DeRose] that (1) when I [story-DeRose] claim to know that the bank will be open on Saturday in case A, I am saying something true. But it also seems that (2) I am saying something true in case B when I concede that I *don’t* know that the bank will be open on Saturday) (p. 914).

Disquoting, as would be natural if these assertions were made separately,¹⁵ (1) amounts to “In case A [low stakes] story-DeRose knew”; and (2) amounts to “In case B [high stakes] story-DeRose did not know.”¹⁶ These ascriptions of philosopher-DeRose’s must

¹⁴ The cases must be considered separately, because considering them together would bring the Parity of Evidence Principle into play. Note also that these ascriptions are meant to be governed only by practical factors. We might (without theoretical backing) decide that Leila does not know once we bring up the possibility that the bank has changed its hours. But this would be a matter of which possibilities were salient (in accordance with the Rule of Attention discussed by Lewis (1996)), rather than the practical stakes we are concerned with.

¹⁵ Again, when the assertions are considered together, it is not natural to apply all the Knowledge Principles even if they are intuitive in unproblematic cases; see note 14 above.

¹⁶ DeRose points out that, in addition to the difference in practical stakes, his cases A and B differ that in case B the possibility that the bank may have changed its hours has been mentioned and considered (DeRose 1992, p. 915). These factors do reinforce his intuitive judgments; however, if knowledge is to

be governed by the stakes of the subject, story-DeRose. Neither the ascriber, philosopher-DeRose, nor the evaluator, the reader of the paper, has any practical stake in the bank's hours. Furthermore, neither the reader nor philosopher-DeRose's practical situations change when we contemplate case A and when on another occasion we contemplate case B. So if practical factors govern our inclination to ascribe knowledge in case A and deny it in case B, they must be the factors faced by the subject of the ascription, as the Practical Environment Principle predicts.

The Practical Environment Principle supports sensitive invariantism, since it makes knowledge depend on the subject's state. The Parity of Evidence Principle, on the other hand, tells against sensitive invariantism. Thus MacFarlane argues,

we do not say things like “Before the possibility that he might win the lottery became relevant, John knew that he would not be able to afford health insurance, but now he does not know this (though he still believes it),” or “John knows that he won't be able to afford health insurance, but if he were discussing the possibility that he might win the lottery, he would not know this” (MacFarlane 2005a, p. 202).

In these cases, John's evidence remains the same before and after winning the lottery becomes relevant, and John would have the same evidence if he were discussing the possibility that he might win the lottery.¹⁷ If we respect the Parity of Evidence Principle, we will avoid these odd statements. If we reject the Principle, we will have to

have a role in practical reasoning, our knowledge ascriptions ought to be affected by practical stakes alone without regard to which possibilities are mentioned and considered. (See the criticism by Hawthorne (2004, p. 169ff) of accounts of knowledge that rely on whether counterpossibilities are not salient.) See also note 13 above.

¹⁷ This assumes that one's knowledge is not identical with one's evidence, as in (Williamson 2000), chapter 9. These statements seem odd, and their oddity can be explained by the Parity of Evidence principle if we reject the equation of one's knowledge and one's evidence. If we accept the equation, we need a principle of parity of some related notion.

acknowledge a case in which making nonepistemic changes could eliminate or restore someone's knowledge. This seems odd; if we are explaining why knowledge has gone away, we want to be able to point to something about the subject's evidence.

The Testimony Principle, as mentioned above, requires a *ceteris paribus* clause. If T has evidence that S's testimony is likely to mislead her, then S's testimony will not put T in a position to know even if S knows whereof she speaks. Even when T is justified in accepting S's testimony and S's testimony is based on knowledge, S's testimony still may not transmit knowledge to T.¹⁸ *Ceteris paribus*, however, we do respect the Testimony Principle. If we say "Jones knows that *p*, but Smith wouldn't know that *p* even if Jones told her and she believed her," we expect some explanation of why Smith can't get knowledge from Jones's testimony. It would be odd if there were no explanation of the violation of the *ceteris paribus* clause.¹⁹

Each of the Knowledge Principles, then, leads to an odd statement when it is violated. This is evidence that the Principles govern the way competent speakers use the word 'know'. But how could we use a word that was governed by such inconsistent Principles? To answer this, we must sketch a theory of inconsistent discourses, and consider some cases in which we might expect an inconsistent discourse to arise and to be viable.

2. Inconsistent Discourses and Frames

My account of inconsistent discourses will be adapted from Anil Gupta's theory of discourses that are founded on misconceptions (Gupta 1999). On Gupta's account,

¹⁸ See (Lackey 1999) and (Graham 2000).

¹⁹ Compare DeRose's discussion of attributing knowledge to potential informants (2005, p. 184).

though assertions in such discourses may lack *absolute content*, they can have an *effective content*, which is determined not only by the utterance's meaning and its context but also by what Gupta calls its *frame*. The frame determines which of the discourse's inference principles are brought to bear on a particular utterance in the discourse.

(My basic point does not depend on this particular way of construing inconsistent discourses. It is important that there be some way of assigning effective contents to indirect discourses, but my account may be adaptable to other accounts of how this can be done. Still, Gupta's account seems plausible, and will allow me to give my account of the inconsistency of knowledge talk.)

Gupta gives the example of how 'up' might be used by a community that thinks that 'up' is a privileged direction in space. Note that this is a sort of discourse we can easily imagine taking root among a people that believes the world to be flat; and note further that the misconception is more deeply embedded in their 'up' talk than a simple factual mistake would be (as in *Jekyll-Hyde*). Correcting their misconception would involve more than simply making them abandon the claim that 'up' is one direction.

This community, then, has two basic rules governing when one object may be asserted to be up above another. The perceptual criterion is that "a is up above b" can be properly asserted "in certain perceptually distinguishable situations," like those in which we ourselves would assert it; the inferential criterion is that "a is up above b" can be properly asserted when it is inferred from "c is up above d" and "the direction of the ray dc is the same as that of the ray ba" (Gupta 1999, p. 16). Similarly, "a is not up above b" can be inferred from "c is up above d" and "the ray ab is not parallel to the ray cd." Given a round earth, these criteria lead to inconsistency. Nevertheless, this community

will be able to get along reasonably well; directives such as “fix the lamp that is above the stove” will serve their purpose, no matter where on the globe they are uttered. We may even imagine that they have a relatively successful practice of astronomy in which the inferential criterion is used more often than the perceptual one.²⁰ Their misconception about ‘up’ need not lead them into total confusion.

Note also that their ‘up’-statements will be effectively assessable as true or false. “The lamp is above the stove” is effectively true if the perceptual criterion is satisfied. Accordingly Gupta distinguishes *absolute* and *effective* content: “Absolute content captures what an act of assertion is *committed to*; effective content captures the content that is *in play*” (Gupta 1999, p. 30). If a discourse contains a misconception, then anyone who makes an assertion in the discourse will be committed to a contradiction, in the sense that she can be led to the contradiction by an invocation of the constitutive rules for the discourse. So the assertion’s absolute content is such that the assertion is false no matter how the world is. Nevertheless, it can have an effective content, which allows us (given the way the world is) to evaluate the assertion’s effective truth-value. The effective content is determined by the meaning of the terms in the sentence, the context in which the sentence is asserted, and furthermore a *frame* distinct from the context.

The frame determines which of the rules concerning the discourse are applied in this particular case. The frame is determined by the assertion’s role in a successful practice; it is less local than the specific context of utterance, and according to Gupta supplies

²⁰ See (Gupta 1999), p. 22. It takes some trouble to fill out the details so that astronomy can actually be successful here. Gupta tells the story so that the community has picked out a certain direction as the Standard Up (p. 17); perhaps everywhere but in the vicinity of the Standard Up, the atmosphere refracts light in such a way that visual perception is useless for astronomy. Astronomers might then calibrate their measures of which celestial bodies are above which in terms of the measurements at the Standard Up. We can also posit that astronomy is not a critical part of their lives, so their astronomical practice is not too well developed.

“information about normal or standard uses of sentences—information that is not localized to any speech situation but is spread across uses of language” (1999, p. 31).²¹ I think the best way to view the frame is as determining the inference-rules that are in fact applied to the assertion in the practice in which it is made. A typical utterance of “The lamp is above the stove” is made in a setting in which it is natural to apply the perceptual criterion to it and extremely unnatural to apply the inferential criterion (at least over a great distance). It may be that in astronomy as practiced in this community, it is always natural to apply the inferential criterion to uses of ‘above’ and never the perceptual criterion.²² Hence the effective content of “The lamp is up above the stove” will be determined by the perceptual criterion of application: The ray from the ground through the stove passes through the lamp (more or less). The effective content of “Celestial body A is up above celestial body B” will be determined by the inferential criterion: The ray from B through A is parallel to the rays through other pairs of objects such that one is said to be above the other, in this practice.²³ Within practices in which only some of the rules are in fact applied, inconsistencies will not in fact arise. So the existence of these practices and their associated frames keeps the community from (much) confusion and allows effective contents to be assigned to (most) utterances.

