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From Epistemic Contextualism to Epistemic Expressivism

I. Introduction: Invariantism and Contextualism

Traditional accounts of the meaning of knowledge claims have been versions of descriptivist invariantism. That is to say knowledge attributions were taken to describe a complex relation between a subject and a proposition, which either holds or does not hold regardless of the context from which the claim is made. When faced with skeptical paradoxes generated by arguments such as:

(SA) P1: S doesn't know that he's not a brain-in-a-vat,

P2: If S doesn't know that he's not brain-in-a-vat, then S doesn't know that-*o* [where *o* is any obvious proposition, knowledge of which we would ordinarily attribute to S],

C: Thus, S doesn't know that-*o*,

where the premises seem true but the conclusion seems false because it contradicts with many ordinary knowledge attributions that seem patently true, the descriptivist invariantist has three options, each of which involve biting a bullet. He can deny P1 and argue that, despite appearances to the contrary, S really does stand the knowledge relation to the proposition that he is not a BIV. He can deny P2 and argue that all of the plausible closure principles that seems to entail P2 are false. Or he can accept the skeptical conclusion C and argue that all of the ordinary attributions of knowledge that *o* to S are, despite appearances to the contrary, false.

We've seen all three responses in the past century of epistemological theorizing, but none of them seems completely satisfactory.¹ Recently, some epistemologists have found a new way out of this paradox which involves rejecting invariantism in favor of contextualism, which is the view that knowledge claims contain a hidden indexical in their logical form.² Schematically, it's the thesis that sentences of the form,

(1) S knows that p,

have the truth conditions given by,

(2) S's belief that p meets epistemic standards e ,

where the value of e is determined by the context in which (1) is used. This allows for easy dissolution of the paradox generated by SA. For one can accept the soundness of the argument but deny that C contradicts with the ordinary knowledge claims that seem patently true because they are made in different contexts where the value of e is different. Moreover, contextualism seems to be bolstered by reflection on more ordinary cases where one and the same knowledge claim can seem true in one conversational context and false in another conversational context, even when all of the epistemically relevant features of the putative knower are held fixed.³ However, despite the fact that contextualism explains some linguistic intuitions about cross-context variations in the attributability of knowledge, it seems to disrespect other equally strong linguistic intuitions about the dialectical connections between various knowledge claims made in different contexts. Moreover, many worry that the contextualist response to skeptical paradoxes such as the one generated by SA is ad hoc.

Thus, we metaepistemologists find ourselves in a precarious position. On the one hand, invariantism seems to leave us stuck with skeptical paradoxes and without the resources to explain our linguistic intuitions about cross-context variations in the attributability of knowledge.⁴ On the other hand, contextualism seems ad hoc and undersupported by all of the linguistic data. Is this cause for despair?

I think not. Notice that there's an alternative to both invariantism and contextualism that has so far been ignored in this debate. Both invariantism and contextualism are *descriptivist* accounts of the meaning of knowledge claims; that is, they construe knowledge claims as the attribution or denial of some (robust) epistemological relation. This is certainly in line with the dogma of descriptivism in philosophical semantics, whereby it's assumed that since semantic content of indicative sentences is standardly given in terms of their truth-conditions, the characteristic function of all indicative sentences is to describe worldly objects, properties, and relations. However, knowledge claims are normative, and fruitful *nondescriptivist* accounts have been developed for other sorts of normative claims, which suggests that a nondescriptivist account might also be fruitfully developed for knowledge claims.

Thus, my aim in this essay is to sketch and motivate a nondescriptivist account of the meaning of knowledge claims; specifically, I shall sketch and motivate an expressivist account of knowledge claims. In section II, I begin by rehearsing two common objections to contextualism. Then, in section III, I argue that analogs of these objections also threaten a form of descriptivist speaker-relativism for ethical claims. Because ethical expressivism is a prominent nondescriptivist alternative to ethical descriptivist speaker-relativism, in part IV I explore the

issue of whether expressivism avoids the two problems in the metaethical case and argue that it does so without foregoing the advantages of ethical speaker-relativism. This provides the motivation for extending the expressivist analysis to knowledge claims in section V, where I also confirm the expected result, which is that epistemic expressivism also avoids the problems with contextualism without foregoing the advantages of contextualism.

