

CONTEXTUALISM, SKEPTICISM, AND INVARIANTISM

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Abstract. Michael Williams and Keith DeRose defend their different versions of contextualism on the grounds that contextualism gives a better account of the ordinary use of epistemic terms than invariantist competitors. One aim of this paper is to explain why their arguments do not succeed. A further aim is to show that the dispute between contextualists and invariantists portrayed by Williams and DeRose is a narrow interpretation of the dispute: there are important contextualist and invariantist positions which fall outside the scope of their arguments and which a full defense of contextualism should consider.

Keywords: Contextualism, skepticism, invariantism.

0. Introduction

Michael Williams and Keith DeRose defend their different versions of contextualism on the grounds that contextualism gives a better account of the ordinary use of epistemic terms than invariantist competitors. My aim in this paper is to explain why I believe that their arguments do not succeed. In section 1 of the paper, I focus on DeRose's arguments in favor of contextualism over invariantism. In section 2, I consider Williams' arguments for contextualism over skeptical invariantism. In section 3, I point out that the dispute between contextualists and invariantists portrayed by Williams and DeRose is a narrow interpretation of the dispute: there are important contextualist and invariantist positions which fall outside the scope of their arguments.

1. Contextualism versus Invariantism

Keith DeRose argues for contextualism over invariantism on the grounds that it gives a better account of the use of epistemic terms in ordinary language. He gives several familiar cases to illustrate the context-sensitivity of knowledge ascriptions in ordinary language. For example, there is a case about whether Keith knows that a certain bank is open on Saturday. In a low standards context, it is appropriate to say that Keith knows; but in a high standards context with more at stake, it is reasonable to deny that Keith knows (DeRose 1992: 913). DeRose claims that such ordinary language evidence supports the context-sensitivity of 'knows', just as it supports the context-sensitivity of terms that are clearly context-sensitive, such as, 'tall', 'big', and 'heavy'. He writes:

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Such facts about ordinary usage also provide us with our primary, most important, and best evidence that clearly context sensitive terms like ‘tall’ are context sensitive in the way we suppose Data of the same type provide us with the best possible type of evidence that ‘knows’ is context sensitive ‘Knows’ is context-sensitive . . . because speakers in some contexts do (in fact with propriety, and with apparent truth) seriously describe subjects as knowing propositions when those subjects meet moderate epistemic standards . . . , even if they don’t meet higher epistemic standards, but in other contexts, will go so far as to (in fact, with propriety and apparent truth) seriously deny that such subjects ‘know’ such things, reserving the ascription of ‘knowledge’ only for subjects that meet some more demanding epistemic standard. (DeRose 2005: 191)

Further, DeRose claims that ordinary language provides strong evidence against competitors to contextualism, such as skeptical invariantism—just as it provides strong evidence against wildly mistaken definitions such as the following—“*X* is a physician, iff *X* is able to cure any conceivable illness instantaneously”; and “*X* is a bachelor, iff *X* is an adult male”. The basis for saying that, e.g., the former of these is wrong is, according to DeRose:

. . . that we take to be physicians many licensed practitioners who don’t satisfy the demanding requirements alleged; that we seriously describe these people as physicians, that we don’t deny these people are physicians Its no doubt in virtue of such facts as these that the traditional view, rather than the bizarre view, is true of our language; the correctness of the traditional view largely consists in such facts. (DeRose 2005: 190–1)

Contrary to DeRose, I contend that it is an open question whether the evidence of ordinary language favors contextualism over invariantism. For the sake of argument, I grant that ordinary language is the relevant evidence for deciding among competing accounts of the semantics of epistemic terms. I also agree that the ordinary use of the word ‘knowledge’ involves context-sensitive attribution conditions. My reasons for disagreeing with DeRose are as follows. In the first place, although many terms with context-sensitive attribution conditions have context-sensitive truth conditions, many do not. ‘Short’, ‘large’, and ‘tall’, have both context-sensitive attribution conditions, and likewise, context-sensitive truth conditions. But consider terms like ‘gold’, ‘water’, and ‘aluminum’. The standards for attributing these terms vary across contexts. Whether a body of liquid is appropriately called ‘water’ depends on context—whether we are watering plants, identifying the largest body of water on earth, working with the extremely high tolerances of a pharmaceutical laboratory, or in a context of Cartesian inquiry. Still, ‘water’ and these other words have invariant truth conditions. What it is to be water or aluminum or gold is context-invariant. The nature of these things is fixed by their chemical constitution. Given that the

set of terms with context-sensitive attribution conditions includes many terms with context-sensitive truth conditions, and many with context-invariant truth conditions, it is not clear why we should think that the evidence from ordinary practice DeRose cites favors a contextualist over an invariantist interpretation of the semantics of 'knowledge'.