My idea here is that application of rules that are not in a given utterance’s frame is not illegitimate; it is simply not done. Gupta (1999, p. 28) gives the example of a repairman who, told to fix the lamp above the stove, travels a third of the way around the

²¹ Gupta’s talk of uses of sentences may make it seem as though frames apply to sentence-*types*, so that, for instance, the effective content of any utterance of “The lamp is up above the stove” would be determined by the perceptual criterion. Gupta (p.c.) has confirmed, however, that frames apply to particular utterances rather than to sentence-types. As we will see, “S knows that p” can be uttered as part of different practices, and accordingly different frames.

²² See note 20 above.

²³ In the community Gupta describes, these rays will be parallel to the Standard Up; see note 20 above.

world, measures ‘up’ by the perceptual criterion, comes back to the kitchen, figures out which ray out of the stove is parallel to the ‘up’ established elsewhere, and fixes that lamp—which is not the lamp that is above the stove by the perceptual criterion. The point is not that the repairman has done something illegitimate.²⁴ Rather, it is that he has done something impossibly eccentric.²⁵ No one would do this even in a flat world, where it would not lead to inconsistency. But if someone were to do this, in a world where both the perceptual and inferential criteria are really accepted as constitutive of the meaning of ‘up’, the proper reaction would be, “Good Lord! He’s shown that *that* lamp is above the stove, too!” (Or, much more likely, “He must’ve made some mistake in figuring out the parallel to the faraway ‘up’, because this lamp isn’t above the stove; the ray to *that* lamp must be parallel to the faraway ‘up’.”) The application of inference rules that are outside the frame determined by the current practice would still carry conviction, were it done; it is just too odd to be done.

The frame differs from the context of utterance in several important ways. First, as Gupta emphasizes, the frame is less local than the context. The different utterances in a single conversation are made in different contexts, with different speakers, for instance; in general they will all be made in the same frame. Second, as Gupta also emphasizes, the frame does not figure in the rules of language the way the context can. If we could precisely formulate rules governing the meaning of “She is a philosopher,” they would

²⁴ Gupta (p.c.) has confirmed that on his view there is an important sense in which the repairman’s inferences are legitimate, though there may also be another sense of legitimacy on which legitimate inferences are constrained by effective content. The latter sense will not be important for us here, as we are concerned with what inferences will actually be recognized as legitimate within the inconsistent discourse.

²⁵ As Gupta says, “More eccentric than if at a dinner party a guest should pull out a microscope to examine the contents of her plate before declaring that the host had served peas. Deep errors in our botanical theories might be revealed by this chance examination, but a dinner party is not the time and place to explore the possibility” (Gupta 1999, p. 39n16).

surely advert explicitly to the context of utterance. ‘She’ refers to whatever woman is salient or demonstrated in the context of utterance. By contrast, the community’s rules for ‘up’ constitute only the perceptual criterion and the inferential criterion, neither of which adverts to the frame.²⁶

Consequently, statements involving frame-dependent elements can express complete propositional attitudes, while statements involving context-dependent elements cannot. Saying “Frank believes that she is a philosopher” ascribes a complete propositional attitude to Frank only insofar as the context of the belief-ascription supplies a denotatum for ‘she’. To understand what he is thinking, we must interpret him as thinking of a certain woman. In contrast, saying “Frank believes that the lamp is up above the stove” ascribes a complete propositional attitude to Frank (given the denotata of ‘the lamp’ and ‘the stove’), even without a frame. To understand what Frank is thinking, we need not interpret him as thinking of a certain sense of ‘up’. Indeed, he does not know that there is more than one sense of ‘up’ to think of.

It follows that usually frames and effective contents can only be discussed in the metalanguage, not in the object language. If the people speaking the inconsistent discourse knew what the frames were and that effective content differed from absolute content, they would know that their discourse was inconsistent, which usually they do not. An exception comes when speakers know that a discourse is inconsistent, but the

²⁶ Since no one in the community knows that ‘up’ is not a direction in space, speakers would have to be semantically blind (see Hawthorne 2004, p. 107ff., and Schiffer 1996) to any rules adverting to the frame. This point holds in general for inconsistent discourses; naïve speakers will not know they are inconsistent, and so would have to be blind to any rules adverting to the frames that keep the inconsistency under control.

I will return to the question of semantic blindness at the end of section 5, in response to DeRose’s argument (Bamboozled) that a certain degree of semantic blindness is inevitable; there I argue that semantic blindness seems inevitable in cases when the Knowledge Principles are brought into conflict, so that the principles that in fact governs knowledge-discourse cannot be simultaneously upheld.

inconsistency is harmless enough that they continue to speak it anyway. (As I continue to speak of knowledge.) Even then, the frames and effective content for the discourse can't be discussed within that discourse.

The contrast between contexts and frames comes through in a contrast between illegitimate inferences and inferences that are legitimate but not carried out in practice. An inference that equivocates between contexts is recognized as illegitimate, if the equivocation is relevant. "Big things are bigger than small things" is arguably true in every context, and "Alice's apartment is small" and "Alice's cat is big" are true in appropriate contexts.²⁷ Yet no one would be tempted to infer that Alice's cat is bigger than Alice's apartment. "The cat's not big *for an apartment*," we might say. If a discourse is truly inconsistent, then an inference that goes outside the frame would be recognized as legitimate if it were proposed. The repairman asserts "The lamp is up above the stove" in a frame in which inferences are drawn from it according to the perceptual criterion, and the perceptual criterion only. But if someone were to say, "This means that the ray from the stove to the lamp is parallel to the ray from the stove in my West Coast mansion to the lamp above it," no one would reply, "We don't mean up in *that* sense." The reply would be, "That's an odd thing to mention, though true." This contrast will be important when we come to distinguish my analysis of knowledge-talk from contextualist analyses.²⁸

3. Practices, Frames, and an Aporia

²⁷ In fact, these utterances tend to create the appropriate contexts. When apartments are being discussed, the context is such that something counts as big if it is big for an apartment or dwelling; when cats are being discussed, the context is such that something counts as big if it is big for a cat or pet.

²⁸ Thanks to Kevin Scharp for discussion of the points in this and the preceding paragraphs.

If knowledge-talk is inconsistent, knowledge ascriptions will have effective contents only if they take place in appropriate frames. These frames will come from workable practices that shield us from the inconsistent consequences of the Knowledge Principles. And these practices must be widespread and robust. We speak of knowledge all the time, and it rarely leads us into trouble. So an account of knowledge-talk on which it is governed by inconsistent rules must respect the fact that these inconsistencies rarely arise in practice. Most knowledge ascriptions must be locatable within one frame or another, and it must be rare to switch between frames in a way that leads to inconsistency.

My suggestion is this: The frames are determined by the purpose of the knowledge ascription. Often, when we say “S knows/doesn’t know that p,” we care only whether S has true belief that p. (In fact, we presuppose that p, and care only whether S believes it.) Other times, the speaker is concerned with how well justified the subject’s belief is, because she is concerned with whether the subject would be a good source of information, given the concerns of the people involved in the current conversation. In other cases we use knowledge ascriptions to assess the rationality of the subject herself. How well justified the subject is matters because it allows us to evaluate whether the subject was rational to act on the justification she has. Each of these practices of knowledge ascription corresponds to a frame in which the effective content of knowledge ascriptions depends on how much justification is required given the purpose of the knowledge ascription. Most knowledge ascriptions will depend on the standards required by a single person’s interests or for a group of people whose interests may be assumed to require only a single standard. (I will discuss the details of these frames in section 5.)

For knowledge-talk to be workable with this system of frames, it must be the case that a knowledge ascription made within one frame does not usually form the basis for inferences within another frame; or that if it does, the inferences made within that other frame do not lead to any blatant falsehoods. Trouble will arise when an ascription made within one frame is recalled in another frame, and the customary inferences for that frame lead to falsehood. Take the following dialogue:

(Bank Reversal) [1] Sasha: Do you know the bank's hours?

[2] Helga (who has been to the bank three Saturdays ago): I know that the bank is open Saturday.

[Time passes and Helga writes a check that will not clear if she does not deposit her paycheck by Monday.]

[3] Sasha: You'd better deposit your paycheck. Do you know if the bank is open Saturday?

[4] Helga: No, I don't know. I'd need to check it hasn't changed its hours.

[5] Sasha: So earlier, when you said that you did know, you were wrong.