II. Two Problems for Contextualism

As I have already indicated, contextualism has the two primary advantages that it can dispel troubling skeptical paradoxes and can explain linguistic intuitions about the apparently cross-context variations in the attributability of knowledge. These have, I believe, been adequately argued for by contextualism's proponents, so I won't go into them further here. Contextualism also has two primary disadvantages, which I believe deserve better articulation than they usually receive.

To bring the first problem into view, notice that a consequence of contextualism is that even if we hold S, p, S's evidence for p, and any temporal variables constant across contexts, the sentence, "S knows that p" could be true as uttered in one context and false as uttered in another context; correlatively, an affirmation of knowledge, "S knows that p" and a denial of knowledge, "S doesn't know that p" could both be true when uttered in distinct contexts with different epistemic standards. Of course, it is exactly this feature of the contextualist view that allows for its novel response to skeptical paradoxes. There are, however, cases where two tokens of a knowledge attribution uttered in different contexts seem to stand in agreement and, correlatively,

cases where a token affirmation and its apparent denial uttered in different contexts seem to stand in conflict despite the fact that, according to contextualism, there are different epistemic standards operative in the two contexts.

For example, there are cases where in uttering a knowledge claim we intend to reaffirm or change our previous view (expressed in a different context) about whether someone knows something. Consider a case where Sharon and Chris are visiting their son Charlie in a different city. The morning of the flight, Chris asks Sharon, “Do you know whether Charlie will pick us up from the airport?” Sharon replies, “Yes, I talked to him yesterday and gave him our flight details.” We can assume that nothing serious hangs on whether Charlie will pick them up, and if he doesn’t they could take the train into town. But having talked to him Sharon takes herself to know that he will pick them up; and, assuming that it’s true that Charlie will pick them up, Sharon’s (implicit) knowledge claim seems true. Let’s imagine, however, that later Chris takes a call from a business associate proposing an important conference call with a client at a time that Chris could make only if Charlie does pick them up from the airport. He tells Sharon of the proposal and continues, “Are you sure Charlie will pick us up? Perhaps he forgot the flight time.” On the contextualist view, it seems like the standards for knowledge have been raised. Nonetheless, there seem to be at least two ways this case could go forward. Sharon might say, “I thought I knew, but I guess it is possible that he will forget the flight time, so I don’t know for sure. Maybe you should give him a quick call to confirm before you schedule the conference call.” Or she might say, “He promised to be there at 5:30, so he won’t forget the flight time, so I know he’ll be there. Go ahead and schedule the conference call.”

From the contextualist's point of view, the standards for knowledge seem to be different between the context of Sharon's first (implicit) knowledge claim and the context of her (possible) later knowledge claim—for the question of whether Charlie will pick them up has become more important due to the proposed conference call. However, in both continuations of the case, the later knowledge claim seems to manifest, so to speak, a dialectical connection to the earlier knowledge claim. Sharon either wants to deny knowledge and thereby *change* her earlier view that Charlie has knowledge or she wants to attribute knowledge and thereby *reaffirm* her earlier view. But if each of these knowledge claims are semantically relative to the standards operative in their context of utterance and these standards are different in the earlier and later contexts, then contextualism cannot capture these intuitive dialectical connections. This is because the context sensitivity imputed by the contextualist undermines the way in which two tokens of the same knowledge attribution type or a knowledge attribution token and its correlated disattribution, as uttered in different contexts with different epistemic standards, could express, respectively, agreement or opposition. However, as the case indicates, it often seems as if we do use knowledge claims in just this way.⁵ Call this the *dialectical intuitions problem*.

Does this problem generate a fatal objection to contextualism? Problematic intuitions never generate fatal objections to a theory because defenders of theory can always deny the accuracy of the intuitions. Of course, such a move incurs a cost: plausibility will be saved only if the defenders of the theory can strike a nice balance between downplaying the robustness of the intuitions and coming up with a plausible error theory for why we have mistaken intuitions. In DeRose(2004), we see just such an attempt to downplay the robustness of the sort of problematic intuitions we've just considered. He considers a case with two contexts, LOW and

HIGH, where knowledge of a particular proposition is attributed to a particular subject in LOW but denied in HIGH, and writes,

When we consider the affirmation in LOW together with the denial in HIGH, is it clear that these two claims contradict one another? So far from that being obvious to me, I've always been fairly strongly inclined to think they do *not* contradict one another. But that's just me, and it is perhaps no accident that I became a contextualist. But when I have presented such cases to large enough groups of students, and then asked about whether the claims contradict one another, I have always found both positive and negative answers strongly represented.”(2005: 194)

The idea here seems to be that in light of the varying intuitions about the dialectical status of the claims we shouldn't take them too seriously or think it a major problem with contextualism if it disrespects them.

