

Knowledge Attributions, Contextualism, and Invariantism

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Abstract

In *Knowledge and its Limits (KAIL)*, Timothy Williamson argues for the view that “only knowledge warrants assertion” (2000, 243). Call this the knowledge norm of assertion. Several philosophers including DeRose, Hawthorne, and Stanley, agree that if the knowledge norm is true, then knowledge itself depends on stakes, since warranted assertability seems to change with what is at stake if the proposition in question is true (1992; 2003; 2005). This brings us to the question: stakes for whom? DeRose maintains that knowledge depends on the stakes for the speaker of the knowledge attribution, arguing for Epistemic Contextualism (2002, 187). However, Hawthorne and Stanley disagree, contending that it is the stakes for the subject of the knowledge attribution which is relevant, arguing for Subject Sensitive Invariantism (2003, 157; 2005, 85). While the Contextualist and the Invariantist are armed with responses against each other’s view, I suspect that Russell’s and Doris’ indifference cases might break the impasse in favor of the Contextualist (2008, 432). This paper will thus attempt to show that the knowledge norm of assertion leads us to Contextualism rather than Subject Sensitive Invariantism, by comparing how Contextualism and Subject Sensitive Invariantism fare against Russell’s and Doris’ Indifference Cases.

Introduction

In *Knowledge and its Limits* (KAIL), Timothy Williamson argues for the view that “only knowledge warrants assertion” (2000, 243). Call this the knowledge norm of assertion. Several philosophers including DeRose, Hawthorne, and Stanley, agree that if the knowledge norm is true, then knowledge itself depends on stakes, since warranted assertability seems to change with what is at stake if the proposition in question is true (1992; 2003; 2005). This brings us to the question: stakes for whom? DeRose maintains that knowledge depends on the stakes for the speaker of the knowledge attribution, arguing for Epistemic Contextualism (2002, 187). However, Hawthorne and Stanley disagree, contending that it is the stakes for the subject of the knowledge attribution which is relevant, arguing for Subject Sensitive Invariantism (2003, 157; 2005, 85). While the Contextualist and the Invariantist are armed with responses against each other’s view, I suspect that Russell’s and Doris’ indifference cases might break the impasse in favor of the Contextualist (2008, 432).

This paper will thus argue that supposing that knowledge is a norm of assertion (KNA) leads to Contextualism (CXM) rather than Subject Sensitive Invariantism (SSI), by:

1. Providing an account of KNA,
2. Restating DeRose’s argument for CXM which relies on:
 - a. KNA, and;
 - b. The Context Sensitivity of Assertions (CSA).
3. Presenting Bank Cases to motivate CSA,
4. Considering SSI as an alternative explanation of Bank Cases and extending the case to Third Person Knowledge Attributions which Invariantists find problematic for CXM, as well as a Contextualist response,
5. Presenting Russell’s & Doris’ Indifference Cases as an objection against SSI, and;

6. Showing that CXM fares better than SSI overall in accommodating “no-knowledge” intuitions regarding Indifference Cases.

§1 - Defining Terms: Knowledge as the Norm of Assertion

Williamson takes knowledge to be a constitutive norm of assertion, insofar as abiding by such a norm is essential to the act of assertion (2000, 243). In particular, Williamson identifies KNA as a wide scope norm that ‘One must ((assert p) only if one knows that p)’, whereby the modal ‘must’ denotes an obligation according to the rules of assertion that one act in a way that abides by the conditional “assert p only if one knows that p” (2000, 243). DeRose recognizes that Williamson here intends KNA to just be constitutive of the practice of assertion and thus KNA yields necessary and sufficient conditions for warranted assertions according to the practice of assertion, as follows (2002, 180):

KNA: One is positioned well enough to assert that P if and only if (iff) one knows that P.

When I make reference to KNA, I will have DeRose’s simpler biconditional account in mind.

§2 - The Argument: From Assertion to Contextualism

For our purposes, we can understand Contextualism as follows:

CXM: The truth conditions for “I know that P” vary with context (of the utterance, and thus the context of the attributor of knowledge).

Treating “being in a position to warrantably assert that P” as equivalent to “being well positioned enough to assert that P”, DeRose’s argument for CXM on the basis of KNA can be formalized (2002, 187):

1. If the standards for when one is in a position to warrantably assert that P vary with context, then the truth conditions for “I know that P” also vary with context.