[6] Were you lying or mistaken?²⁹

Helga's original knowledge claim [2] is made when the discussion concerns whether her information is good enough for her or Sasha to act on. Her disclaimer of knowledge [4] is made when the discussion again concerns whether her information is good enough for her to act on, but now better information is required. So the frame has shifted with the shift in Helga's situation. When, in [5], Sasha invokes the old knowledge claim, it would be legitimate to apply a variation of the Testimony Principle to it, that if Helga knew that

²⁹ Inspired by Stanley's "Zoo" dialogue (Stanley 2005, p. 52), which deals with a shift in what possibilities are salient rather than the ascriber's practical stakes.

p and she remembers her previous belief *ceteris paribus* she still knows that p .³⁰ Then it would be legitimate, and customary in this frame, to apply the Practical Environment Principle and conclude that Helga's information is good enough for her to act on. Since Helga's information is not good enough, Sasha can legitimately conclude that Helga's previous knowledge claim was wrong. Then, in [6], Sasha switches to evaluating Helga's rationality and probity, and draws a negative conclusion. The negative conclusion is wrong, but the frame shifts lead inexorably to it, once Sasha has perversely decided to bring up Helga's old knowledge claim and use it for a purpose other than figuring out what Helga is to do now.

The inconsistency in our knowledge-talk comes out here in that Helga is backed into a corner. None of the following responses seems entirely apt:

(Disclaimer) Helga: I didn't say that I knew the bank was open Saturday!

(Confession) Helga: What I said was wrong, and I wasn't deliberately deceiving you, so I must have been mistaken.

(Positive Claim) Helga: Before I knew that the bank is open Saturday, but now I don't know anymore.

These three claims respectively violate the Disquotational Principle, the Practical Environment Principle with respect to Helga's earlier self (her earlier knowledge claim was based on evidence sufficient for the environment she was in), and the Parity of Evidence Principle. They seem to be respectively recommended by the contextualist, the relativist, and the sensitive invariantist.³¹ And they all sound strange. Perhaps

³⁰ See Burge (1993) for some analogies between testimony and memory. Even if you do not think the analogy goes deep, a Memory Principle could still be plausibly be added to the Knowledge Principles.

³¹ Hawthorne (2004, pp. 159-60) suggests that reactions like *(Positive Claim)* are not dictated by sensitive invariantism. By the standards of the later context, Helga does not know that the bank is open

(*Confession*) sounds best, but it does seem wrong for Helga to admit a mistake; her earlier assertion was perfectly proper, and she has not discovered any new evidence against it.

This aporia by itself does not show that knowledge-talk is governed by inconsistent rules. We might feel it less costly to acknowledge that one of (*Disclaimer*), (*Confession*), and (*Positive Claim*) is true than to say that knowledge-talk is inconsistent.³² I will argue that knowledge-talk is inconsistent by developing a model for a similar inconsistent discourse. This model is a world whose inhabitants have no pressing reason to invent the notion of time zones. In that world, I will claim, time-talk will be governed by inconsistent principles very like the Knowledge Principles. Time ascriptions will have three main purposes: describing how things are with the subject of the time ascription, describing how things are with the ascriber or serving as a guide for her, and describing how things are with the hearer or serving as a guide for her. These are analogous to three purposes that knowledge ascriptions might have: to evaluate the subject's rationality, to evaluate whether the subject might be a good informant for the speaker, and to evaluate

Saturday. She therefore does not know that her earlier self knew that the bank is open Saturday even by the standards that were in force for her earlier self; even if she knows that her earlier self's belief met the relevant epistemic standards, she does not know that her earlier self's belief was true. If knowledge is the norm of assertion, this means that Helga later is not in a position to *assert* that her earlier self knew, even if her earlier self did know. Hawthorne observes, however, that this will not explain Helga's willingness to assert that earlier she did *not* know (Hawthorne 2004, p. 162ff), and DeRose (2005) has criticized his attempt to explain this willingness in terms of a tendency for speakers to overproject their ignorance.

I suggest in the text that Helga should be reluctant to admit a mistake, which might suggest that the negative assertion objection would not arise. (I do not think it does entirely preempt the objection; it is natural for Helga to say that she never knew, even if it is not natural for her to own up to being mistaken in her earlier assertion. The point is that Helga is backed into a corner.) Even so, another objection arises. On Hawthorne's account, it would seem natural for Helga to say "If the bank *is* open Saturday, then I knew it earlier." She does know that, if the bank is open Saturday, then her earlier self's belief met the relevant epistemic standards and *ex hypothesi* was true. But in fact this would not be a natural thing to assert. See the discussion at <http://mattweiner.net/blog/archives/000190.html>. (See also (Weiner forthcoming) for arguments that knowledge is not the norm of assertion.)

³² For one of these claims to be true, we must have a certain degree of 'semantic blindness' (see Hawthorne 2004, p. 107ff, describing an argument from Schiffer 1996). DeRose (Bamboozled) argues that a certain degree of semantic blindness is inescapable. I will return to the question of semantic blindness at the end of section 5.

whether the subject might be a good informant for the listener or for whoever else may pick up on the knowledge ascription. The model world will be set up so that it is easy to assign effective contents to most time-talk, and so that aporias rarely arise. After presenting my model, I will argue that our knowledge-talk is set up the same way.

4. Asteriska

The world I will describe, Asteriska, is so-called because of its shape: It is shaped like an asterisk, spanned from north to south by high mountain ranges.³³ The mountains are hard but not impossible to traverse, so people live in the valleys between them and don't have much to do with people in other valleys. People far apart within a valley frequently communicate by telephone and FM radio, but talk between valleys is only carried out by a few hobbyists using shortwave radios. As with us, time measurements are meant to keep track of how far the day has progressed, so that the sun is overhead roughly at noon. All the clocks in a single valley are set to the same time, perhaps by a centralized radio broadcast; the valleys are narrow enough so that the sun is roughly overhead everywhere in the valley when the clocks in the valley read noon. Clocks are too big to carry. On rare journeys from one valley to the next, travellers lose track of time in the mountains and, in the next valley, ask the locals what time it is.

I stipulate that Asteriskan time-talk is governed by three Asteriskan Time Principles, analogous to the three main Knowledge Principles. Corresponding to the Practical Environment Principle, which ensures that knowledge has practical application for the

³³ The mountain ranges need not be evenly spaced.

subject, we have a principle ensuring that time ascriptions describe the way things are for the subject of the ascription:

(Chronological Environment Principle) The statement “S Φ s/ Φ ed/will Φ at noon” is true iff S Φ s/ Φ ed/will Φ more or less when the sun is directly over S’s head, correcting for latitude. Other time-ascriptions are determined by dividing the period from noon to noon into twenty-four hours.

“It is n o’clock” is treated as though the speaker is the implicit subject, so an utterance of “It is noon” counts as true according to this Principle iff the sun is more or less over the speaker’s head.

Corresponding to the Parity of Evidence Principle, which says that the evidence that suffices for knowledge for one person suffices for knowledge for another, we have a principle assuring that the time that counts as noon for one person counts as noon for another:

(Simultaneity Principle) If S and T were to say “It is n o’clock” simultaneously, then S’s statement would be true iff T’s were.³⁴

The Disquotational Principle is as before:

(Disquotational Principle) An utterance of “It is n o’clock” is_{tenseless} true iff at the time of the utterance it is_{tenseless} n o’clock.

The Chronological Environment and Simultaneity Principles lead to inconsistency if applied to people in different valleys, as the Practical Environment and Parity of

³⁴ Bracketing questions of tolerance, according to which it might be true by one standard but not by another to say “It is three o’clock” at 3:04.

Evidence Principles lead to inconsistency when applied to people with different practical stakes.

Another stipulation: The Asteriskan language has no resources for localizing time ascriptions. “It’s four twenty-three here” sounds as odd to an Asteriskan as “It’s four twenty-three at this velocity” sounds to us. (As we will discuss, specialists might develop a vocabulary to localize time ascriptions, but it won’t be part of ordinary time-talk.)

These stipulations about Asteriskan time-talk make sense only if they could lead to a viable practice; otherwise the Asteriskans would develop other ways of talking. But Asteriskan time-talk as I have described it will be perfectly viable. To begin with, the vast majority of Asteriskan utterances are made by a person in some valley to another person in the same valley, about people in that same valley. These will be the assertions with the most practical value. If Alice says to Sarah, “Janet will eat lunch at noon,” the effective content is that Janet will eat lunch when the sun is overhead in the valley all three inhabit. If they want to meet for lunch, this assertion will be a useful guide.

Even when the speaker, subject, and audience are all in different valleys, trouble will be rare. So long as the conversation sticks to one purpose, the time-talk can be assigned an appropriate frame. Suppose that Alice and Kim in their separate valleys are using the shortwave to discuss Natasha in yet another valley. If the conversation concerns Natasha’s habits and lifestyle, then Alice’s assertion “Natasha will be up at 6 a.m.” will serve as the basis for inferences based on the Chronological Environment Principle, so Kim can infer something about where the sun is in relation to Natasha when Natasha awakes. Kim will be unlikely to use the Simultaneity Principle to infer that she or Alice

could truthfully say “It is 6 a.m.” when Natasha wakes, because the conversation isn’t about them.

Another conversation might concern Alice’s own lifestyle. Suppose that as soon as Natasha awakes she will contact Alice, and Alice is complaining about how early she must get up for this. She says, “Natasha will be up at 6 a.m.” Since the conversation concerns Alice, it is natural for Kim to use the Simultaneity Principle to infer that Alice could truthfully say “It is 6 a.m.” when Natasha awakes, and to apply the Chronological Environment Principle to this utterance of Alice’s to infer something about where the sun is in relation to *Alice* when Natasha awakes. It is not natural for her to apply the Chronological Environment Principle to infer that Natasha is an early riser, because the conversation is not about Natasha. Similarly if the conversation is about Kim’s habits.