Are the intuitions behind the dialectical intuitions problem as weak as DeRose suggests? I doubt that they could be. For notice that the contextualist's response to SA requires precisely the revelation that the conclusion of

C: S doesn't know that-*o*

is *despite years of it seeming otherwise to epistemologists* consistent with attributions to S of knowledge that *o* made in other nonskeptical contexts. However, if the intuition of dialectical conflict between cross-context knowledge claims were really as weak as DeRose suggests, no one would be very exercised about SA and we certainly wouldn't be worried about skeptical “paradoxes”.⁶

Cohen (1999: 77-78) pursues a partners-in-crime response to this sort of objection by arguing that the same sort of semantic blindness among ordinary speakers posited by the contextualist attaches to ordinary semantic intuitions about ‘flat’, and yet most philosophers agree that ‘flat’ is a context sensitive term. However, I doubt that the semantic blindness is as robust in the case of ‘flat’ as in the case of the contextualist account of ‘knows’. This is for two reasons.⁷

The first is it seems to me that if we accuse ordinary speakers of contradicting themselves in cross-context cases where they attribute flatness in one context but deny it in another context, they will quickly appeal to or easily be led to the purpose relativity of the claims as a way to dispel the appearance of contradiction. However, it seems that if we accuse ordinary speakers of contradicting themselves with their apparently conflicting knowledge claims made in contexts with different epistemic standards, such responses are much less readily available. Cohen (2004) acknowledges this difference and pursues what I take to be a promising explanation—viz. that ‘knows’ unlike ‘flat’ is a *normative* term. He writes, “We find [contextualism] much easier to accept in the case of flatness than knowledge, because ascriptions of flatness do not have the normative force that ascriptions of knowledge/justification do”(2004: 193). However, although I agree that ‘knows’ is a normative term unlike ‘flat’, this does not yet explain why ordinary speakers are more hesitant to admit the context sensitivity of ‘knows’ than of ‘flat’ unless we can say why context sensitivity in normative terms is harder to admit than context sensitivity in nonnormative terms. If Cohen’s suggestion is that it is because we value knowledge, then I want to ask why that makes the crucial difference—after all, pool players value flatness, but they would presumably just as easily admit that ‘flat’ is context sensitive as anyone else. I think we will reach a satisfactory explanation here only by spelling out in some more detail the normative

nature of knowledge claims in contrast to the nonnormative nature of flatness claims. Below I begin to do just that in my discussion of what ordinary knowledge attributions express and why we do that. However, as far as I can tell, we don't yet have a plausible explanation of the difference between the robustness of (putative) semantic blindness in the case of 'flat' and 'knows'.

The second reason I am skeptical of Cohen's partners-in-crime argument is that very few philosophers seriously think that the question of whether some surface is flat generates a perplexing philosophical puzzle, but many philosophers have seriously thought that SA or some variant generates a perplexing philosophical puzzle. This suggests that the semantic error theory required by contextualism requires attributing semantic blindness not just to ordinary speakers but also to philosophers whose job it is to reflect carefully on things like the semantics of 'knows'. One might suggest that the disanalogy with 'flat' here is due to the fact that philosophers don't care about flatness as much as they care about knowledge. But precisely because knowledge is one of the traditional subjects of philosophic investigation and philosophers tend to be less semantically blind than ordinary speakers, I would have thought that if 'knows' is semantically context sensitive in roughly the same way as 'flat' philosophers would have discovered this way out of the puzzles generated by SA a long time ago. Of course, this is no knockdown argument against contextualism, but I suspect that much of the intuitive resistance to contextualism on the part of philosophers comes from the fact that its answer to SA seems too easy.