Second, there are features of ordinary language that favor an invariantist view. When someone in a high standards context challenges knowledge claims in low standards contexts, the point is typically that people in low standards contexts don't know what they claim to know. The point is not that while they may know relative to low standards, they don't know relative to high standards: it is simply that their low standards claim to know is false. It may be appropriate for people to claim to know in a low standards context, just as it may be appropriate for someone in a low standards context to claim that a drop of liquid is water. The high standards challenges are questioning whether the drop is really water, and whether people really know. The challenge regarding the drop of water does not concede that the drop is water relative to the low standards context: the point is that the low standards judgment is wrong. The same holds for the high standards challenge to the knowledge claim made in a low standards context: the point is not that the relevant claim is knowledge relative to the low standards context: the point is that the judgment in the low standards context is wrong.

Third, there is a further explanation of why it is an open question what semantic assumptions figure in the best explanation of the ordinary use of epistemic terms. Consider an analogy. Assume that the evidence for deciding among competing physical theories consists of sensory appearances. One cannot read off the features of the physical world from its appearances alone: physical theory allows that sensory appearances are often extensively deceiving. For example, a square table top takes on a multitude of deceptive shape-appearances as a function of the condition of an observer and other conditions of observation. We don't conclude that the shape of the table top is context-sensitive on the grounds that variations in the condition of an observer bring about variations in the appearance of the shape of the table top. Physical theory explains why the square table top has varying appearances in varying conditions of observation. The appearance of the shape of the table top is due to many factors in addition to its objective shape—e.g., the properties of light, the sensory systems of the observer, and the distance and angle of the observer from the table. There are many other examples in common sense and science in which overall theoretical considerations imply that appearances are largely deceiving: tall buildings appear to shrink as we move away from them, two dimensional surfaces appear to have three dimensional depth, macroscopic physical things appear to have secondary qualities, and so on.

This analogy applies in several ways to the case of relying on features of ordinary use to confirm a theory of the semantics of epistemic terms. First, as physical theory is confirmed by the data of appearances, we assume that hypotheses regarding the semantics of epistemic concepts are confirmed by data regarding the use of epistemic terms. Second, we assume that the confirmation of theories is holistic. What is up for confirmation by the appearances of the shape of the table top is not simply a hypothesis about the shape of the table top, but a large body of theory pertaining to the conditions of the observer, the conditions of observation, and physical laws. Similarly, what is up for confirmation by evidence regarding the use of epistemic terms in ordinary language is not simply a hypothesis about their semantics, but also a large body of theory pertaining to the semantics of other terms, the beliefs and desires of speakers, the norms that govern conversational exchanges, and so on. Further, it is common in physical theory that overall theoretical considerations rule that appearances are often largely deceptive; similarly, in the case of semantic theory, overall theoretical considerations often rule that features of the ordinary use of terms are largely deceptive. This is illustrated by the fact that, as we observed, the ordinary use of ‘water’ and ‘gold’ have context-invariant truth conditions despite having context-sensitive attribution conditions.

In light of the foregoing points, I claim that the issue regarding the semantics of epistemic terms is not resolved, as DeRose says, simply by reflection on the fact that in ordinary language epistemic terms have context-sensitive attribution conditions. An argument is needed to show that the best explanation of the ordinary use of epistemic terms assigns them a contextualist rather than an invariantist interpretation.¹

DeRose makes such an argument. He claims that an invariantist hypothesis faces more explanatory difficulties than a contextualist hypothesis.² To see the point, consider the following example. Suppose Jones, an accomplished mechanic, diagnoses the problem with a car, and when asked, confidently claims to know that the problem is the carburetor. Reflecting on Jones’ epistemic state from a low standards context, our judgment mirrors Jones’ own judgment that he knows. Whereas reflecting on Jones’ epistemic state from a high standards context, our judgment is that Jones doesn’t know: he confidently claims to know, but he is wrong. The contextualist allows that the judgments in the high standards context and the low standards context are both correct. Whereas the invariantist must explain away one of these judgments: e.g., if the judgment in the low standards context is to be explained away, the issue is how can it be that we (and Jones) have the intuition that Jones knows, when in fact he does not. DeRose contends that providing this explanation is problematic for an invariantist.

DeRose tells us that an invariantist may attempt a warranted assertability maneuver (WAM). He writes:

The invariantist, of course, cannot accept that . . . the speakers' assertions are true, and so must deny a quite strong intuition. But it is often argued, the idea of varying standards for the warranted assertability of knowledge attributions can help the Invariantist explain away the intuition that is hostile to her.