When an inter-valley conversation sticks to the concerns of one particular person, the effective content of an assertion of “It is n o’clock” in the conversation is that it is n o’clock where that person is.³⁵ Aporia can result when the conversation switches from one person’s concerns to another’s. Even then, things will be all right as long as assertions made within one frame are not used as the basis of inferences within another.

Take the following dialogue:

(Asteriskan time-shift)

[1] Kim: Has Natasha been sleeping late?

[2] Alice: She woke up at ten this morning. She told me so; she turned on the time broadcast first thing in the morning.

[3] Kim: Have you been waking up early yourself?

³⁵ “It is n o’clock where that person is” would be a nonsensical statement in Asteriskan, but recall that effective contents are discussed only in the metalanguage, not in the discourse itself.

[4] Alice: I woke up at eight.

[5] Kim: So you woke up before Natasha. You must have been awake when Natasha tried to raise you on the shortwave.

[6] Alice: No, when Natasha tried to raise me I was still asleep.

[7] Kim: But you just said that you woke up at eight and Natasha woke up at ten! Isn't eight o'clock before ten?

Alice's utterance [2] is meant to illuminate Natasha's habits, which ordinarily means that its effective content is that Natasha woke up when it was ten where she was (as we would say in the metalanguage). Alice's utterance [4] illuminates her own habits, so it should have a different frame, and its effective content is that Alice woke up when it was eight where she was.

With [5] and [7], however, Kim invokes the Simultaneity Principle. If Alice could truly say "It is eight o'clock" when she woke up, then Natasha could have truly said "It is eight o'clock" at the same time. Applying the Simultaneity Principle to assertions made in different frames leads to an aporia.³⁶ None of Alice's available responses are satisfactory:

(Asterisk-Disclaimer) Alice: I didn't say Natasha woke up at ten.

(Asterisk-Confession) Alice: I said Natasha woke up at ten, but I must have been wrong.

(Asterisk-Positive Claim) Alice: Natasha woke up at ten, and I woke up at eight, but Natasha woke up before I did.

³⁶ In explaining frames I argued that outside-the-frame inferences are legitimate but unnatural. In this conversation Kim's use of the Simultaneity Principle is natural. That, however, is because no single frame can be assigned to this entire conversation. Recall that frames are associated with successful practices that employ the inconsistent discourse. This conversation could not be part of any successful practice. The point is that, given Asterisk life as I have described it, such conversations will be extremely rare.

As in (*Bank Reversal*), (*Disclaimer*) violates the Disquotational Principle. It will be completely incomprehensible unless Kim is familiar with contextualist theories of time ascription. (*Positive Claim*) sounds just wrong about the way time works; ten isn't before eight. It violates either the Simultaneity Principle or basic facts about the number line. Most likely, if Alice and Kim are not aware of the inconsistencies in their time-talk, they will opt for (*Confession*). But, according to the Chronological Environment Principle, (*Confession*) is wrong; Natasha did wake up at ten where she was (as we would say). (*Confession*) also requires the judgment that Natasha was lying or mistaken when she said she awoke at ten, and this is wrong.

The analogy with our knowledge-talk should be clear. (*Asteriskian Time-Shift*) is an aporia like (*Bank Reversal*); the analogous responses are available, and they fail in analogous ways. To establish the inconsistent character of our knowledge-talk, I will argue the conditions for knowledge-talk are suitable for an inconsistent discourse, in the way that Asteriska is suitable for inconsistent time-talk. Asteriskian time-talk, I have argued, can only develop the way it has because most conversation takes places within a single valley, and inter-valley conversations generally do not switch from one purpose to another. Our knowledge-talk, I will argue, is the same way. The speaker, hearer, and subject of the discussion will usually all be in a practical environment that constrains them to the same evidential standard. When they use different standards, the conversation usually sticks to a single purpose in a way that prevents confusion from arising. But when a conversation switches from one purpose to another, an aporia can result, in which inferences that we recognize as legitimate lead to a contradiction.

5. How Knowledge-Talk Works

In section 3, I claimed that a knowledge ascription is usually made with one particular purpose, and that this purpose determines the ascription's effective content. In particular, if the subject's degree of justification is relevant at all, there will be one person whose interests determine how much justification is needed for knowledge; or there will be several people whose interests are relevant, but their interests will all call for the same level of justification. Thus confusion will be avoided, except in the rare cases where the parties require different levels of justification and the conversation shifts from a purpose requiring one level of justification to another purpose requiring a different level.

Note first that much of the time, assertions of "S knows that p" don't require that S have any particular level of justification. It matters only that S believes that p, where the truth of p is presupposed. If John Dillinger asks Homer Van Meter, "Do the Feds know that we're hiding out here?" and Van Meter says "No," Dillinger will be unimpressed if Van Meter later explains (truly) "I knew all along that the Feds *thought* we were hiding out here, but I also knew they had no good reason to think so." Similarly, if we say "N percent of United States citizens know that Canada is the United States' largest trading partner," we are reporting that N percent of people believe that Canada is the United States' largest trading partner; we do not particularly care if they arrived at that belief by a lucky guess or by relying on an unreliable source. Such ascriptions are made within a frame in which no one's practical rationality is at issue, so people who make these ascriptions will not usually use the Practical Environment Principle to infer that the

knower has any particular degree of justification.³⁷ The other principles might be used or not; it hardly matters, since they will all be satisfied degenerately. (For instance, if *any* amount of evidence suffices for knowledge, then if S and T have the same amount of evidence for p, S knows iff T does; and this holds even if S and T don't have the same amount of evidence.) If we want to assimilate these knowledge ascriptions to other knowledge ascriptions, we can say that the appropriate standard for all parties is one according to which no evidence is needed for knowledge.

In other conversations, however, knowledge ascriptions do invoke the subject's degree of justification. This is particularly likely when the word 'know' is stressed; if we are certain that Hannah believes truly that the bank is open Saturday, we may still ask, "But does Hannah *know* that the bank is open Saturday?" We are concerned with whether Hannah's evidence meets a certain standard. This concern will typically not be idle; we have some purpose in wanting to know whether Hannah's evidence measures up. We may be concerned with whether Hannah's beliefs and actions are rational. We may be concerned with whether it would be rational for us to rely on Hannah's word that the bank is open. We may be concerned with whether a third party, perhaps our audience, would be rational to rely on Hannah's word. As remarked at the end of section 3, these three purposes are analogous to the three purposes of Asteriskian time-talk: concern with how it is with the subject, with the speaker, and with the hearer.

It might seem that the subject, speaker, and hearer will usually have different standards for knowledge; if, for instance, it is much more important to the speaker than to the subject to have a true belief about whether the bank is open Saturday. On the

³⁷ Though there is this sense in which the Practical Environment Principle will succeed: S ought to act on the assumption that p in the sense that acting on the assumption that p will in fact lead to the best outcome, since p is true.

contrary, most knowledge ascriptions will take place in a setting where the same standards apply to all parties. Rarely will we ask whether S knows that *p* out of mere academic concern for S's rationality. The person who says that S knows that *p* is usually concerned with whether S is an adequate source of information, for the speaker or for the addressee or for some other party who might be drawn into the conversation.³⁸ If S is a potential informant, the rationality of her acting on the assumption that *p* no longer depends on what actions she is planning to take on her own behalf. For one of her potential actions is telling us or our friends that *p*. If she is to be a cooperative conversationalist, she should not in fact tell whoever's asking that *p*, unless her evidence is good enough for whoever's asking. ("I'm satisfied that the bank is open Saturday; but *I'm* not going to go bankrupt if *I* don't get my paycheck deposited, am I?") So S's stakes in the question whether *p*—the stakes of the subject of the knowledge ascription—will be brought into line with the stakes of the ascriber and her audience.

In such a case it is as if the subject, the ascriber, and the addressee are in an extended and partially potential conversation, whose purpose is to gather information suitable for one particular person to act on. The standards for all three parties depend on the standards appropriate to this purpose. We will apply the Testimony Principle and perhaps the Parity of Evidence Principle; but insofar as we apply the Practical Environment Principle to anyone other than the person who seeks the information, we are

³⁸ Compare (Craig 1990), which argues that the reason we have to develop a concept of knowledge is to identify people who would be good informants on the subject of whether *p*. Someone who merely has a true belief whether *p* may not be someone we have any reason to ask whether *p*, but someone who knows that *p* will be more likely to have an identifiable characteristic that marks her out as a good informant.

