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Knowledge and Presuppositions

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter introduces the author's account of the semantics of 'knowledge' attributions: *Presuppositional Epistemic Contextualism* (PEC), according to which the content of 'knows' in a context *C* is determined, in part, by what is pragmatically presupposed in *C*. After developing the Stalnakerian notion of a *pragmatic presupposition*, the chapter makes progress towards a solution of one of the major problems for relevant alternatives versions of contextualism: it provides an account of what it means for a possibility (or an alternative) to be epistemically relevant at a context while at the same time avoiding the objection that 'knowledge' becomes—as Lewis puts it—overly 'elusive'. As a result, this chapter offers a response to the familiar objection to contextualism that, without a precise account of relevance, epistemic contextualism remains unacceptably occult.

'I know the bank will be open tomorrow, since I was there just two weeks ago on Saturday morning. So we can deposit our paychecks tomorrow morning.'

High Stakes. Hannah and her wife Sarah are driving home on a Friday afternoon. They plan to stop at the bank on the way home to deposit their paychecks. Since they have an impending bill coming due, and very little in their account, it is very important that they deposit their paychecks 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 be open tomorrow.'[2]

Our intuitions concerning *Low Stakes* are that Hannah speaks truly when she self-ascribes 'knowledge'. In *High Stakes*, however, our intuitions are reversed: in *High Stakes* our intuitions are that Hannah speaks truly when denying that she 'knows that the bank will be open on Saturday'. EC aims to account for these intuitions by claiming that it is more difficult to satisfy 'knows' in the context of *High Stakes* than it is in the context of *Low Stakes*: even though Hannah is in exactly the same epistemic position towards the proposition that the bank will be open on Saturday in both cases, she nevertheless satisfies 'knows' in *Low Stakes* but not so in *High Stakes*. More evidence or a stronger epistemic position is required for Hannah to satisfy 'knows' in *High Stakes* than in *Low Stakes*.[3]

Examples such as the *Bank Case* have attracted a large amount of critical attention in recent years. In particular, a variety of non-contextualist (p.13) theories have been proposed that are meant to account for the data from the *Bank Case* without appealing to semantic context-sensitivity. *Subject-Sensitive Invariantism*, for instance, claims that knowledge itself—rather than 'knowledge'-attributions—is sensitive to certain factors of the subject's rather than the ascriber's context, and a view that I have elsewhere called *Pragmatic Invariantism* claims that the data from the *Bank Case* is best accounted for by postulating conversational

recently popular views to be mentioned here are *Epistemic Relativism*, according to which 'knowledge'-attributions are assessment-sensitive, and, of course, the formerly default invariantist view—*Moderate Insensitive Invariantism*—according to which Hannah is simply wrong when denying that she 'knows' in *High Stakes*.[5] Finally, it should also be noted at this point that while each of the views just mentioned takes the data emerging from the above cases to be theoretically relevant and in demand of an explanation, those very data have, more recently, been met with increasing scepticism by 'experimental philosophers'.[6]

In this monograph, however, I shall largely ignore the views just mentioned and the methodological criticisms of examples such as the Bank Case by 'experimental philosophers'. While extremely interesting, these views will have to be dealt with on a different occasion in the detail they undoubtedly deserve. Let me, therefore, emphasize again that the primary goal of this monograph is not to deliver a final verdict on EC—a goal that would require a comparative evaluation of all the competing views in the area. Rather, the goal of this monograph is to develop and expand upon a novel account of EC—an account that has not received much attention in the literature as of yet but that is nevertheless exceedingly promising and attractive.[7]

Besides their aim to account for the data from examples such as the *Bank Case*, contextualists have usually also claimed that their theories have (p.14) the explanatory resources to do some interesting philosophical work—namely, to resolve sceptical puzzles.[8] To add this extra bit of explanatory force to their purely semantic claims about 'know', contextualists refer —following Stewart Cohen's (1988) early (and ground-breaking) work on the topic—to an error-theory, according to which sceptical paradoxes arise because speakers are blind towards the context-sensitivity of epistemic terms when considering sceptical arguments.[9] To be precise, the contextualist argues that when we are puzzled by sceptical arguments, we fail to realize that the propositions expressed by their conclusions are perfectly compatible with the propositions expressed by our everyday 'knowledge'-claims.