I think these differences between ‘flat’ and ‘knows’ reveal that contextualism turns not on the posit of a minor and easily explainable sort of semantic blindness to ordinary speakers, which in comparison to the situation with ‘flat’ might be reasonable; rather contextualism requires the posit of a deep and hard to explain semantic blindness to anyone resists contextualism about ‘knows’ or is perplexed by SA.⁸ This makes the contextualist response to skeptical paradoxes such as SA seem unacceptably ad hoc, so call this the *ad hoc semantics problem*.

III. Metaethical Speaker-Relativism and the Two Problems

The debate about contextualism can sometimes seem like it transpires without a clear recognition of the fact that a similar account of the meaning of ethical claims has long been on the scene in metaethical debates. This is metaethical speaker-relativism, which is the thesis that ethical claims are implicitly relative to features of the speaker in their truth conditions. Dreier characterizes the general position as “the theory that the content of (what is expressed by) a sentence containing a moral term varies with (is a function of) the context in which it is used. The content of a moral term itself depends on the most salient moral system in the context of use” (1990: 6). Schematically, this is the thesis that a claim such as,

(3) X is right,

has the truth conditions given by,

(4) Doing X is required by moral system *M*,

where the value of *M* is determined by the context in which (3) is used.

This view has at least the following two related advantages.⁹ First, it can answer Mackie's (1977: ch.1) skeptical worries about the existence of ethical truths—a problem which has framed much of the debate in the last quarter century of metaethics. The relativist's idea is that ethical truths are not universal but relative to particular and variable moral communities, outlooks, or contexts, which makes it easier (albeit perhaps not perfectly easy) to see how there can be ethical truths.¹⁰ Second, the view has semantic resources for explaining linguistic data where people in different contexts will manifest a difference of opinion about some ethical matter although this difference doesn't seem easily attributable to some deficiency in evidence or rationality on either side. The idea is that the *difference* of opinion is not a *disagreement* because the content of each sentence is implicitly relative to a different moral system.

These two advantages have been well enough pressed by proponents of ethical speaker-relativism, so all I want to point out here is that they seem to line up for the most part with the two advantages claimed for contextualism. Ethical skepticism construes ordinary ethical discourse as erroneous, and ethical speaker-relativism offers a way to save ordinary discourse by reinterpreting the content of ethical claims. Likewise, epistemological skepticism construes ordinary epistemological discourse as erroneous, and contextualism offers a way to save ordinary discourse by reinterpreting the content of knowledge claims. Of course, part of the reason for calling ordinary ethical or epistemological discourse into question in the first place is that there seem to be deep differences of opinion that aren't easily chalked up to a failure of rationality or evidence on one or the other side. Ethical speaker-relativism provides a way to explain this difference without attributing error to either side; likewise, contextualism provides a way to explain the difference without attributing error to either side.¹¹

Interestingly, the two problems with contextualism discussed in the previous section also threaten ethical speaker-relativism. It is a standard objection to metaethical speaker-relativism that the position cannot account for the intuition that two utterance of the same ethical sentence or the utterance of an ethical sentence and its ostensible negation can stand, respectively, in agreement or conflict, even when they are uttered in different situations or by different speakers such that the speaker-relativist would say that their truth conditions are relativized to different moral systems. This is the analog of the dialectical intuitions problem that above we saw threatening contextualism. As with contextualism, this problem is not fatal, for the accuracy of these countervailing intuitions can always be denied at a cost: plausibility will be saved only if the defenders of the theory can strike a nice balance between downplaying the robustness of the intuitions and coming up with a plausible error theory for why we have the mistaken intuitions. However, the ethical speaker-relativist must admit that the intuitions are pretty strong. For the proposed answer to ethical skepticism hinges on treating the skeptical worry as based on linguistic error about the correct account of the meaning of our ethical claims; however, ethical theorists would not find skeptical worries at all compelling or troubling if the intuition of genuine disagreement or agreement, even in cross-context cases, were not fairly robust. Some ethical speaker-relativists pursue a partners-in-crime response to this sort of worry by arguing that the context relativity of ethical claims is like the context relativity of other uncontroversially context-sensitive claims; however, as before, the very philosophical perplexity generated by the skeptical worries that ethical speaker-relativism is designed (in part) to answer belie close analogy with uncontroversially context-sensitive claims. Thus, the ethical speaker-relativist's positing of semantic context sensitivity to ethical claims looks like an ad hoc response to ethical skepticism.