This account of knowledge, Craig emphasizes, will not provide a sharp analysis of necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge. In this I think Craig's account is compatible with mine, in predicting that in some cases knowledge attributions would lead to confusion. We can see the Practical Environment and Testimony Principles as capturing what it takes for someone to be a useful informant, while the Parity of Evidence and Disquotational Principles capture what it takes for knowledge to be objectivized in the sense Craig discusses (p. 88 and *passim*).

applying it with respect to the practical question of whether the subject should pass her information along to that person. This use of the Practical Environment Principle sets the same standard of knowledge for everyone. It will not lead to a contradiction even when the Testimony and Parity of Evidence Principles are also used.

In rarer cases our concern with whether S knows or knew *is* merely academic. Still, the purpose of our academic knowledge ascription may determine its effective content. Suppose that you and I are considering whether Leila *knows* that the bank is open Saturday; we have no stake in the bank's being open, but are merely concerned with whether Leila is behaving rationally. Then we will use the Practical Environment Principle as applied to Leila, and we will conclude that she does know, since her evidence is good enough for her purposes. We will not be tempted to continue by using the Parity of Evidence Principle to conclude that we know that the bank is open on the same evidence as Leila, and then to use the Practical Environment Principle to conclude that we would be rational to act on that assumption. Our interest being academic, we are not considering acting on that assumption.

Academic cases can also call for standards that depend on the ascriber's stakes rather than the subject's. Suppose that Lola is in a low-stakes situation but (unlike Leila) has no evidence concerning the bank's hours. She cannot find Hannah, but she knows that Hannah was at the bank three weeks ago, and she is wondering whether Hannah *would* be useful to her if she were available. "If the bank is open Saturday, Hannah knows that it is," Lola says. Our interest (as evaluators of this ascription) is in whether Lola is being rational; we are not concerned with using her or Hannah as an informant about the bank. (We already know that the bank is open Saturday, and that Hannah was there three

Saturdays ago.) Since Lola can't find Hannah, Hannah is not in a position where she might have to decide whether to tell Lola that the bank is open. So Hannah isn't in an extended or potential conversation with Lola, and her practical environment with respect to the bank's hours may well differ from Lola's.

Still, if we are concerned with Lola's rationality, we should consider whether it would have been wise for her to take Hannah's word concerning the bank's hours. Since it would have been, we conclude that Lola's conditional knowledge ascription is effectively true, even if Hannah is in a high-stakes situation. It is natural to use the Practical Environment Principle as applied to Lola to set the standard for what evidence suffices for knowledge, and to use the Testimony Principle to conclude that Hannah knows if her evidence meets Lola's standard. Our focus on Lola's rationality keeps the effective content of the knowledge ascription dependent on Lola's stakes. It is not natural to apply the Practical Environment Principle to Hannah and to conclude (wrongly) that she would be rational to act on the assumption that the bank is open, because we aren't focused on Hannah's predicament.

If the focus of the conversation switches, we may be led into error. Suppose that, after focusing on Lola's rationality, we start considering Hannah's rationality. Then it becomes natural to use the Practical Environment Principle to infer that, since Hannah knew the bank was open Saturday, she would be rational to rely on that assumption.³⁹ This conclusion is false; Hannah is in a high-stakes situation and needs better evidence than what she has. We have been led into error because we took a knowledge ascription that was made when we were evaluating Lola's rationality and applied it when we were

³⁹ The Disquotational Principle also comes into play here. We have concluded that Lola's statement "If the bank is open Saturday, Hannah knows that it is" is true; we can use the Disquotational Principle to infer from this that if the bank is open Saturday, Hannah knows that it is.

evaluating Hannah’s rationality. These two purposes fall under different frames. It is no surprise that switching from one frame to another leads to false conclusions.

This case does not clinch the argument for inconsistent semantics for knowledge. The ascriptions, I think, do not raise particularly strong intuitions about whether they are correct. After all, our initial evaluation of Lola’s statement was doubly moot, in that we have no stake in whether the bank is open and Lola herself knows that she will not be able to use Hannah as an informant. If a theory rules out one of the inferences on the way to the conclusion that Hannah would be rational to rely on the bank’s being open, that is not a high cost.⁴⁰ However, there can be rare cases in which the conversation shifts between frames even though its purposes are not academic. In such cases the resulting confusion is harder to dismiss. Consistent semantics for knowledge will have trouble with these cases precisely because they predict that one continuation should be judged to be unequivocally true, rather than acknowledging all options to be unsatisfactory.

Take this case (adapted with modifications from DeRose (2005, pp. 186, 196)):

(Interrogation) The police are questioning Thelma about John’s whereabouts the day before, when a horrible crime was committed. She saw John in the office and accordingly says (a) “I know that John was in the office yesterday.” The police, wanting another witness, ask her (b) “Does Louise know that John was in the office yesterday?” Thelma knows that Louise has the following evidence that John was in: someone

⁴⁰ For instance, a sensitive invariantist would reject Lola’s assertion that Hannah knows that the bank is open if it is. The contextualist can say that there is a context shift when we shift our attention from Lola to Hannah, so that beforehand we can truly say that both Lola and Hannah know, and afterward we can say truly that neither knows. The relativist can say that the standard for ascription is determined by our stakes rather than the subjects’, and perhaps can say with the contextualists that our stakes shift when we shift our attention.

told her so, and she saw John's hat in the hall. For the police's purposes, this evidence is not enough to count Louise as knowing that John was in. So Thelma says, (c) "Louise doesn't know that John was in." The police then play Thelma a wiretap recording of Louise in a bar saying, (d) "I know that John was in the office yesterday." (e) "Is one of you lying?" they ask.⁴¹

In the interrogation room, the conversation has high stakes. The purpose is to gather information that is good enough for the police to act on, and the police's actions can have grave repercussions. Accordingly Thelma's knowledge claim (a) would be inappropriate if Thelma's evidence were not so strong. Thelma's decision whether to tell the police that she knows John was in is a high-stakes decision, and the Practical Environment Principle dictates that she say she knows only on strong evidence. With (b) and (c) the focus remains on the police's needs, and again high standards are required for a knowledge ascription. It is natural to use the Practical Environment Principle with respect to the police to determine that the police know only if they have very good evidence, and then to use the Parity of Evidence Principle to conclude that Louise knows only if she has very good evidence.⁴²

⁴¹ In DeRose's second presentation of the case, Thelma is in the bar (and not yet in a high-stakes context) when Louise says "I know." So she knows of Louise's utterance and the police do not. I have changed the example so that the police know of Louise's utterance and Thelma does not, until they tell her. I have also added the last question (e) from the police. DeRose uses the example to criticize Hawthorne's attempt to explain the tendency of people in high-stakes contexts to say that people in low-stakes contexts lack knowledge (if their evidence is good enough for low-stakes but not high-stakes cases). Hawthorne (2004, p. 163) suggests that people in high-stakes contexts tend to overproject their ignorance onto others, but DeRose points out that in this case Thelma has no ignorance to project. See also note 31 above.

⁴² We might also use a modification of the Testimony Principle. If the police didn't already know that John was in (from Thelma's testimony), they could come to know it from Louise if Louise knows; but by the Practical Environment Principle the police could only gain knowledge from an informant if the informant has very good evidence; so Louise knows only if she has very good evidence.

But (*d*) is an utterance from another conversation, with another purpose, in another frame. Let us suppose that Louise is justifying some action she took based on the assumption that John was in, where it was perfectly rational for her to rely on the assumption given her evidence. (Say, she didn't lock the office door, where nothing terrible would come to pass were it left unlocked overnight.) Then Louise's assertion of (*d*) is focused on her own rationality, and it is appropriate for her to apply the Practical Environment Principle to herself. Thus she need only meet low standards in order to claim knowledge.⁴³ In the bar, there is little risk that Louise's knowledge claim will be used to justify a false conclusion. When her claim is introduced in a different conversation with a different purpose, however, it can create confusion. Thus it is natural for the police to use the Disquotational Principle to conclude that Thelma and Louise have contradicted each other, and to ask who is wrong (as in (*e*)). (Note also that interrogations are unusual conversations, in which it is natural to bring in assertions from other conversations in order to catch the witness in a contradiction.)

As in our previous aporias, none of Thelma's available responses is entirely satisfactory.

(Interrogation-Disclaimer) Thelma: Louise didn't say she knows John was in.

(Interrogation-Confession) Thelma: Louise does know; I was wrong when I told you she didn't know.

(Interrogation-Ratting) Thelma: Louise doesn't know; she must be lying

⁴³ She can even make a stressed knowledge claim: "I *know* John was in the office."

or mistaken.⁴⁴

(Interrogation-Positive Claim) Thelma: Louise does know, but I was

telling the truth when I said she didn't know.

(Disclaimer) and *(Positive Claim)*, I think, would make the police extremely impatient (but see below). I don't recommend trying them during an actual police interrogation, unless your lawyer is very good. To anyone who is not familiar with esoteric philosophical considerations, Louise did say she knows, and utterances (c) and (d) contradict each other. (That's the Disquotational Principle.)