> One would hope for something similar in the case of 'know'.
>
> (Hawthorne 2004a, pp. 61–2)

As Hawthorne emphasizes, it is not clear how far we can go with the project of providing a recipe book of what determines the content of 'know'. After all, maybe the (Kaplan) character of 'know' is not susceptible to analysis. This is, I take it, to be expected. Nevertheless, Hawthorne is certainly spot-on in demanding some story that is revealing of the mechanisms underlying the contextual shifts underlying the Bank Case data and the contextualist's resolution of sceptical paradoxes: without such a story, contextualism is devoid of real explanatory force and must therefore fail to offer a genuine solution to our problems.

Finally, it should be noted that an account of what determines the 'epistemic standards' at a context is not only of interest to epistemic contextualists, but also—as the above quote from Hawthorne suggests—to subject-sensitive invariantists and epistemic relativists. Since these theorists agree with the contextualist that there is some sensitivity to 'epistemic standards', they will also need an account of this merely metaphorical notion. Thus, subject-sensitive invariantists as well as epistemic relativists will presumably be tempted to make use for their own purposes of the account developed here.

1.2 Knowledge and Relevant Alternatives

To begin our discussion of the semantics of 'knows', let us take a closer look at David Lewis's views on scepticism and contextualism. According to Lewis:

> (L) A subject S

perceptual experiences and memory states. For the purposes
of this book it is instructive to consider this a stipulative

on Saturday—worlds that Hannah can properly ignore in *Low Stakes* but not in *High Stakes*, the relevant worlds being precisely those worlds in which the bank will be closed on

(SI) People sometimes speak truly when they assert 'Nobody knows p' in contexts in which sceptical arguments are discussed.

However, if the semantic value of 'know' can change in a way allowing for both (ASI) and (SI) to be true, why then are we puzzled by sceptical arguments? Lewis replies that the puzzle

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When discussing the notion of a presupposition in a philosophical or linguistic context, Robert Stalnaker's work on the topic comes immediately to mind. A first suggestion might thus be to adopt his rather well- developed notion of a *pragmatic presupposition* for the present purposes. And in fact —as will become obvious later—Stalnaker's notion is ideally suited for putting flesh on the skeleton of a presupposition-based EC as outlined above. Thus, if I am right, the very notion that has application in Stalnaker's accounts of linguistic phenomena as diverse as assertion, sentence presupposition, indicative conditionals, and others also plays a crucial role in the semantics of 'knowledge'-ascriptions.

What, then, is a Stalnakerian pragmatic presupposition? Before answering this question it is imperative to note that Stalnaker thinks of the notion at issue as primitive. Pragmatic presuppositions are, according to Stalnaker, propositional attitudes *sui generis* and as such insusceptible to analysis or definition. However, even though Stalnaker intends the notion to remain ultimately undefined, he offers, throughout his work, several explications of the notion (p.23) that are meant to approximate the concept and give the reader a closer grasp of it. Stalnaker justifies this approach as follows:

> It may be charged that [the concept of a pragmatic presupposition is] too unclear to be the basic [concept] of theory, but I think that this objection mistakes the role of basic concepts. It is not assumed that these notions are clear. In fact, one of the points of the theory is to clarify them. So long as certain concepts all have some intuitive content, then we can help to explicate them all by relating them to each other. The success of the theory should depend not on whether the concepts can be defined, but on whether or not it provides the machinery to define linguistic acts that seem interesting and to make conceptual distinctions that seem important. With philosophical as well as scientific theories, one may explain one's theoretical concepts, not by defining them, but by using them to account for the phenomena.
>
> (Stalnaker 1970, p. 46; cp. also 1974, p. 50)

(PP), presupposing is outside the realm of the voluntary. Is this a problem for my account?

is not and *will not become* common ground after the utterance.
Consider the following dialogue:

Faculty Meeting

A:

I can't come to the meeting—I have to pick up my sister from
the airport.