And this is just the analog of the ad hoc semantics problem that above we saw threatening contextualism.

IV. Ethical Expressivism and the Two Problems

So we have now seen that ethical speaker-relativism enjoys similar advantages but suffers the same two problems as epistemic contextualism. Speaker-relativists and contextualists will perhaps insist that they can overcome the problems. Others will take the problems to encourage a reconsideration of the prospects of epistemic invariantism and ethical universalism. However, there is a nondescriptivist alternative to these descriptivist approaches that has already been pursued in some detail in the metaethical case, and I believe something similar deserves exploration in the metaepistemological case as well. This is expressivism.

It will be handy to start with a thumbnail sketch of how I understand the expressivist position in the metaethics, before considering what resources it brings to the table for addressing the problems we've been considering. Ethical expressivists can agree with descriptivists (both relativists and universalists) that the meaning of ethical claims is to be explained in terms of what they express. However, they disagree in their approach to accounting for "what they express". We can understand the difference in terms of the distinction between semantic pragmatics and pragmatic pragmatics.¹² Semantic pragmatics is the study of the way features of the context in which a sentence is uttered affect its semantic content by determining the value of deictic elements; pragmatic pragmatics is the study of the way different sentences are used to perform different sorts of expressive actions. Ethical speaker-relativism and expressivism are both

concerned to explain the observed cross-context variation in the use of ethical sentences in a way that doesn't require mysterious access to universal ethical facts. The speaker-relativist explains this variation in terms of a deictic element in the deep logical form of the *propositions* expressed by the ethical *sentences*. For him, the sentences express propositions that are relative to a moral system; and apparent disagreements can always be explained away by construing the relevant sentences as implicitly relative to different moral systems. The expressivist instead explains this variation in terms of what kind of *state* is expressed by the ethical *utterances*. Standardly, expressivists make a distinction between descriptive states of mind (e.g. representations or matter-of-factual beliefs that the world is one way or another) and action-directed states of mind (e.g. intentions to make the world become one way or another).¹³ Then they argue that ethical utterances express action-directed states rather than descriptive states, which with the plausible assumption that different people have different action-directed states despite having equivalent evidence and being equally rational explains why speakers make conflicting ethical claims.

Different expressivists have different accounts of the relevant action-directed state of mind. One powerful and well-known account is due Gibbard (1986, 1990), who characterizes the state of mind as a complex state of "norm-acceptance". Specifically about attributions of rationality, which he takes to be the paradigmatic normative claim, Gibbard writes, "Thinking X rational...is a combination of a normative state and a state of factual belief. It is accepting a system *N* of norms such that one believes the subject to be in circumstances for which *N* permits *X*"(1986: 479)¹⁴, which, if we generalize and apply this to the utterance of ethical sentences, comes to the view that ethical utterances express the speaker's acceptance of a system *N* of norms such that the speaker believes the subject of the sentence to be in circumstances for which *N* ethically

permits/forbids something.¹⁵ Notice that for this expressivist position, the mental state expressed by ethical claims *contains* a factual belief and the content of this belief is exactly what a metaethical speaker-relativist would say is expressed by the sentence.¹⁶ For example, the relativist will claim that a tokening of,

(5) I ought not vote for candidate X,

expresses a belief whose content is the same as,

(6) My voting for candidate X is forbidden by *N*,

where the value of *N* is determined by the moral system determined by the context in which (5) is uttered; in contrast to this, the norm-expressivist will claim that (5) expresses a complex state of mind composed of a belief with the content of (6) and the acceptance of the system of norms *N* alluded to therein. So, taking this as our paradigm, expressivism is the position at the level of pragmatic pragmatics that ethical claims express states of norm-acceptance rather than matter-of-factual beliefs.

So much for my thumbnail sketch of expressivism. Obviously much more would be required to adequately defend the position against natural worries, but this has been explored in detail by others¹⁷ and here the crucial point is that there is a difference between ethical expressivism and ethical speaker-relativism in that the speaker-relativist treats the content of ethical claims as descriptive but relative at the level of semantic pragmatics to a moral system determined by the speaker's context, while the expressivist treats ethical claims as expressing a special action-directed state of mind called norm acceptance at the level of pragmatic pragmatics. The importance of this difference for my discussion is that it provides a way for the expressivist to

avoiding the two problems we saw facing speaker-relativism without obviously losing the two advantages of that position.