How so? Well, it has proven generally fruitful in philosophy to explain away certain intuitions by means of what we may usefully call *warranted assertability maneuvers* (WAMS). Such maneuvers involve explaining why an assertion can seem false in certain circumstances in which it's in fact true Alternatively . . . an intuition that an assertion is true can be explained away by means of the claim that the assertion, while false, is warranted, and we mistake this warranted assertability for truth. Either way, the maneuver is based on the correct insight that truth-conditions and conditions of warranted assertability are quite different things, but we can easily mistake one for the other. (DeRose 1999: 196)

DeRose grants that some WAMs are effective, but not WAMs in defense of invariantism. To support this view, he looks at two WAMs—one effective, and the other not. He argues that an invariantist WAM is relevantly similar to the ineffective WAM. DeRose's example of an effective WAM involves Grice's notions of the Cooperative Principle and conversational implicature. Why, DeRose asks, does ordinary language create the misleading impression that *S*'s assertion of the sentence "it is possible that *p*", implies that *S* does not know that *p*. The explanation appeals to Grice's Cooperative Principle, and specifically, the rule "Assert the Stronger". Given that *S* is following the Cooperative Principle, if *S* asserts that it is possible that *p*, there is an implicature that *S* doesn't know that *p*; for if *S* had known *p*, *S* would have made the stronger knowledge claim rather than the weaker possibility claim. It can appear that *S*'s assertion that it is possible that *p* implies that *S* doesn't know that *p*, because it is easy to confuse what *p* implies, with what *S*'s assertion of *p* implicates.³

In contrast, an ineffective WAM attempts to explain away ordinary language counterevidence to an obviously implausible definition: "*S* is a bachelor, iff *S* is a male". In ordinary language, we do not call married males 'bachelors'; and, if asked, we would say that married males are not bachelors. A WAM may attempt to explain away this counterevidence by claiming that conditions of warranted assertion and truth diverge. For example, it would allow that we are warranted in asserting that married males are not bachelors, but it would claim that this fact about ordinary use reflects features of conditions of warranted assertion for the term 'bachelor', not its truth conditions. Or it may postulate rules of warranted assertion to explain the ordinary use of the word, 'bachelor', claiming that there is a rule governing the word 'bachelor' which states that it is inappropriate to say that a married male is a bachelor; thus, we do not call married males 'bachelors'. And it claims that there is rule making it conversationally appropriate to say that married males are not

bachelors, even though what we say is false. This explains why, if asked, we deny that married males are bachelors. The point, again, is that features of the ordinary use of a term are explained as due to conditions of warranted assertion rather than the semantic requirements of the concept expressed by the term.

DeRose objects to the ineffective WAM on the grounds that it provides a recipe for preserving virtually any definition, however implausible, in the face of any ordinary language counterevidence. Putative counterexamples can be explained away as due to a confusion between conditions of warranted assertion and truth, or by appeal to ad hoc rules of warranted assertion. The WAM appealing to Grice's theories is different. It appeals to an independently motivated theory of conversational implicature to reconcile assumptions about the semantics of terms with facts about their ordinary use.⁴

DeRose claims WAMs in defense of invariantist accounts of epistemic terms are relevantly similar to the ineffective WAM above. He writes:

Truth be told, the warranted assertability objection against contextualism usually takes the form of a *bare* warranted assertability objection: It's simply claimed that it's the conditions of warranted assertability, rather than of truth, that are varying with context, and the contextualist is then accused of mistaking warranted assertability with truth. To the extent that invariantists go beyond such bare maneuvers . . . , they seem to appeal to special rules for the assertability of "knows" . . . Of course, if . . . [the invariantist] is allowed to appeal to the bare possibility that warranted assertability is being confused with truth or to special rules about the term in question, even our theorist about 'bachelor' can rebut the evidence against his theory. (DeRose 1999: 201)

I contend that DeRose does not succeed in raising special explanatory difficulties for invariantism. An apparent problem is that DeRose only considers one kind of WAM, one that appeals to a confusion between the implications of a proposition and the implicatures of asserting it. But there are other WAMs to which an invariantist might appeal. For example, a WAM may appeal to epistemic warrant. We may have epistemic warrant for *p*, even though *p* is false; and since in different contexts people may have different evidence bearing on the same proposition, in one context relative to one body of evidence, people may be warranted in asserting that Jones the mechanic knows the problem is the carburetor; while in other contexts (relative to different bodies of evidence), people may be warranted in denying that Jones knows. Alternatively, a WAM may appeal to pragmatic considerations. An invariantist may attempt to explain why our epistemic practices have value to us and are retained, despite the fact that our epistemic attributions are largely false. Hard determinists employ such a strategy when they argue that positive and negative moral judgments as well as punishments and rewards have an important social function despite resting

on the false assumption that people are free in the choices they make.