(From KNA)

2. The standards for when one is in a position to warrantably assert that P do indeed vary with context. (CSA)

3. Therefore the truth conditions for “I know that P” also vary with context.

(CXM, from 1, 2 Modus Ponens)

KNA states that one is in a position to warrantably assert that P iff one knows that P. If there are some contexts whereby one has warrant to assert that P, and other contexts whereby one does not, then whether one knows that P corresponds to just those contexts in which one has warrant to assert that P. Thus, KNA tells us that the truth conditions for “I know that P” track the variability of the warrant for asserting that P. Thus premise 1 follows straightforwardly from KNA.

For the purposes of this essay, I suppose that KNA is true. And since premise 1 follows from KNA, I take no issue with premise 1. The question then is whether premise 2 (CSA) is true. To motivate CSA, I will examine the paradigmatic Bank Cases which seem to support the observation that CSA is true, leading us to CXM from KNA.

§3 - The Paradigm Thought Experiment: Bank Cases

Consider these Bank Cases as follows (DeRose 1992, 913; Russell & Doris 2008, 429-30):

LOW Realizing that it isn't very important that their pay cheques are deposited right away, Hannah says, 'I know the bank will be open tomorrow, since I was there just two weeks ago on a Saturday morning. So we can deposit our pay cheques tomorrow morning'.

HIGH Since [Hannah and Sarah] have an impending bill coming due, and very little in their account, it is very important that they deposit their pay cheques by Saturday. Hannah notes that she was at the bank two weeks before on a Saturday morning, and it was open. But, as Sarah points out, banks do change their hours. Hannah says, 'I guess you're right. I don't know that the bank will open tomorrow'.¹

Let us call P the proposition that "the bank will be open tomorrow", and let us stipulate that LOW and HIGH take place on a Friday.

Intuitively, LOW and HIGH are cases which demonstrate how pragmatic concerns seem to *encroach* onto the purely evidential factors we might conventionally consider relevant when making knowledge attributions. In LOW, Hannah's low stakes as to whether P seem to impose relaxed epistemic standards. As such, granting that P is true, it seems that we are intuitively able to grant that Hannah's claim to know that P in LOW was felicitous, since she was aware that her claim to *know that P* in LOW was supported by her evidence of her remembering that the bank opened on a Saturday two weeks ago. In LOW, it seems that her evidence is knowledge forming by relaxed standards.

¹ These Bank Cases are from DeRose 1992, but they have since become ubiquitous in the literature, appearing in virtually all discussions of the implications of pragmatic encroachment for the knowledge norm. Thus, I standardize the cases by drawing upon how they are presented in Russell and Doris 2008, which is itself taken from Stanley 2005. .

However, in HIGH, Hannah's high stakes as to whether P seem to impose stricter epistemic standards. It thus seems that we are also intuitively able to grant that Hannah's claim to *not know that P* was felicitous, because the consequences of making an error in HIGH are much more severe, given their impending bill. Hannah's evidence being the mere recollection *as of* the bank being open on a Saturday two weeks ago does not seem to yield knowledge in these stricter standards. Furthermore, granting that KNA is true and knowledge is factive, that means that the appropriateness of Hannah's utterances in both cases entails that Hannah knows that *she knows that P* in LOW, but knows that *she does not know that P* in HIGH. From this, we can infer that it would have been infelicitous for Hannah to have claimed to know that P in HIGH (since she does not know that P in HIGH).

If the only relevant difference between LOW and HIGH is the context which has low vs high stakes for Hannah respectively, then it does seem that CSA is true—since Hannah is warranted in asserting that she knows that P in one context but not the other. If so, then we can, as per the argument above, conclude from premises 1 and 2 that CXM is true. Thus, it seems that we have strong reasons to think that supposing that KNA is true leads us to CXM.

§4 - An Objection: SSI and Third Person Attributions

However, here, Invariantists such as Hawthorne and Stanley might protest that this move comes too quick. While they agree that Hannah is warranted in asserting that one knows that P in LOW but not in HIGH, the Invariantists deny that this is due to the standards for asserting "S knows that P" varying with context.

Instead, the Invariantists may say that it is the practical factors such as the stakes for the *subject* S as to whether P, which determines whether S indeed knows that P, and *not the*

context in which the knowledge attribution is made (Hawthorne 2003, 157; Stanley 2005, 115). Call this view, Subject Sensitive Invariantism (SSI).²

Like CXM, SSI similarly predicts that Hannah is warranted in asserting that she knows that P in LOW but not in HIGH, but makes such a prediction not on the basis of the stakes for Hannah-qua-attributor in the context of the assertion, but on the basis of the stakes for Hannah-qua-subject who is the referent of the assertion. For SSI, it is really the change in pragmatic factors such as stakes for the *subject* of the knowledge attribution which is enacting the change in assertability conditions, not the change in context of the assertion.