One of the advantages of speaker-relativism was that it can easily explain why different people make apparently conflicting ethical claims even when there is no obvious way to attribute error to one or the other party. The explanation is that they aren't really disagreeing. However, this also generated the dialectical intuitions problem, which stemmed from the fact that there is an intuitive dialectical connection between many pairs of ethical claims. For example, the pragmatic hawk says,

(7) War is morally obligatory

and the idealistic dove, says,

(8) War is morally wrong,

and they certainly can seem to be opposing each other's views. Moreover, if a honorable Samurai says,

(9) War is morally obligatory,

it would seem that he has agreed with the hawk and disagreed with the dove. But because the speaker-relativist will construe the content of these claims as relative to the (different) moral systems determined by the speakers' (different) contexts, she must disrespect the intuition that these claims could be dialectically connected.

The expressivist can better capture the intuitive dialectical connections. For, he contends that the utterance of an ethical sentence expresses a complex state of mind including two components: a belief about what a particular system of norms permits or forbids and the acceptance of this

system of norms. This gives him the resources to recognize *two* axes along which two ethical utterances may be in disagreement or agreement. That is, instead of only recognizing the possibility of disagreement or disagreement in relativized factual belief as the ethical speaker-relativist does, the norm-expressivist can also recognize that different utterances can express the acceptance of opposing or concurring norms. Thus, as far as the norm-expressivist is concerned, two ethical claims can express genuine opposition or agreement even if they do not express logically contradictory or identical propositions. This means that the expressivist can avoid the dialectical connection problem threatening ethical speaker-relativism.¹⁸

The second problem we saw facing speaker-relativism was the ad hoc semantics problem. This stemmed from two sources. First, a natural reaction for the speaker-relativist to pursue to the dialectical intuitions problem would be to try to explain away the intuitions generating the problem as weak and mistaken. Second, given that speaker-relativism provides a response to ethical skepticism, it seemed that these intuitions cannot be too weak, since otherwise it would be mysterious why the existence of ethical truths could seem philosophically puzzling.

As we have just seen, the expressivist can respect the intuitions of dialectical connection between ethical claims,¹⁹ so he doesn't have to deny their accuracy and thus isn't initially open to the first source of the ad hoc semantics objection. However, one might worry that expressivism involves the posit of a different but nonetheless problematic sort of semantic blindness. Recall that the expressivist's response to the ethical skeptic involves the claim that ethical claims express not descriptive mental states but nondescriptive states of norm-acceptance. One might worry, however, that this is just another posit of semantic blindness—for don't we

take ourselves to be expressing descriptive mental states (matter-of-factual beliefs) when we make ethical claims?

I'm not so sure. I agree that there *is* some sort of semantic blindness involved in expressivism, but I think the situation is importantly different from the error theory required by speaker-relativism. I think expressivism doesn't involve a posit semantic blindness to ordinary speakers—for ordinary speakers do not have opinions about the expressive force of their claims that are fine-grained enough to cut either for or against expressivism on this point. To be sure, the expressivist will maintain that people like Dreier and Mackie who think that their ethical sentences have purely descriptive rather than norm-expressive content or that their ethical claims express matter-of-factual beliefs rather than states of norm-acceptance are mistaken. In my opinion, however, this is a very specialized sort of mistake that the expressivist only has to attribute to some philosophers who are caught up in the dogma of descriptivism in philosophical semantics. So, although expressivism might fairly be said to involve a controversial theory of the meaning ethical claims, given the present dogma of descriptivism, it is not an ad hoc, and thus avoids the ad hoc semantics problem suffered by speaker-relativism.

V. Epistemic Expressivism and the Two Problems

In the previous section we saw what ethical expressivism is and how it has the resources to avoid the two problems that threaten ethical speaker-relativism without giving up the primary advantages of that position. The basic structure of this debate is fairly familiar from recent metaethical discussions, and my point in going through it was not to press for any new

advantages of expressivism over speaker-relativism; rather, I think this debate can shed light on the debate about contextualism. Specifically, I now want to use what we have learned to argue that *epistemic* expressivism has the resources to avoid the dialectical intuitions problem and the ad hoc semantics problem suffered by contextualism without giving up the primary advantages of that position.