DeRose may reply that we are missing the point of his objection. The point is that invariantists appeal to *bare* WAMs to reconcile invariantist assumptions with the facts of ordinary language. They simply distinguish conditions of warranted assertion and conditions of truth, and claim that this distinction can explain how it is possible that epistemic terms have context-sensitive attribution conditions and context-invariant truth conditions. Absent an explication of this possibility in terms of independently motivated background theories (such as the WAM developed in terms of Grice's Cooperative Principle), the invariantist WAM is just handwaving. A bare proposal like this can be made to defend virtually any account of any concept against any ordinary language evidence.⁵

DeRose is surely right that invariantist WAMs are often just handwaving. However, this point counts no more against invariantism than contextualism. Recall that contextualism and invariantism are being evaluated in terms of how well they provide predictive and explanatory accounts of the use of epistemic terms in ordinary language. To this end, each makes assumptions about the requirements of epistemic concepts. As we have emphasized, accounts of the use of epistemic terms in ordinary language involve not only assumptions about the requirements of epistemic concepts, but also a large set of auxiliary hypotheses regarding the semantics of other terms, the beliefs and desires of speakers, norms governing conversations, and so on. An invariantist WAM is a suggestion regarding such a set of auxiliary hypotheses. It is *bare* in that details are not appropriately filled in.

For the sake of argument, I grant DeRose the foregoing points. But the question is, does a contextualist do better? Recall that the contextualist's semantic assumptions, like the invariantist's, figure in an explanation of epistemic practices as but one element of a large body of theory. What, we may ask, is the contextualist's account of the auxiliary assumptions needed to fill out the predictive and explanatory account of epistemic practices? The answer is: contextualists (including DeRose) give no details whatsoever. Without such details, DeRose simply assumes there is a plausible set of auxiliary hypotheses that squares contextualist semantic assumptions with the data of the ordinary use of epistemic terms. Allowing such an assumption is also handwaving, and a recipe for defending virtually any account of any concept in the face of ordinary language evidence.

DeRose may protest that an invariantist faces an explanatory demand that the contextualist does not, since there is a much larger discrepancy between our ordinary epistemic practices and the requirements of epistemic concepts on invariantist assumptions than on contextualist assumptions. Thus, there is much more for the invariantist to explain away. This point is a red herring. It may be true that more epistemic attributions in ordinary practice are true on contextualist assumptions than on invariantist assumptions (especially on skeptical invariantist assumptions). But

this is not the issue: the issue is which account of epistemic concepts figures in the best predictive and explanatory account of epistemic practices. Epistemic concepts—whichever interpretation is adopted—figure in such an account only as one element in a large body of theory. The invariantist's suggestion that his account can be reconciled with epistemic practices by means of a warranted assertability maneuver may be handwaving. But the contextualist is also handwaving (or not even raising a hand) in providing no details of the larger body of theory that figures in a predictive and explanatory account of epistemic practices.

Finally, there is a good reason to believe that DeRose's doubts about the explanatory power of invariantist theories are misguided. Consider again Jones the mechanic. In high and low standards contexts, Jones is assessed as not knowing and knowing respectively. A contextualist allows that both judgments are true. An invariantist is committed to explaining away one of these strongly held judgments. DeRose claims that this is problematic. But there are reasons to believe it is not. First, consider a term with clearly invariant truth conditions, e.g., 'water'. In high and low standards contexts, one and the same sample is judged as not water and water, respectively. This is a perfectly familiar phenomenon, and whatever the details turn out to be, there is little doubt that there is a satisfactory explanation of these judgments. Now assume that epistemic terms, e.g., 'knowledge', are like 'water' in having context-invariant truth conditions, and that from high and low standards contexts, respectively, a person is denied and affirmed to be a knower. From the standpoint of an invariantist, the cases of 'water' and 'knowledge' are relevantly similar. In the case of 'water' there is little doubt that an explanation can be provided for why people judge one and the same sample of liquid differently in different contexts. Similarly, there is (or should be) little doubt that such an explanation is available for 'knowledge' and other epistemic terms (on an invariantist interpretation).⁶

2. Contextualism versus Skeptical Invariantism

To this point we have examined arguments for contextualism over invariantism. In this section, I turn to arguments favoring contextualism over skeptical invariantism, specifically Michael Williams' arguments for contextualism over what he calls 'Cartesian skepticism'.⁷ Cartesian skeptics, in his sense, include skeptics about knowledge and justification regarding the external world, other minds, the past, and induction. Such skeptics assume a context-invariant structure of reasons relevant to answering global challenges. For example, the problem of other minds assumes a partition between problematic beliefs about other minds, and evidential beliefs regarding bodily behavior; and the problem of the external world assumes a similar divide between beliefs about the external world and beliefs about sense data. Cartesian skeptics

assume that the justification of any belief in a relevant category must trace back exclusively to beliefs about a certain subject matter—e.g., sense data in the case of external-world beliefs, bodily behavior in the case of other-mind beliefs. They assume that an answer to a global challenge is a context-invariant requirement for justification.

Unlike Cartesian skepticism, Williams' contextualism holds that the evidential requirements for justifying a proposition vary from one context to another. One and the same proposition may be foundational (basic) in one context and non-foundational (non-basic) in others; and in contexts in which it is non-foundational, there are differences in relevant alternatives and relevant evidence. For example, the belief that an elm tree has a deadly fungus may be epistemically basic in some contexts, and non-basic in others; and in the latter contexts, the alternatives that need to be ruled out and the evidence relevant for doing so may differ—e.g., in discussions among tree surgeons and Cartesian inquirers. Moreover, Williams contextualizes the skeptic: a skeptical assertion may be true in a context in which the issue on the table is a global challenge, but the same skeptical assertion may be false in contexts of ordinary life or science in which a global challenge is not in play.