B:

Hang on; I know that you don't have a sister. You're just
making up a reason to get around the meeting!

C:

That's not true. I have a sister.

B:

No, you don't.

A:

Yes, I do! I just never told you.

C:

Relax! (to A) Independently of whether you have a sister or
not, will you come to the meeting?

A:

PP), A se3 268.56 749.64 Tm( )TjETBT/F1 350 Tf50.03 225 Tf0.084.2 749.64 Tm0.20506 To

that speakers constantly pragmatically presuppose all sorts of propositions that fail to be part of the common ground. Does this intuitively implausible result endanger (PP*)?

To see why it does not, note that the notion of a pragmatic presupposition is a technical notion that does not necessarily coincide with our intuitions about the use of the English word 'presupposition'. Moreover, distinguishing closely between a pragmatic presupposition, which is a behavioural *disposition*, and the behavioural manifestation of a pragmatic presupposition, the implausibility of (PP*) can be explained away: truthful Frank in fact constantly pragmatically presupposes that he has a sister, but he surely does not constantly *manifest* that pragmatic presupposition.

Before moving on, let me briefly outline further the importance and fruitfulness of the notion of a pragmatic presupposition for semantic theory by means of an example. Consider, for illustration, the following pairs of sentences, whose a-sentences intuitively presuppose the propositions expressed by their corresponETBR bsentences

that speakers uttering the a-sentences pragmatically presuppose rather than assert the corresponding b-propositions. In other words, Stalnaker has it that the use of the above a-sentences requires that a given pragmatic presupposition be in place in the context of utterance. When I utter 'The queen of Tuvalu is at home', my utterance requires me to pragmatically presuppose that Tuvalu has a queen: it requires me to behave (and thus to be disposed to behave), in my use of language, as if I believed it to be common ground that Tuvalu has a queen. Note that this is in fact fairly uncontroversial: pragmatically presupposing p is, after all, nothing but a way of behaving, in one's use of language, as if one believed p to be common ground. Thus, whenever one sincerely and literally utters sentences such as those in (2), one pragmatically presupposes the relevant b-propositions. Stalnaker thus has the resources to

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Rule of Presupposition (RP)

If *w* is compatible with the speakers' pragmatic presuppositions in *C*, then *w* cannot be properly ignored in *C*.

Furthermore, I have given substance to (RP) by explicating the notion of a pragmatic presupposition along Stalnakerian lines:

*Pragmatic Presuppositions** (PP*)

x pragmatically presupposes *p* in *C*   *x* is disposed to behave, in her use of language, as if she believed *p* to be common ground in *C*.

Besides differing from Lewis's account with respect to the rules determining the set of possibilities that cannot be properly ignored at a context, the view to be defended in this book diverges from Lewis's in another important respect.[37] To see what I have in mind, note that Lewis's (L) is subject to rather straightforward counterexamples. In particular, note that (L) includes neither a belief condition nor a condition to the effect that one's belief must be properly based for it to qualify as 'knowledge'. Thus, a subject can satisfy the conditions specified by (L) relative to a context *C* while holding her belief that *p* on an epistemically entirely inappropriate basis—such as tealeaves reading or the testimony of an exceedingly unreliable guru. Assuming that a subject basing her belief that *p* in such ways does not satisfy 'knows *p*' relative to any context of utterance, we need to (p.31) amend (L) by supplementing it with an additional constraint ensuring the proper basing of the subject's belief.[38],[39]

I shall therefore, in what follows, assume the following approach to the semantics of 'knows *p*':

Semantics for 'knows p' (L*)

x satisfies 'knows *p*' in context *C*

    1. *x*'s belief that *p* is properly based and

2. *x*'s evidence eliminates all ¬ *p*-worlds, except for those that are properly ignored in *C*.