(Confession) and *(Ratting)* make more sense on their face, but they are still unsatisfactory. *(Confession)* may lead to things gratuitously going less well for Thelma than they ought. She was neither lying nor making a mistake when she told the police that Louise didn't know. Furthermore, *(Confession)* is uncooperative given the purposes of the conversation. Louise would not be an adequate informant for the police. *(Ratting)* is more cooperative; it lets the police know that they should not be relying on Louise. Still, it sells Louise short to say that her utterance (d) was false. Certainly Louise is not lying, and she does not seem to be mistaken about anything relevant. She is not mistaken about her evidence or the extent to which it supports the conclusion that John was in the office. So *(Ratting)* results in a conversation that makes sense on its face, but that in fact leads the participants into error. (Compare the discussion of *(Asteriskian-Confession)* in section 4.)

⁴⁴ *(Ratting)* has no analogue in *(Bank Reversal)* or *(Asteriskian time shift)*, because those cases involve a single asserter whereas *(Interrogation)* involves two. In all three cases, there are two assertions, and *(Confession)* involves repudiating the earlier one. In *(Interrogation)* the earlier assertion was the speaker's own and the later assertion is someone else's, so the speaker has the option *(Ratting)* of saying that the other asserter was wrong. In the other cases, there is no more motivation for the speaker to repudiate her own later assertion than to repudiate her earlier assertion.

It seems as though subject-sensitive invariantism predicts that (*Confession*) is true,⁴⁵ prototypical contextualism predicts that (*Disclaimer*) is true, and prototypical relativism predicts that (*Ratting*) is true.⁴⁶ DeRose here defends contextualism by arguing, in effect, that (*Disclaimer*) is not as odd as might be thought. His target is Hawthorne's Disquotational Schema for Knowledge, according to which a speaker who sincerely utters 'S knows that *p*' expresses the belief of *S* that she knows that *p*.⁴⁷ Hawthorne says:

If, for example, someone sincerely utters 'I know that I will never have a heart attack', we have no hesitation whatsoever in reporting the contents of his mind by claiming that he believes that he knows he will never have a heart attack. That is how the verb 'knows' seems to work (Hawthorne 2004, p. 101).

⁴⁵ Subject-sensitive invariantism predicts that (*Confession*) is true here even though it predicts that (*Positive Claim*) is true in (*Bank Reversal*). This is because in the two cases the knowledge ascribers are differently related to the subjects of the ascriptions. In (*Bank Reversal*), Helga said that she herself knew that the bank was open when she was in a low-stakes situation and denied that she herself knew that the bank was open when she was in a high-stakes situation. In both cases the speaker is the subject, so in both cases the speaker's stakes line up with the subject's, and subject-sensitive invariantism predicts that both ascriptions are true, as in (*Positive Claim*). In (*Interrogation*), Louise says that she herself knows in a low-stakes situation, and Thelma says that she herself knows in a high-stakes situation; both claims accord with the subject's stakes. Thelma, in her high-stakes situation, also says that Louise does not know. According to subject-sensitive invariantism, this is incorrect, since Louise is in a low-stakes situation. Thus Thelma ought to retract that knowledge ascription, as in (*Confession*). The difference arises because in (*Interrogation*) the ascription being retracted is one in which the speaker is not the subject.

⁴⁶ By "prototypical" contextualism and relativism I mean versions of those theories on which the speaker's or evaluator's stakes, respectively, determine the standard of knowledge to be applied. As DeRose points out (2005, p. 189), contextualists can hold that the subject's stakes helps determine the standard for knowledge in a context; presumably relativists can avail themselves of similar maneuvers. This will not necessarily resolve the oddity of the dialogue in (*Interrogation*), however; if anything it seems to push the contextualist toward (*Positive Claim*) and the relativist toward (*Confession*).

DeRose may hold that in cases like this the standard for knowledge is ill-defined; in (DeRose 2004) he argues that in some cases knowledge ascriptions have no truth-value because the participants in the conversation adopt different standards. In that case my view would be much like his, as discussed in section 6. (DeRose's prescription for how Thelma should resolve the confusion in (*Interrogation*) is much like mine.)

⁴⁷ More precisely, if 'S' is a term referring to *s*, then the speaker expresses the belief of *s* that she knows that *p*; see Hawthorne (2004, p. 101) for more detail. Issues of reference can be bracketed in (*Interrogation*), as it is common knowledge among everyone that 'Louise' refers to Louise, etc.

DeRose, discussing his version of (*Interrogation*), asks of Thelma's conversation with the police:

Now, in this elevated context, will Thelma display 'no hesitation whatsoever' in reporting, 'Louise believes that she knows'? Intuitively, it actually seems that it would be wrong for Thelma to say that in her highly charged context; it is *certainly* not so clearly the right thing to say as to occasion 'no hesitation whatsoever in saying it (2005, p. 197).

DeRose is considering a case in which Thelma knows about Louise's knowledge claim ((*d*) in my example) but the police do not.⁴⁸ In such a case it seems as though Thelma would probably do best to deny that Louise knows, ignoring Louise's knowledge claim. Even in (*Interrogation*) as I have set it up, with the police aware of Louise's claim, it seems right for Thelma to hesitate before saying, "Yes, Louise does believe that she knows."⁴⁹ But Thelma should also hesitate before saying "Louise does not believe that she knows." As I said above, the police would understandably balk at that, faced with Louise's statement, "I know that John was in the office." Neither alternative is entirely satisfactory. This indicates that we are dealing with an underlying inconsistency in our 'knowledge' talk rather than with a phenomenon that can be accommodated in a consistent semantics. The Disquotational Principle yields an inference that ordinarily would be recognized as legitimate; but in a case such as this, where it leads to inconsistency with other things we already accept, we may hesitate about it.

⁴⁸ See note 41 above for the differences between DeRose's case and my own. At this point in his paper DeRose is also considering a case in which Thelma's evidence is no better than Louise's.

⁴⁹ This is a point against relativism; on relativism Louise has expressed the belief that she knows (*tout court*), but that belief is false when evaluated in Thelma's context.

This hesitation resembles the inescapable semantic blindness discussed by DeRose (forthcoming). DeRose is here defending contextualism against the charge that it means we must be blind to the meaning of our own words: Contextualism entails that a speaker in a high-stakes setting who says “John doesn’t know” is not contradicting a speaker in a low-stakes setting who says “John knows,” yet those assertions seem contradictory. (This objection is made by Schiffer (1996) and Hawthorne (2004, p. 107ff).) DeRose points out that, confronted with appropriate high-stakes and low-stakes cases, some people will argue that these assertions really don’t contradict each other—even people who are not already committed to contextualism. He concludes that on every theory someone turns out to be semantically blind. Yet this situation is what we would expect if knowledge ascriptions are governed by inconsistent Principles. Under ordinary circumstances fluent speakers accept any inference that is in accord with the Knowledge Principles. When they are shown how those Principles conflict in a certain case, they are driven to demur from one Principle or another. Since all the Principles really are intuitive in virtue of our competence with the word ‘know’, there is no consensus about which one must be rejected, and different people demur from different Principles. Any consistent theory rejects some Principle and so makes someone semantically blind.⁵⁰

We have not yet exhausted the options for consistent semantics of knowledge, however. A consistent semanticist might say that there is no such thing as knowledge *tout court*, only knowledge by one standard or another. Even unadorned knowledge ascriptions invoke an implicit standard set by the context of ascription. Ordinarily we get

⁵⁰ Note that the situation that leads to semantic blindness is literally academic. The students are brought to compare knowledge ascriptions made to a single subject by two ascribers in high-stakes and low-stakes environments; but the students themselves aren’t thinking of using the subject or ascribers as informants, and they have no practical interest whatsoever in the proposition at issue.

along fine leaving the standard implicit, but an aporia like (*Interrogation*) forces us to make it explicit. Such semantics are not unusual for context-sensitive terms; ordinarily we get along fine with the word ‘tall’, but when confusion threatens we may have to say something like ‘tall for a basketball player’. In the next section I will argue that, though this is the best consistent semantics for ‘knows’, the inconsistent semantics is still better. ‘Knows’ does not behave like a context-sensitive term with an implicit standard. Making a standard explicit is what we ought to do when confusion threatens, but this is abandoning our old knowledge talk rather than uncovering its hidden depths.

6. Standards for Knowledge

What should Thelma say? She can make the standard of knowledge explicit: As DeRose suggests, she can say something like “Louise said that she knows, but she was speaking casually.” Or she might say something like “Louise wasn’t saying she knows by standards that will hold up in court.” She might even discuss Louise’s evidence as such: “Louise saw John’s hat in the hall, and I told her she was in, but she didn’t actually see him herself.” Notice that this last remark steps out of the discourse of knowledge. Thelma is no longer trying to use the word ‘know’ to sum up Louise’s epistemic state; rather she is explaining Louise’s degree of justification and letting the police decide what to do with it.