SSI and CXM come apart when the subject of the knowledge attribution is not the one making the knowledge attribution. Consider a case which has *high stakes* for the attributor and *low stakes* for the subject (ie. HIGH-A-LOW-S):

HIGH-A-LOW-S Since [Hannah and Sarah] have an impending bill coming due, and very little in their account, it is very important that they deposit their paychecks by Saturday. Hannah calls up Bill on her cell phone, and asks Bill whether the bank will be open on Saturday. Bill replies by telling Hannah, ‘Well, I was there two weeks ago on a Saturday, and it was open.’ After reporting the discussion to Sarah, Hannah concludes that, since banks do occasionally change their hours, ‘Bill doesn’t really know that the bank will be open on Saturday’.³ (Stanley 2005, 115; Russell & Doris 2008, 430)

² For simplicity, I treat Hawthorne’s Sensitive Moderate Invariantism (SMI) and Stanley’s meta-epistemological constraint on accounts of knowledge, namely Interest Relative Invariantism (IRI), as broadly falling under the category of Subject Sensitive Invariantism.

³ Though the HIGH-A-LOW-S scenario is from Stanley 2005, as mentioned above, I draw upon how they are presented in Russell and Doris 2008 for presentational purposes.

This is a case whereby the stakes are high for Hannah (and not for Bill), and Hannah asserts that Bill does not know that P.

CXM predicts that Hannah's attribution of ignorance to Bill is felicitous (and, given KNA, accurate) since in Hannah's context, it is important that P is true, and it seems that Bill's evidence does not satisfy Hannah's standards given the weight of pragmatic concerns for Hannah. However, SSI predicts that Hannah's ignorance attribution is infelicitous (and, given KNA, inaccurate), because it is not the stakes for Hannah which are relevant in determining whether Bill knows that P—it is the stakes for Bill which are relevant. If, it matters very little to Bill as to whether P is true, then if Bill believed that P on the basis of remembering that the bank was open two weeks ago on a Saturday, that could very well amount to knowledge, regardless of how important it is for Hannah that P.

Here, SSI attempts to provide us with an error theory to explain away CXM's intuitions. While Hannah's compulsion to let her own pragmatic concerns encroach on her judgement of Bill's knowledge was understandable (given our psychological compulsion to project our own stakes and anxieties onto others), this was a mistake. Strictly speaking, in order for Hannah's assertion to objectively describe Bill's epistemic state, Hannah should not have taken her personal stakes to be relevant, but take *Bill's stakes to be relevant* instead. With this in mind, since the stakes as to whether P are low for Bill, it seems that Bill's evidence which consists of his remembering that the bank was open on a Saturday two weeks ago satisfies Bill's own standards set by the stakes for him as to whether P (regardless of whether Hannah might be personally dissatisfied with this standard). Thus, according to the Invariantist, CXM predicts the wrong result which SSI gets right.

However, this intuition is precisely what DeRose explicitly denies applies here. DeRose considers a different case of HIGH-A-LOW-S (2004, 347-8). In DeRose's example, the coworkers Louise and Thelma are initially in a low stakes situation and conclude on the

basis of John's hat being where it usually is when John is in, that they know that John is in the office, in the context of attempting to settle a \$2 bet. Louise remains in the low stakes situation, but when Thelma is later put into a high stakes situation whereby she is being interrogated by the police as to whether Louise knows that John is in the office, DeRose finds, *contra* SSI, that it is infelicitous for Thelma who is in a high standards context to use low standards to assess whether Louise knows that John is in the office, *even if the stakes as to whether John is in the office are low for Louise*. Furthermore, DeRose argues that Thelma's assertion that "Louise does not know that John is in the office", is felicitous (and thus, accurate, given KNA) which shows that the pragmatic factors in the context of the utterance *are* relevant in determining the standards for knowledge attributions. Thus according to the Contextualist, it is SSI, not CXM which predicts the wrong result.

Personally, I am persuaded by DeRose's argument. It seems to me implausible to deny that Thelma's assertion that "Louise does not know that John is in the office" is felicitous especially in the context of her dialogue with the authorities. Suppose that Thelma asserted that "Louise knows that John is in the office", and the authorities interview Louise and find out that Louise's evidence (that John's hat was where it usually is when John is in) is just the same as Thelma's—the same evidence which, in the context of Thelma's conversation with the authorities, Thelma regarded as not sufficient for constituting knowledge. If this were to happen, I would imagine that it would be fair to fault or rebuke Thelma for being an uncooperative conversational participant. The upshot I gather from this thought experiment is that when one is in a HIGH-A-LOW-S situation, it seems that participants of the conversation are not interested in whether the subject has knowledge simply insofar as the subject's standards are concerned—they are interested in whether the subject has knowledge according to the standards agreed upon by the participants of the conversation!