Williams claims that we should favor contextualism over skepticism because it better captures the ordinary use of epistemic terms.

Contextualism gives us a picture of knowledge and justification that stays close to the phenomenology of everyday epistemic practices, that articulates a fallibilist conception of rationality, . . . and that offers a principled escape from traditional skeptical conundrums. That is why we should accept it. (Williams 2001: 254)

Williams' argument needs clarification. His point is not that contextualist's assumptions are 'closer' to ordinary practice than the skeptic's—in the sense that more ordinary epistemic assertions in our ordinary epistemic practices are true on contextualist assumptions than on skeptical assumptions. He grants this, but does not regard it as decisive. Instead, the issue he raises is: which assumptions about the requirements of epistemic concepts figure in a better predictive and explanatory account of ordinary epistemic practices? Regarding this issue, Williams grants central points that came up in the discussion of DeRose's views: a skeptic's semantic assumptions can be built into a body of theory that can be squared with the features of the ordinary use of epistemic terms; and a skeptic may explain away the discrepancy between his assumptions about epistemic requirements and the facts of epistemic practices by appeal to the fact that knowledge attributions are the product of many factors over and above a grasp of the requirements of epistemic concepts. In short, Williams grants that a skeptic's semantic assumptions can figure in an adequate account of the ordinary use of epistemic terms, despite the fact that on the skeptic's

semantic assumptions, most of the epistemic attributions in ordinary language are false (Williams 2001: 153–5).⁸

Given the foregoing, it may appear that the issue between the skeptic and the contextualist has no resolution. However, this is not Williams' verdict: he gives several "non-empirical" reasons to favor the contextualist's account over the skeptic's—reasons over and above the issue of the agreement of a theory with ordinary language.

One such reason is that the skeptic's assumptions generate 'gratuitous skeptical paradoxes', whereas the contextualist's assumptions avoid them. (Williams 2001: 153). However, this is indecisive: why is the fact that the skeptic's interpretation generates gratuitous skeptical paradoxes a reason to favor the contextualist's over the skeptic's interpretation? If this is not question-begging against the skeptic, Williams owes an explanation.

Another reason he gives is that the skeptic's view leads to erasing all the 'invidious comparisons' that are 'the whole point' of epistemic practices to make. Williams writes:

If a theory of justification leads to radical skepticism, erasing all important epistemic distinctions, that's a reason to replace it . . . [On the skeptic's assumptions]. . . a our epistemic practices are self-defeating. Although the whole point of such practices is to make invidious comparisons, there are no grounds for making them. A theory that represents working practices as unworkable is a bad theory. On theoretical grounds then we would be entitled to prefer the . . . [contextualist's assumptions regarding] knowledge and justification, even if the two conceptions were equally faithful to the phenomenology of everyday epistemic practices. (Williams 2001: 153–4)

This is unfair. The skeptic allows that our epistemic practices involve making invidious distinctions, and that various pragmatic ends of everyday life and science are served by the fact that we make these distinctions—just as various pragmatic ends are served in everyday life and science by our distinguishing flat from not flat, empty from not empty, and so on. The skeptic disagrees with the contextualist over the significance of these distinctions, claiming that although these distinctions have pragmatic value, they are for the most part are unreal.

Still another reason Williams gives in favor of contextualism, over and above agreement with epistemic practice, is that while "... contextualism ... takes the phenomenology of ordinary justification seriously, the skeptic must introduce ad hoc auxiliary hypotheses to explain away the disparity between his assumptions and epistemic practice" (Williams 2001: 154, 196). Presumably Williams' point is not that the skeptic has to invoke auxiliary hypotheses to square his assumptions with epistemic practice, whereas the contextualist does not. Both the skeptic's and contextualist's assumptions have implications for epistemic practice only as part of a larger

body of theory. Rather, the point seems to be that the skeptic's auxiliary hypotheses are ad hoc, whereas the contextualist's are not. But Williams does not defend this claim; moreover, the skeptic may deny that his auxiliary hypotheses are ad hoc on the grounds that various other concepts are reasonably treated in the same way he treats epistemic concepts. Following Peter Unger, for example, one may claim that the semantic content of various concepts—e.g., 'flat', 'round', 'square', 'empty', and so on—involve idealized conditions that ordinary things never literally satisfy, even though it may be conversationally acceptable to call things, e.g., 'flat', when they come close enough to meeting the requirements for being flat for the purposes at hand (see Unger 1984).