How are we to understand *epistemic* expressivism? The obvious route to go here is to pursue the following analogy: ethical speaker-relativism is to ethical expressivism what epistemic contextualism is to epistemic expressivism. As we've seen, epistemic contextualism can be summed up as the claim that sentences of the form

(1) S knows that p,

should be understood as having the truth conditions given by,

(2) S's true belief that p meets epistemic standards *e*,

where the value of *e* is determined by features of the speaker's context. Rather than explaining the meaning of instances of (1) in terms of expressing a proposition with relativized truth conditions given by (2), as the contextualist does, I suggest the epistemic expressivist will treat instances of (1) as expressions of states of epistemic norm-acceptance. It is epistemic norm-acceptance in that the norms accepted are *epistemic* norms, but norm-acceptance is, again, a complex state of mind consisting of a belief with (2) as its truth conditions and the acceptance of the epistemic norms alluded to therein.

When it comes to (at least some) ethical claims, it is pretty clear what the relevant norm is; they tell us that certain actions are obligated, permitted, or forbidden. But, although it is often

said that epistemology is a normative discipline, it is less clear what epistemic norms are. A plausible suggestion here is that the norms relevant to understanding the meaning of knowledge claims are norms which entitle beliefs. Specifically knowledge claims could be understood as expressing our acceptance of particular epistemic norms, which when applied to a particular person's belief entitle or don't entitle the belief. So we might refine (2) with:

(2') S is entitled by norms *e* to her true belief that p;

and so the epistemic expressivist proposal is that instances of (1) express a complex state of mind which includes a factual belief with (2') as its truth conditions and the acceptance of the epistemic norms *e* alluded to therein. This is similar to Brandom's proposal:

What is one doing in taking someone to have knowledge? The traditional tripartite response surely has the right form. To begin with, one is attributing some sort of *commitment*: a belief...Corresponding to the traditional justification condition on the attribution of knowledge, we may say that not any commitment will do. For it to be *knowledge* one is attributing, one must also take the commitment to be one the believer is in some sense *entitled* to...But not all beliefs to which the believer is entitled count as knowledge. One takes them to so qualify only where one takes them in addition to be true.(2000: 118-119)

However, the epistemic expressivist will construe what it is to "take the commitment to be one the believer is in some sense *entitled* to" as a matter of the attributed belief meeting the epistemic norms whose acceptance is involved in taking someone to know something.

Why do we attribute knowledge, i.e. express states of epistemic norm-acceptance? There are probably a variety of reasons, and different reasons can seem to be operative in different contexts. In some contexts, we're concerned with whether someone might be a good informant about particular sorts of information. We say, e.g., "Geoff will know whether the 1977 BMW R1100 comes standard with disk breaks; he knows everything about that bike." In other contexts, we're concerned to get our audience to rely on us. We say, e.g., "I know that the bank will be open on Saturday, we can deposit our checks then." And perhaps in other contexts we are concerned with the comparative strength of the entitlement to our beliefs. We say, e.g., "Even if I don't know that I have hands, I know that I am thinking." I think this is the insight of contextualism: in some contexts of evaluation, it seems that entitlement to a belief is fairly easy to come by, whereas in other contexts of evaluation it seems that entitlement to a belief is more difficult to come by. However, the epistemic expressivist will attribute this phenomenon not to variations in the truth-conditions of knowledge claims, rather to cross-context differences in which epistemic norms are accepted by those attributing and denying knowledge, which in turn can be explained in contextual variations in why we are evaluating whether or not a particular believer is entitled to his beliefs.

At a high enough level of abstraction, we might see all epistemic discourse as a matter of regulating our "information economy", where because of the division of intellectual labor and storage capacities different people have access to different pieces of information. Knowledge attributions, then, could be seen as playing a crucial role in keeping track of who can be trusted about which kinds of information.²⁰ When we attribute knowledge of a specific truth to someone—"S knows that p"—we thereby commit ourselves to the truth of p. Sometimes our

reason for thinking that *p* is true is that *S* thinks that *p* is true and we think *S* is to be trusted with respect to *p*. Other times, we have antecedent reason to think that *p* is true and we attribute knowledge of *p* to *S* because we take *S* to be trustworthy with respect to matters *like p*, which means that learning his opinion about whether *q* could be a good way to find out whether *q*.²¹