I claim that adverting to explicit standards of knowledge is similarly stepping out of the discourse of knowledge *tout court*. It is necessary only when our usual talk of knowledge has failed and the speaker needs to use a special device to say how good the subject’s evidence is. However, there is a contextualist account on which adverting to

explicit standards is continuous with our knowledge-talk, because the standards were implicit all along. This is the consistent theory that is closest to mine, but I will argue the inconsistency theory is still superior.⁵¹

On this contextualist theory, every knowledge attribution refers to a standard for knowledge, implicitly or explicitly. Ludlow (2005) suggests that the verb ‘know’ is L-marked (Chomsky 1986) for a standard of knowledge: The verb selects for phrases denoting standards for knowledge, which may be pronounced or unpronounced. Compare “John cut the salami with a knife,” in which the instrument phrase ‘with a knife’ is pronounced, and “John cut the salami,” in which, Ludlow says, arguably “there is still some sense in which an instrument phrase is present, even if unpronounced” (p. 19). In this case ‘cut’ is L-marked for instrument phrases. If ‘know’ is L-marked for a standard-of-knowledge phrase, then when the phrase is unpronounced the standard of knowledge may well be determined by the context of the ascription.

A contextualist account with different standards of knowledge may seem to give a natural explanation for much of our practice of knowledge ascription. Talk of different standards for knowledge is neither bizarre-sounding nor restricted to philosophers. Ludlow provides many examples in which non-philosophers advert explicitly to standards of knowledge: ‘known by any objective standards’, ‘know with some confidence’, ‘know with complete certainty’, etc. If knowledge ascriptions have implicit standards, then some of the Knowledge Principles will come out false. The Practical Environment Principle will be violated whenever the standard set by the context differs from the standard appropriate to the decision the subject faces, and the Disquotational

⁵¹ However, on this version of contextualism many knowledge ascriptions will lack truth-value, so it may not count as a consistent theory at all. See note 38 below.

Principle will be violated whenever the standards set by the context in which “S knows that *p*” is uttered differ from the standards set by the context in which “R says that S knows that *p*” is uttered. But this may not seem a great cost. For the Practical Environment Principle, perhaps whenever the subject’s choice is at issue the standards set by the context line up with the subject’s stakes.⁵² As for the Disquotational Principle, the contextualist (see Cohen 2005) might argue that something similar happens with ‘large’; we tend to report utterances of “S is large” by saying “R says that S is large,” making the standard for size explicit only when confusion threatens. And few deny that ‘large’ is context-sensitive.⁵³

Nevertheless, there is reason to deny that “S knows that *p*” has an implicit standards parameter the way “S is large” does. To begin with, the Disquotational Principle really does cause more trouble for contextualism about ‘knows’ than about ‘large’.

Disquotational reports of ascriptions of largeness will be comfortable when the standards for largeness are the same as in the original context, or when the reporter does not know that they have changed.⁵⁴ If I say “My pet Allie is large” when talking with other cat owners, it is not natural to report my utterance by saying “He said that his pet Allie is large” when talking with friends who are having difficulty finding a place to live with their greyhounds, malamutes, horses, and elephants. If my original utterance is quoted, everyone will understand that I didn’t mean that Allie is large compared to these animals.

⁵² DeRose suggests this (2005, p. 189).

⁵³ Cappelen and Lepore (2005) deny it, but few others.

⁵⁴ Cohen (2005) uses an analogy with ‘tall’ to argue that a disquotational schema for ‘knows’, like a disquotational schema for ‘tall’, must be formulated metalinguistically in a contextualist-friendly way. My contention is that this overestimates how comfortable we are in rejecting disquotation for ‘know’ when the context has shifted, as opposed to our comfort with rejecting disquotation for ‘tall’ and ‘large’ when the context has shifted in a relevant way.

If we were to construct an aporia based on shifting standards for ‘large’, analogous to (*Interrogation*), it would be easily resolved by an invocation of standards. Even a straightforward denial of the disquotational report might suffice—“I didn’t mean that Allie is *large* large.” The denial of disquotation will not serve so well for knowledge reports, except in a context where it is clear that standards for knowledge are artificially raised. (Such contexts include philosophical discussions of contextualism and skepticism, in which “I didn’t mean I *know*” sounds more appealing than it would be in the interrogation room.) Even after Thelma explicitly invokes Louise’s lower standards for knowledge, it would not be surprising if she encountered skepticism; “But she did say she *knew*” is more plausible than “But you did say Allie is *large*.”⁵⁵

In general the standards for knowledge are not to the fore the way the standards for largeness are. It is obvious that Allie can be large in one comparison class and small in another, and there are as many modifiers as you like to express standards for largeness. (“Large for a cat,” “large for a mammal,” “large for a pet,” etc.) It is not nearly so evident that there will be situations where we want to say that Leila knows something that Hannah does not, even though they have exactly the same evidence for it. These situations only arise when we apply knowledge ascriptions across frames, and might never be encountered in an ordinary lifetime. Furthermore, though there are locutions for

⁵⁵ Here I am disagreeing with Ludlow’s reply to Hawthorne’s disquotational argument against contextualism. Consider a hearer in a high-standards context who believes that a speaker in a low-standards context has sincerely expressed a true belief by saying “I know that *p*.” Hawthorne (2004, p. 102) argues that the hearer must accept that the speaker knows that *p* (by disquotation); but from the high-standards context this is not possible. Ludlow argues that in fact there is no inconsistency between the statement “You know you have feet” that the hearer might derive disquotationally and the statement “You don’t know you have feet” that she might utter in her high-standards context, because on contextualist semantics these statements are not inconsistent. But this does not solve the problem contextualism faces. The statements *appear* to be inconsistent, and a theory on which they are consistent ought to explain this appearance. Contextualism for ‘large’ is more comfortable than contextualism for ‘know’ because it is easier to block disquotation for ‘large’.

specifying standards of knowledge, there are not as many as one might expect if every knowledge ascription has an implicit place for a standard. I cannot think of a phrase for the standards in play in the low- and high-standards bank cases; ‘by ordinary standards’ and ‘by extraordinary standards’, perhaps?

More importantly, if standards are implicit in knowledge ascriptions it ought to be easy to get people to make them explicit. But it is harder to elicit standards for knowledge explicit than comparison classes for size. If someone says “My car is large,” the question “Large for what?” makes sense on its face, even if the answer is “For a car, dummy.” The problem with the question is that the answer is obvious. If a non-philosopher says “My car is parked outside,” and someone asks, “By what standard do you know?” , I think the speaker will be nonplused. As Schiffer says, “no ordinary person who utters ‘I know that *p*,’ however articulate, would dream of telling you that what he meant and was implicitly stating was that he knew that *p* relative to such-and-such standard” (1996, pp. 326-7).⁵⁶ Even if ordinary speakers needn’t be able to articulate a theory on which there is always an implicit speaker, if the theory is true an ordinary knowledge-ascriber ought to be able to understand if not to answer the question “By what standard?”⁵⁷

These considerations suggest that explicit invocation of standards is a departure from ordinary knowledge-discourse rather than an elaboration of something already implicit in it. There is another, non-linguistic reason to think so. When we give an explicit standard

⁵⁶ MacFarlane (2005a, p. 209n6) also argues that mastery of the word ‘know’ does not require the ability to specify an epistemic standard.

⁵⁷ If a speaker says “John cut the salami” but does not know with what, she may be flummoxed when someone asks “With what?” She may not be able to supply the phrase “With something or other.” But this is different from the confusion that “By what standard?” would cause; the speaker will recognize the question “With what?” as legitimate.

of knowledge, knowledge-talk loses much of its utility. Ascriptions of knowledge *tout court* ordinarily allow us to bracket the exact level of evidence that is required for the purposes of the discussion. If we say that S knows, we can infer as necessary that S has good enough evidence for her purposes (by the Practical Environment Principle) or for our purposes (by the Parity of Evidence and Practical Environment Principles); exactly how good is good enough need not arise. When we say “S knows by x standards,” it raises the question whether knowing by x standards is good enough for S’s purposes or for ours. In this it is akin to explicitly citing S’s evidence; it gives us more information about exactly how well supported S’s belief is, while raising the question of whether that degree of support is adequate to our purposes. And, as we have observed, to explicitly cite S’s evidence is to abandon the discourse of knowledge. (I will return to this point in the last section, when I discuss how these results call into question the importance of knowledge in epistemology.)