Granting that both the skeptic's and the contextualist's assumptions can be reconciled with the ordinary use of epistemic terms, is there another explanation of why we should favor contextualism over skepticism? Williams may appeal to the criterion of conservatism as the non-empirical ground for favoring contextualism over skepticism. The criterion enjoins us to make the least modification in background theories in the face of recalcitrant experience, other things being equal; and contextualism seems to come out better than skepticism relative to this consideration. But the appeal to conservatism is not decisive. One reason is that a skeptic, in denying that our beliefs are known and/or justified, is not necessarily advocating that we give them up: a skeptic allows that they may be retained for purely pragmatic reasons. A second reason is that conservatism is but one of the non-empirical virtues of explanations that need to be considered in arguing that a contextualist account of epistemic terms figures in the best explanation of the ordinary use of epistemic terms. Other non-empirical criteria need to be considered as well. Even if conservatism by itself counts in favor of contextualism, the support it provides is defeasible and may be outweighed when all relevant criteria are considered. (This point will be discussed in more detail later.)

Williams may propose another explanation of why we should favor contextualism over skepticism. The fact that more epistemic attributions constituting epistemic practice are true on the contextualist's interpretation of their truth conditions compared to the skeptic's may be taken to be a non-empirical reason in favor of the contextualist's interpretation. Williams may have in mind a non-empirical criterion specific to theories of interpretation, namely, Davidson's Principle of Charity: roughly, a semantic interpretation of a cognizer's utterances and propositional attitudes is governed by the requirement of maximizing the number of truths. But there are problems with this proposal. First, the principle of charity is a requirement on a global interpretation of linguistic meaning and the content of propositional attitudes, and does not apply specifically to the interpretation of the semantics of epistemic attributions. Second, there is a good reason for not taking the grounds for favoring the contextualist's over the skeptic's account of epistemic requirements to be: (i)

empirical adequacy relative to epistemic practice, and (ii) the extent to which an account of epistemic requirements implies that features of epistemic practices reflect the facts. By these criteria we should accept an account of epistemic practices which implies that each and every judgment that makes up ordinary epistemic practices is true—which is absurd. Such an account is empirically adequate relative to the facts of epistemic practices, and compared to other empirically adequate accounts of epistemic requirements, it most closely mirrors the facts of ordinary practice. Surely, a plausible account of epistemic requirements allows that many of the judgments in our epistemic practices are false.

Finally, it should be borne in mind that the issue we are considering is whether there is a reason to favor contextualism over invariantism, given that both accounts can be squared with ordinary use. We have been considering whether a certain non-empirical criterion tips the scale in favor of contextualism—i.e., that more ordinary epistemic attributions come out true on a contextualist account compared with competitors. Even if it is granted that contextualism comes out better relative to this criterion, this is insufficient to make the case for contextualism. As we observed earlier, showing that contextualism provides a better explanation of the ordinary use of epistemic terms requires bringing to bear a full set of criteria involved in explanation. For example, an important criterion Williams does not consider is the ability of a theory to give a unified account of a heterogeneous body of data. It appears that invariantism does better than contextualism relative to this criterion. Whereas the contextualist sees a diversity of uses of epistemic terms in diverse contexts, an invariantist achieves explanatory unification by seeing the diversity of uses as different appearances of one and the same set of invariant standards—much like physical theory explains the diverse appearances of the shape of a table as appearances of a table top with a single objective shape, or biology explains organisms of different phenotypes as having the same genotype.⁹

3. Conclusion

To this point, we have granted that the dispute between a contextualist and an invariantist turns on the issue of which semantic assumptions figure in the best explanation of the ordinary use of epistemic terms; and we have argued that, on this understanding of the dispute, a convincing case for contextualism has not been made. However, it should be observed that this is a narrow understanding of the dispute. The reason is that an invariantist and/or a contextualist may not agree that evidence regarding the ordinary use of epistemic terms is the proper basis for resolving the dispute. A contextualist and/or an invariantist may wed their epistemological views to different background semantic and metaphysical assumptions which de-

termine differences in how the subject of epistemological theories is conceived and what evidence is taken to support an epistemological theory. Here are some illustrations. An invariantist may adopt semantic assumptions widely held in the analytic tradition by philosophers who believe that apriori conceptual analysis is a key to many problems in philosophy. It may be assumed that the concepts of knowledge and justification have logically necessary and/or sufficient conditions (and perhaps are governed by synthetic apriori principles), and that apriori intuitions regarding various principles, examples, and counterexamples provide the basis for justifying competing views about the logical requirements of the concepts of knowledge and justification.¹⁰ Alternatively, an invariantist may agree with Hilary Kornblith that 'knowledge' is a natural kind term on the Putnam/Kripke model. Knowledge, like water, would be understood to have a nature that is determined by empirical investigation of knowledge itself, and not by an apriori or empirical investigation of the concept of knowledge, the inferential role of "knowledge", or the use of 'knowledge' in ordinary language or ordinary epistemic practices. On this view, the ordinary use of 'knowledge', and common sense assumptions about knowledge that inform ordinary epistemic practice, are no more relevant to the nature of knowledge than the ordinary use of, and common sense assumptions about, lead, gold, or aluminum, are relevant to determining the nature of these metals. The nature of knowledge, like the nature of these metals, is determined by our best current theories of the phenomenon itself.¹¹