(L*) will be developed further in the remainder of the book, but the amendments I will propose are of a largely cosmetic nature only. The main idea underlying PEC is accurately captured by (L*), and I shall therefore, in what follows, call the conjunction of (L*), (RP), (PP*), and the remaining Lewisian rules of proper ignoring, that is the *Rule of Actuality, Resemblance, Belief, Reliability, Method*, and *Conservatism, Presuppositional Epistemic Contextualism* or, for short, *PEC*.[40]

Before moving on to the topic of sceptical puzzles, however, it is worthwhile noting that there are further reasons to prefer an account such as (L*)—that is, an account that comprises a proper basing constraint—over Lewis's more simple (L). First, note that, according to (L), we always know what our evidence is, for our evidence eliminates, by Lewis's definition of the notions of evidence and elimination, all possibilities in which we have different evidence than we actually have.[41] This is, of course, an implausible consequence that is avoided by adding

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x satisfies 'knows p' in context C x's evidence eliminates all $\neg p$-worlds that are compatible with what is pragmatically presupposed in C.

Note that (SV) makes a claim about the role of what is pragmatically presupposed in the context of ascription with regard to the truth-conditions of 'knowledge'-attributions: it entails a presuppositional epistemic contextualist semantics of 'knows'. However, note also that (SV) is not a biconditional: it merely explicates a necessary condition for 'knowledge'—or, to be precise, for the satisfaction of 'knows p' in a context C

context. However, for reasons relating to semantic compositionality, it is not, as I argue elsewhere, obvious that an expression that is semantically associated with an aphonic contextually filled argument place does not vary its Kaplan content with context (see Blome-Tillmann ms-a). Independently of these issues, I shall refer in this monograph to 'know' as context-sensitive and, sometimes, as having an unstable Kaplan character.

(2) For the original example see (DeRose 1992). The version quoted here is borrowed from (Stanley 2005, pp. 3–4).

(3) We shall later (Section 1.2) clarify the (at this point deliberately) vague talk of 'epistemic standards' and 'evidence' in this passage.

(4) For a discussion and defence of *Subject-Sensitive Invariantism* see (Fantl and McGrath 2002, 2009; Hawthorne 2004a; Stanley 2005). For *Pragmatic Invariantism* see (Brown 2006; Rysiew 2001, 2007) and, for critical discussion of the view, (Blome-Tillmann forthcoming).

(5) The main advocate of *Epistemic Relativism* is John MacFarlane (MacFarlane 2005, 2011); *Moderate Insensitive Invariantism* is defended explicitly and in detail by Timothy Williamson (2005a, 2005b) and, more recently, Jennifer Nagel (2007, 2008, 2010).

(6) For an interesting discussion see DeRose (2011).

(7) Of course, developing such a coherent and explanatorily powerful version of EC will in itself amount to giving an argument in favour of the view.

(8) The only exception to this claim that I am aware of is (Ludlow 2005).

(9) Cf. (Cohen 1988, p. 106; DeRose 1995, p. 40).

(10) I have in mind DeRose (2009, p. 240), who defends the view that speakers can 'select epistemic standards', and who employs this view in replying to objections to his version of EC. It should be noted that the invocation of epistemic

(18) This strategy, relying on what I have elsewhere called the phenomenon of 'semantic blindness', has been criticized widely, but see (Blome-Tillmann 2008) for a comprehensive defence.
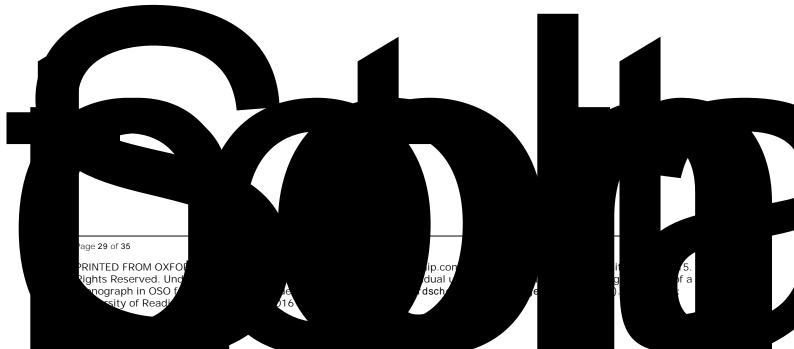
(19) This is particularly absurd in cases in which a participant to a conversation attends to a sceptical possibility in their own thought only, i.e. without mentioning the possibility to other speakers.