Still, the contextualist theory in which standards are always implicit is not so far from the inconsistency theory.⁵⁸ On the inconsistency theory, explicit talk of standards is useful for clearing up confusions that arise from knowledge-talk’s inconsistency. As such, it is also a useful tool for theoreticians of knowledge-talk. Even if my theories were

⁵⁸ The standard would be set by the context in which knowledge is ascribed, but not necessarily by the ascriber’s stakes in the matter. As DeRose (2005, p. 189) points out, in some contexts it is appropriate to use standards that depend on the subject’s stakes. These will be the contexts that I have described as taking place in a frame in which the subject’s rationality is at issue. On DeRose’s view (DeRose 2004), the standards are determined by the standards the speaker actually intends, not the ones that would be appropriate to use. If, however, standards were determined by what was appropriate, then there would be some contexts in which more than one standard is appropriate; this would happen whenever (as I have described it) an assertion made in one frame is used as a premise in another. Such cases could lead to truth-value gaps as described in (DeRose 2004). (I discuss these gaps more in (Weiner manuscript).) A contextualist theory with standards sometimes dependent on the subject’s stakes and with abundant truth-value gaps might account for all the data discussed in this paper. However, that theory’s complexity might outweigh its consistency as a theoretical advantage (and there might be some doubt whether a theory with so many truth-value gaps should count as a consistent one).

cried on every corner, ordinary speakers would continue to use unadorned knowledge-talk, because it is the most efficient way of communicating what needs to be communicated. But epistemologists, who need to know exactly what knowledge-talk is getting at, need to talk about standards for knowledge. (As an Asteriskan who wants to say exactly what is going on in time-talk is well advised to develop a theory of time zones.) The difference between the inconsistency theory and the contextualist theory is in whether the standards are considered to have been implicit in ordinary knowledge-talk all along, or whether bringing in standards is considered stepping outside of ordinary knowledge-talk. The theory of knowledge-talk I have set forth suggests not only that bringing in standards is stepping outside of ordinary knowledge-talk, but that epistemologists should step outside of ordinary knowledge-talk and concentrate on the different standards for knowledge.

7. The Epistemological Unimportance of Knowledge

Again, the inconsistency of our knowledge-talk does not mean that it does not serve well enough for our ordinary purposes. It serves better than any alternative would. On any particular occasion, to say that S knows that *p* economically conveys that S's evidence that *p* is good enough, given the purpose of the conversation. To constantly specify what S's evidence is good enough for, or what S's evidence is, would be a waste of breath.⁵⁹ So my account of our knowledge-talk does not require a radical revision in

⁵⁹ Furthermore, saying "S knows that *p*" provides an economical way of conveying several other desiderata about S's epistemic situation: that S believes that *p*, that S's belief is true, and perhaps that S's belief is not Gettierized where Gettierization would be harmful. (See Williamson's discussion of the burglar (Williamson 2000, p. 62).) Which of these desiderata is conveyed will again depend on the purpose of the conversation. But this essay has focused only on the variation for strength of evidence required for

ordinary practice.⁶⁰ It does suggest that in problem cases we should drop talk of ‘knowledge’ or make explicit our standards for knowledge, but these will be peripheral cases in which ordinary practice itself breaks down.

However, there are radical implications for the practice of epistemology. The inconsistent term that is useful enough for everyday practice will not do for in-depth analysis of our epistemic situation. Epistemology should aspire to ask general questions such as “How well positioned is someone in certain circumstances (and thus with certain evidence) to believe certain propositions?” An answer in terms of when S knows that *p* will not do if ‘knows’ invokes inconsistent commitments. Epistemologists should strive rather for precise answers that can be applied without restriction, such as “S’s evidence for *p* meets standard X.” The question of when we can properly say “S knows that *p*” belongs to linguistics or philosophy of language; it is a question about when a certain sentence can be used rather than about fundamental epistemological concepts.

Epistemology proper will concern itself with questions about strength of evidence and justification and the like.

There is a methodological point here about the philosophical importance of ordinary linguistic practice. Suppose S believes that *p*, and we wish to evaluate this belief. There are various ways we can do so. We could evaluate how much evidence S has for *p*, or whether believing that *p* conduces to S’s personal goals, or whether S’s belief that *p* constitutes knowledge. Why should the latter evaluation have been taken to be central to

knowledge; discussing the other desiderata that are conveyed would require considering more Principles and frames.

⁶⁰ Contrast MacFarlane on eliminativism about knowledge; see note 2 above.

epistemology?⁶¹ There is an appealing answer: The concept of knowledge is entrenched in our ordinary practices. We speak of what people know all the time. Epistemologists also speak of beliefs being justified or pragmatically useful, but these philosopher's terms are hardly in common use. If knowledge were not important, it seems, we would have stopped speaking of 'knowledge' long ago. So 'knowledge' has a presumption of importance that other epistemological terms lack.

If this is our motivation for inquiry into knowledge, it must begin with the way we ordinarily use the word 'know'. If entrenchment in ordinary practice is what gives knowledge the presumption of importance, then our account of knowledge must stick close to ordinary practice in order to retain the benefit of this presumption. That is why arguments over contextualism, invariantism, and relativism must start from our ordinary practice and must view failures to capture ordinary practice as costs of a theory. If, as I have argued, ordinary practice is in fact inconsistent, that deals a blow to the hope that we can capture an epistemologically important concept by looking at ordinary practice. There is no single well-defined concept underwriting that practice. Any attempt to turn knowledge into a single well-defined concept will move it away from the ordinary use that convinced us of its importance.

This argument against the epistemological importance of knowledge faces an objection: If our use of 'knowledge' is inconsistent, how have we maintained it for so long? To answer this, I have had to tell a story about how we almost always avoid inconsistency in our actual practice of using the word 'know', and why it is better for us to continue using 'know' rather than any consistent candidate replacement. This story

⁶¹ "Because epistemology just *is* the study of knowledge" isn't a good answer; it just pushes the question back to "Why should anyone have taken epistemology to be particularly important?"

undermines the presumptive importance of knowledge, because it explains why our discourse involving ‘know’ might be widespread successful even though knowledge is not a well-defined, important epistemological concept. The word ‘knowledge’ is used in several overlapping practices of evaluating beliefs: practices that focus on the subject’s practical rationality, practices that focus on the subject as a useful informant for the speaker, practices that focus on the subject as a useful informant for someone else. Together these practices do not define a unique concept for epistemological investigation. If the entrenchment of our ‘knowledge’ discourse motivates the investigation of any concepts, they are the concepts involved in the *effective* contents of knowledge ascriptions in various frames. When we need a consistent concept in the vicinity of our knowledge-talk, we cite the subject’s evidence or standard-of-knowledge; we cannot cite the concept of knowledge *tout court*.

Ordinary practice, however, is not the only thing that can motivate studying a concept of knowledge. We can begin with the idea that certain properties of beliefs are valuable in themselves and take a belief with these properties to count as knowledge.⁶² For instance, we might hold that it is valuable if a belief can be seen to be true through the use of reason alone, or if it can serve as an indubitable, indefeasible, incorrigible foundation for other beliefs; and that only such beliefs should count as knowledge. Then epistemologists should investigate which beliefs do have these properties. The importance of this investigation in no way relies on our actual practice in using the word ‘know’; whatever makes knowledge so defined valuable makes it important to investigate what counts as knowledge. As my examples suggest, these approaches are much more

⁶² Compare Jonathan Kvanvig’s distinction between linguistic and values-based approaches to epistemology at http://bengal-ng.missouri.edu/~kvanvigj/certain_doubts/index.php?p=291.

conducive to skepticism than the approach that begins with our entrenched discourse. An approach based on our entrenched knowledge-talk cannot overturn all of our knowledge ascriptions; an approach based on something else can.

My account of knowledge might seem to neutralize even skepticism deriving from this value-based approach. I have argued that we can and do get along without a consistent conception of knowledge; our 'knowledge' discourse invokes various epistemic standards, none of which counts as knowledge *tout court*. So it might be thought that an argument that we don't *really* know as much as we think should no longer have the power to worry us. Our beliefs may not meet the standards that skeptics demand, but they meet the standards actually use in our practices. Even if knowledge can be defined in terms of a certain value, that value itself is not epistemologically important.

I think we should resist this reply to skepticism. For the worries that lead the skeptic to deny that our beliefs match her standard for knowledge can also lead her to deny that our beliefs really live up to the standards implicit in our practices. The skeptic may begin with the thought that we should believe only what we know. We respond: You should believe when your evidence is enough to match the appropriate standard, given by the practice of which your belief is part. The skeptic responds: But is your evidence really enough to meet that standard? Does sensory evidence meet that standard if you have not ruled out that you are deceived; does inductive evidence meet that standard if you have not shown induction itself to be reliable? The skeptic was at first worried that our beliefs lack whatever value would qualify them as knowledge. Now she is worried that a similar value is necessary for our beliefs to be appropriately justified, and that our beliefs lack that value. We have not made any headway by switching our attention from knowledge.

And it is a virtue of my account that it does not offer an easy answer to the skeptic. The skeptic is worried that our beliefs are not as they should be. The worry remains the same basic worry whether it is couched in terms of knowledge or justification. So it is not to be avoided simply by minimizing the importance of knowledge *per se*, any more than it is to be defeated by pointing out that our practice is to say that people know even when the skeptic denies knowledge.⁶³ We may choose to avoid the skeptical challenge in other ways, perhaps by denying the importance of the values the skeptic adverts to. But this will require confronting the skeptic directly, rather than hiding behind our ordinary use of the word ‘knowledge’.⁶⁴

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⁶³ Feldman (1999) gives a similar criticism of contextualism.

⁶⁴ An earlier version was given as a talk at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; thanks to the audience for many helpful questions and comments. Thanks also to Ram Neta, Anil Gupta, Jon Matheson, Andy Egan, Kevin Scharp, Ted Hinchman, Luca Ferrero, and Elizabeth Scarbrough.

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