Contextualist theories, too, can be built on semantic and metaphysical assumptions different than those apparently assumed by DeRose and Williams. For example, one contextualism may rely on apriori intuitions to support claims about the logically necessary and/or sufficient conditions of the concept of knowledge. Another contextualism may deny that there is a concept of knowledge in this sense, and simply aim to give an account of the correct use of epistemic terms in our linguistic community, to say why it is useful to have these terms, and to give an account of their logical behavior. Still another contextualist may be a contextualist "all the way down", holding that the evidence relevant to the dispute with an invariantist is context-sensitive. In some contexts, the issue is an empirical one; in other contexts, it is apriori. For example, the unquestioned orthodoxy of a certain tradition may assume that there are apriori necessary truths grounded in linguistic meaning, and that the debate between the contextualist and the skeptic is to be interpreted in light of these background assumptions. The issue would be whether apriori linguistic intuitions support the skeptic's or the contextualist's interpretation of the logically necessary and/or sufficient conditions of epistemic concepts. However, another tradition may have a different orthodoxy regarding meaning, necessity, and the apriori. Naturalism and a denial of the apriori may be unquestioned assumptions, and the disagreement between the skeptic and the contextualist would be taken to have an

empirical resolution, if it has a rational resolution at all. (The possibility of the kind of contextual shift in the epistemic status of a proposition may be illustrated with the axioms of Euclidean geometry. Relative to the assumptions and practices in one age, the axioms are regarded as apriori and necessary. But in a later age, with the rise of alternative geometries, the axioms are regarded as justified, if at all, empirically, as an element of overall physical theory.)

Finally, let me close by restating the overall conclusions of this paper.

1. The arguments given by Williams and DeRose do not establish that the evidence of the ordinary use of epistemic terms favors contextualism over invariantism or over skeptical invariantism: it is an open question whether contextualist or invariantist assumptions figure in the best overall predictive and explanatory account of the ordinary use of epistemic terms.

2. The dispute between contextualists and invariantists portrayed by Williams and DeRose is just one of many different forms the dispute may take. Contextualist and invariantist epistemologies may be wed to different background semantic and metaphysical assumptions. Accordingly, some instances of the dispute may be narrow—disagreements about epistemic requirements given a shared set of background semantic and metaphysical assumptions. Other instances of the dispute may be much more broad, concerning not just the issue of whether epistemic requirements are context sensitive or invariant, but also the issues of the proper evidence for resolving epistemic disagreements and the proper understanding of the subject matter of a theory of knowledge, e.g., whether a theory of knowledge is an empirical theory of the phenomenon of knowledge, an apriori account of the concept of knowledge, or an empirical investigation of the patterns of the use of epistemic terms in a language community. Even if the arguments given by DeRose and Williams did resolve the narrow version of the dispute they portray, their arguments do not address the issues between contextualism and invariantism that arise relative to different background semantic and metaphysical assumptions.

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Resumo. Michael Williams e Keith DeRose defendem suas diferentes versões de contextualismo com base em que o contextualismo fornece uma explicação melhor do uso ordinário de termos epistêmicos que competidores invariantistas. Um objetivo deste trabalho é explicar por que seus argumentos não têm sucesso. Um objetivo adicional é mostrar que a disputa entre contextualistas e invariantistas tal como apresentada por Williams e DeRose é uma interpretação limitada da disputa: há importantes posições contextualistas e invariantistas que estão fora do alcance de seus argumentos e que deveriam ser consideradas em uma defesa abrangente do contextualismo.

Palavras-chave: Contextualismo, ceticismo, invariantismo.

Notes

¹ DeRose may reply that the foregoing point depends on a holist view of confirmation that he rejects. He may hold that the evidence of ordinary use is prima-facie evidence in favor of a contextualist account of epistemic terms, in the way that some foundationalists take, e.g., an appearance of a red apple as prima facie, defeasible evidence of the presence of a red apple. Even on this reading, DeRose's case is indecisive. A problem is that even if it is granted that a non-square appearance of a table top provides prima facie evidence that the table top is non-square, the support is defeasible; and the degree of support may be massively outweighed by overall theoretical considerations.

² DeRose neglects to mention certain explanatory problems faced by some invariantists but not faced by contextualists. Consider a skeptical invariantist who believes that no inductive inference is justified, or that no beliefs about the external world is justified. Such a skeptical invariantist would not be in a position to appeal to an empirical theory to defend his semantic assumptions, and/or to explain the disparity between his semantic assumptions and the use of epistemic terms in ordinary language. A contextualist faces no such obstacle. This

point, which applies to some but not all forms of skepticism, seems to be worth further investigation.