(20) (Lewis 1996, p. 559; Lewis's emphasis).

(21) Lewis himself canvasses a normative variant of his position, which, he acknowledges, conflicts with (RA)—namely by modifying (L) so that it ends 'except for those possibilities which we could properly have ignored [if we hadn't attended to them]' (Lewis 1996, pp. 560–1). However, this normative approach effectively eliminates (RA) and thus the contextualist element from Lewis's approach. Lewis's normative approach is to be paired with criteria distinguishing those possibilities that one can properly ignore (or could have properly ignored) in a context from those that one cannot properly ignore (or could not have properly ignored) in a context. In what follows, I offer such criteria.

(22) Jonathan Schaffer (2004a, 2005, 2007) agrees that Stalnaker's notion of a pragmatic presupposition should play a role in the semantics of 'know' when claiming

such Lewisian Rules as Actuality, Belief, and Resemblance, since the context set need not contain actuality, need not correspond to anyone's beliefs, and is not closed under resemblance [. . .]. As such, contextualism would no longer underwrite, e.g. Lewis's solutions to skepticism, Gettier cases, and the lottery paradox, since these require Actuality, Belief, and Resemblance.' (Schaffer 2004a, pp. 99, fn. 27). Considering my above formulation of (RP), however, it is fairly obvious that, *pace* Schaffer, the contextualist *can* deploy Stalnaker's notion of a context set in explicating the notion of proper ignoring. For further discussion of the interaction between (RP) and the remaining Lewisian rules see Ch. 5. For discussion of Schaffer's contrastivist account see (Kvanvig 2007; Neta 2008; Stalnaker 2004).

(23) What happens if your son refuses to pragmatically presuppose that you did not dream? In such a case you will find yourself in what Stalnaker (1978) calls a *defective context*. As I argue below, in defective contexts it is unclear whether you satisfy 'knows', this view providing an attractive explanation of our unclear intuitions about the acceptability of 'knowledge'-ascriptions in defective contexts (see Sect. 7, pp. 43–5).

(24) I again assume that none of the other Lewisian rules that (RP) is to be supplemented with prohibits properly ignoring sceptical possibilities in *C*.

(25) The importance of the idea that the conversational participants should have authority over the 'epistemic standards' of their own context has been emphasized by many contextualists in recent years. See especially (DeRose 2004b), but also (Cohen 1999; Neta 2002; and Schaffer 2005). As we shall see in greater detail below, authority over one's own epistemic standards can be made available by pairing (RP) with a suitable notion of pragmatic presupposition.

(26) Strictly speaking, Stalnaker gives a three-stage definition of the notion of pragmatic presupposition, the first step consisting of a definition of 'acceptance'. These details do not concern me here, however. I work instead with an intuitive notion of *acceptance for the purpose of one's conversation*.

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(44) One might think that we ought to merely attempt to give an account of empirical knowledge and address the issue of knowledge of necessary truths with a different, additional theory. But such a move would be problematic for two reasons. First, note that some knowledge of necessary truths is empirical knowledge. Simple examples can be construed by noting that any contingent truth can, by disjunction introduction, be transformed into a necessary truth. For instance, if Maya knows the contingent proposition p, but not the necessary proposition q, she can come to know the necessary proposition ($p \lor q$) by competent deduction. Maya would, in the case imagined, know this disjunctive proposition at least partly on empirical grounds—namely, on the basis of her empirical evidence in support of p. Secondly, note that it would surely be desirable for purely theoretical reasons to offer an account that is not, in an ad hoc manner, restricted to contingent truths.

(45) Cp. (Williamson 2000).

(46) It is worthwhile emphasizing how very close this view is to (L*), if we think of it as explicating (L*)'s proper basing constraint in terms of safety and as rendering superfluous the Lewisian Rule of Actuality and Rule of Resemblance.