But of course, here the Invariantist can flat-footedly respond by again simply denying that our intuitions capture what is truly appropriate to assert by explaining how our intuitions are misled by using their error theory and this leads us to an impasse.

Who is right? SSI and CXM present us with different predictions in the case of third person knowledge attributions, because they disagree on whose stakes are relevant for a knowledge attribution to be felicitous and accurate. Here, both CXM and SSI have explanations for why their view is correct while the other is wrong, and while I am persuaded by DeRose's arguments, it seems that appeals to such intuitions may still be unconvincing to those sympathetic to SSI.

§5 - A Tiebreaker: Indifference Cases

Hopefully then, the Indifference Cases presented to us by Russell and Doris (2008, 432) might help break the tie between the two theories. Consider:

RICHBOY

Richie, the trust fund baby, is wondering whether to brave the Friday afternoon lines, or return to the bank Saturday (late) morning, and deposit a cheque he has just received from his parents. His roommate, Tad, lounging in the passenger seat of Richie's Hummer, points out that banks sometimes do change their hours, and given that their rent is due, failure to make a deposit will likely result in yet another bounced cheque to their landlord, whose patience has already been strained to breaking point. Richie responds, 'Chill, dude, I know the bank will be open, I was there last week, and even if I bounce a cheque, my parents and I can buy that dump of an apartment building'. Inhaling deeply, Tad nods his agreement. (Russell & Doris 2008, 432)

RICHBOY is a case whereby *the stakes are low* for Richie who is both the subject and the attributor of knowledge in this example, for two reasons:

1. Richie's personal values lead Richie to take the stakes to be low, and
2. Richie's wealth does indeed make the stakes low for Richie.

Granting that P is true and that Richie's belief that P was formed based on his evidence, CXM and SSI both predict that Richie may very well know that P since the standards set by the stakes as to whether P for Richie, are low. Nevertheless there still seems to be some intuitive sense in which Richie is being a deficient epistemic agent given how his attitude of indifference and his enormous wealth lead him to be satisfied with a lower standard of evidence for taking P to be true (as compared to non-indifferent, non-wealthy agents).

If RICHBOY is a case whereby the stakes are truly rendered low by Richie's indifferent attitude and Richie's wealth, then we have a counterintuitive feature of pragmatic encroachment accounts that wealth and an attitude of indifference, are knowledge forming (or at least, are conducive for knowledge formation). Russell and Doris concede that RICHBOY is not a fatal objection—Richie's indifference and wealth do not thereby make him omniscient since knowledge still requires satisfying its usual necessary conditions (such as being formed on the basis of evidence). Nevertheless, it remains the case that indifferent attitudes and wealth can bring the standards for knowledge (seemingly unacceptably) low, and thus remains a significant cost to pragmatic encroachment accounts such as SSI. (Russell & Doris 2008, 433-5)

§6 - Expressing Epistemic Deficiency: Who Fares Better?

To accommodate the intuition that Richie is a deficient epistemic agent, the Invariantist may quibble with the details of the case, saying that Richie’s belief that P doesn’t really satisfy all the necessary conditions for knowledge after all, which allows the Invariantist to deny Richie’s claim to knowledge. However, this move will only afford a brief respite, given that Indifference Cases are completely generalizable (SSI’s opponents only need one compelling counterexample example, while SSI must deny all such counterexamples)—to take this route, the Invariantist must provide substantial reasons why Indifference Cases *in general* fail to yield knowledge, but that undermines their goals of accounting for knowledge in low stakes cases.

In contrast, CXM need not resort to denying Richie’s knowledge claim in order to accommodate the intuition that Richie is a deficient epistemic agent, because CXM need not concede that all other observers should also thereby attribute Richie with knowledge (“S knows that P” is after all, context sensitive).