³ DeRose 1999: 196–7. Another example would be Grice’s explanation of why the ordinary use of ‘or’ gives the misleading impression that ‘or’ does not have the meaning assigned in truth-functional logic.

⁴ DeRose 1999: 197–200. DeRose puts the point like this. To paraphrase: successful WAMs appeal to rules of warranted assertion with general application, rather than rules formulated for particular words. The WAM appealing to Grice’s rule, “Assert the stronger” meets this condition. The WAM in the defense of the implausible definition of ‘bachelor’ appeals to a rule applying to the word ‘bachelor’ alone, and so does not meet this condition. The rule seems hopelessly ad hoc.

⁵ Moreover, DeRose may add the handwaving point applies equally to the other possibilities for an invariant explanation of the context sensitivity of epistemic attributions in ordinary language—e.g., WAMs developed in terms of epistemic warrant or pragmatic warrant. It would also apply to the claim that invariantist semantic assumptions can be retained in the face of the context sensitivity of our use of the word ‘knowledge’ by making appropriate holistic adjustments in background theory. These surely are “bare” proposals, not developed in terms of independently motivated theories, and DeRose is right that they provide a recipe for preserving virtually any definition in the face of any ordinary language counter-evidence.

⁶ Oddly, DeRose concedes that Peter Unger has an invariantist account of ‘knowledge’ that is not vulnerable to his “bare WAM” objection. He cites Peter Unger’s claim that ‘knowledge’ is an example of an “absolute term”. Others include ‘flat’, ‘empty’, ‘square’, ‘parallel’. Unger claims that virtually all attributions of these terms are false, and in high standards contexts we recognize this. Still in ordinary contexts we continue to say that things are empty, flat, known, and so on. These sayings are warranted by a principle which sanctions such sayings when things come close enough to being flat or empty for the practical purposes of the conversation at hand. DeRose concedes that Unger does not rely on a *bare* WAM. (Unger appeals to a rule of warranted assertion with application to a broad class of terms that helps explain away ordinary language counterevidence to the invariantist view.) Nevertheless, DeRose objects to Unger’s view. But his objections are not to Unger’s invariantism, but his *skeptical* invariantism. (DeRose 1999: 202–3) In the next section of this paper, I discuss contextualist arguments against skeptical invariantism. DeRose’s arguments are covered there, except for the following. DeRose points out that a contextualist account of ‘knowledge’ is an alternative to Unger’s view that ‘knowledge’ is an absolute term. In light of this, he argues that “. . . it is difficult to see where the pressure to accept a demanding invariantist account like Unger’s will come from”. (DeRose 1999: 202–3) The answer to DeRose is that the pressure is the same as for the contextualist: skeptical invariantist assumptions, like contextualist assumptions, can be built into an empirically adequate account of the use of epistemic terms in ordinary language.

⁷ The arguments I discuss appear in Williams’ *Problems of Knowledge* (2001).

⁸ An issue here is whether Williams’ view is that the skeptic’s and the contextualist’s assumptions are transiently or radically underdetermined by ordinary epistemic practices. I assume that what is intended is radical underdetermination. The point here echoes Peter Unger’s thesis in *Philosophical Relativity*, (Unger 1984) as well as Quine’s familiar claim that we can

rationally retain a hypothesis in the face of recalcitrant experience by making compensating adjustments in background auxiliary hypotheses (Quine 1961).

⁹ This point is emphasized in Jacobson 2001: 395.

¹⁰ Of course, there are variations of the view suggested in the text. A strong view is that the concepts of knowledge and justification have strict logically necessary and sufficient conditions. A more moderate view holds that the concepts of knowledge and justification have critical logically necessary conditions—e.g., that knowledge of the external world is possible only if it is possible to justify global hypotheses about the external world. On the moderate view, the issue between the skeptic and the contextualist may simply be whether the skeptic's assumption about the requirements for knowledge of the external world are logically necessary conditions for knowledge in any possible context, or simply a requirement in some specialized contexts of philosophical inquiry. Still another view is that epistemic terms are cluster concepts.

¹¹ Such a view has recently been defended by Hilary Kornblith (Kornblith 2002). Although Kornblith defends a version of reliabilism on these assumptions, it seems possible in principle to build a contextualist account of justification on the same semantic assumptions. It is worth noting that the invariantism defended by Kornblith and the contextualism defended by Williams illustrate the possibility of a 'broad' disagreement between a contextualist and an invariantist discussed later in the text. Kornblith takes 'knowledge' to be a natural kind term on the Kripke/Putnam model; Williams claims to give an account of the 'inferential role' of the term 'knowledge' on the model of views developed by Brandom. These theorists disagree not only about the requirements for knowledge but the proper subject matter of a 'theory of knowledge' (knowledge versus the concept of knowledge), and the sort of evidence that supports an epistemological theory (the best theories in cognitive sciences and evolutionary biology versus ordinary use of epistemic terms).