Let us extend the case further, and say that there is another passenger, Dan, seated in the hummer next to Tad. Hearing Richie’s knowledge claim, Dan sniggers at the thought that Richie’s only evidence is his memory *as of* being at the bank last week, recalling that Richie never quite adequately addressed the defeater brought up in Tad’s worry that banks sometimes change their hours. While Richie’s indifference and wealth made Richie careless in his judgement regarding whether Richie should consider such a possibility as being epistemically relevant, Dan thinks the possibility cited by Tad increased the salience of error above the acceptable threshold for knowledge preservation. Dan asserts “No Richie, you don’t really know that the bank will be open tomorrow—not until you know that the bank didn’t change its hours”. Dan is Richie’s acquaintance but not his roommate. It does not particularly matter to Dan whether P is true—Dan has his own place, and thus has no stakes in the matter—but Dan doesn’t think that Richie’s evidence suffices for knowledge.

Dan's assertion expresses a natural "no-knowledge" intuition that Richie does not really know that P. CXM can easily accommodate the felicitousness of Dan's assertions that Richie does not know that P. If we understand Dan's assertions as coming from a context in which higher epistemic standards are set by Dan, it seems reasonable for Dan to judge that Richie's mere recollection that the bank was open last week on a Saturday may not suffice for knowledge in Dan's context. However SSI is unable to make a similar move, given their theoretical commitments. It is, after all, the standards set by the stakes for Richie, as to whether P, which are relevant in determining whether it is true that Richie knows that P, and to use other higher standards to assess Richie would be mistaken (by SSI's own lights). Granting that we have a case of knowledge by indifference, SSI must thus bite the bullet and defend the unintuitive claim that all assertions of the form "S does not know that P" are false.

Notice also that SSI's appeal to their usual error theory against CXM regarding Dan's assertion seems less effective than the previous cases considered because in this case, Dan has no stakes regarding whether P is true. Dan simply judges Richie as not having done his due diligence to verify that P—*not due to anxiety as to whether P*—but in light of Dan's own (reasonable) epistemic practices in general. If SSI maintains that Dan's assertion is false, SSI owes us an explanation which does not rely on psychological projection of stakes or anxieties, but it is unclear what this explanation may be.

Here, the Invariantists may be tempted to retort that CXM is not yet out of the woods given its inability to account for genuine disagreement. In CXM, 'knows' expresses different propositions in different contexts and since Richie claims knowledge in Richie's context, while Dan denies Richie knowledge in Dan's context, their assertions are incommensurate. Dan's assertion of Richie's ignorance would thus fail to express Dan's dissatisfaction with Richie because Dan is "talking past" Richie, so to speak—their assertions are mutually compatible and thus fail to constitute a genuine disagreement.

However, this objection can be met. CXM can explain the apparent disagreement in terms of a metalinguistic move, an attempt to ‘pull’ Richie into Dan’s context in which a higher epistemic standard is in effect. Thus, Dan’s assertion that Richie does not know that P should not be understood as a negation of Richie’s claim to knowledge in Richie’s context, but instead, as an objection to Richie’s use of low standards to assess whether Richie knows that P. The act of asserting Richie’s ignorance imposes Dan’s judgement which clearly relies on different epistemic standards and can be seen as functioning as an appeal to Richie to shift contexts to high standards.

Indifference Cases thus seem to display areas in which SSI’s flat-footed denial of the felicitousness of ignorance attributions (when a subject comes to know by indifference) seem to incur a greater theoretical cost as compared to CXM which accommodates the intuition that ignorance attributions in Indifference Cases are felicitous.

Conclusion

In this paper, I presented DeRose’s argument for CXM from KNA and CSA, as well as Bank Cases which give us strong reason to think that CSA is true. I then considered an Invariantist alternative, SSI, which gives us an alternative explanation of Bank Cases. I discussed the Invariantist challenge of HIGH-A-LOW-S cases, as well as their error theory of the Contextualist explanation, which contends that the speakers in a HIGH-A-LOW-S situation make an error in judgement by projecting their own stakes onto the subject of their knowledge attribution. I then considered a Contextualist response which seems to motivate the intuition that it is infelicitous to judge a subject of a knowledge attribution by low standards when one is in a high standards context. While I was persuaded by the Contextualist response, it seemed that this response might still fail to convince those sympathetic to SSI who deny that such intuitions are trustworthy.

To break the tie, I then considered Russell's and Doris' Indifference Cases which present us with the counterintuitive result that pragmatic encroachment accounts make wealth and indifferent attitudes both conducive to knowledge formation. In this regard, I found that CXM fared better overall because it limited this result to assertions made in the subject's context while allowing for other observers in different contexts to express their dissatisfaction by attributing ignorance to the subject. SSI seems unable to make a similar move due to their commitment to Invariantism and must flat-footedly deny that any such intuitive ignorance attributions are felicitous. Thus, I conclude that supposing that KNA leads us to CXM rather than SSI, all else being equal.

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