Of course, different epistemic norms might entitle beliefs for importantly different reasons. For example, we could imagine reliabilist norms which entitle beliefs formed by a reliable belief forming process and reason-based norms which entitle beliefs which are based on sufficient reasons. So, in some ways, this proposal is neutral with respect to traditional epistemological debates about the nature of knowledge. In fact, I suspect that part of the reason that such traditional debates have seemed so intractable is that metaepistemologists have succumbed to the dogma of descriptivism and thus taken it for granted that knowledge claims express a descriptive mental state and thus have to be understood in terms of the attribution of some constellation of factual properties, which in turn encourages the thought that there is some fact of the matter about whether reliabilists or internalists are right about the nature of the worldly relation of knowledge. However, if we give up this assumption in epistemology, as the expressivist tradition has urged us to do in ethics, we gain the resources to explain why the differences seem intractable, while neither resolving them nor dismissing their importance.²²

This is just a rough sketch of the position, but I think the upshot is that the resources to avoid the problems threatening contextualism fall directly out of the parallels between epistemic expressivism and ethical expressivism without apparent loss of the advantages of contextualism.

One of the advantages of contextualism is that it can explain the apparent cross-context variation in the attributability of knowledge. However, it seems to win this advantage at the cost of incurring the dialectical intuitions problem. This was because contextualism treats the claims as semantically relative to features of the speaker's context, and thereby eliminates any dialectical connections between the claims made in contexts with different epistemic standards. However, just as the ethical expressivist explained the apparent variability of ethical claims by appeal to the fact that they are used to express action-directed states rather than matter-of-factual beliefs, it looks like the epistemic expressivist has similar resources to explain cross-context variations. The basic idea is that in some contexts we accept epistemic norms that tell us to treat someone as entitled to his belief that *p*—thus, we say that he knows that *p*—but for other contexts we accept different epistemic norms which tell us not to treat someone as entitled to his belief that *p*—thus, we say that he doesn't know that *p*. But by maintaining that knowledge claims express states of norm-acceptance rather than relativized factual beliefs, the epistemic expressivist like the ethical expressivist gains a second axis of possible opposition or agreement. That is, he can account for the intuition of cross-context opposition and agreement by claiming that the speakers are expressing pragmatically opposed or concurring states of norm acceptance, rather logically contradictory or identical descriptive beliefs.²³

More intuitively, it is easy to see how a speaker's willingness to treat someone as entitled to her belief that *p* might vary with the speaker's changing circumstances. If the level of epistemic scrutiny in my own circumstances is low, I will be perfectly willing to treat someone as entitled to her belief even if it is based on good but perhaps not terrific evidence; however, if the level of scrutiny in my circumstances goes up and I suspect that the person doesn't have terrific evidence

for her belief, I will be less willing to treat her as entitled to the belief. In this way, the norm-expressivist can explain the intuitive variations in the attributability of knowledge across conversational contexts without resorting to the contextualist's posit of semantic relativity.

As we've seen, the ad hoc semantic problem stems from two sources. First, the natural response for the contextualist to the dialectical intuitions problem is to deny the strength and accuracy of the intuitions that generate the problem. However, second, it seems that these intuitions cannot be too weak, since otherwise it would be mysterious why skeptical generated from arguments such as SA have seemed so philosophically puzzling. The contextualist's attempt to assimilate the linguistic error embodied in this puzzlement to other sorts of plausible linguistic error, however, revealed that the context sensitivity posited by the contextualist is importantly different from other sorts of context sensitivity in that it's especially recalcitrant and particularly so among philosophers who should be less prone to the error. This made the posit look ad hoc.

By locating the source of the intuitive variations in the attributability of knowledge at, in the first instance, the pragmatic level of what mental state is expressed by utterances of knowledge attributions rather than at the semantic level of what semantic content the uttered sentences have, the expressivist avoids disrespecting the intuitions driving the dialectical intuitions problem and thus doesn't have to posit any implausible linguistic error at this stage of the argument. Moreover, it looks as if the epistemic expressivist can pursue a response to SA that is similar to the contextualist's response, with the crucial difference being that for the expressivist the paradox is generated not by mixing up the semantic content of the skeptical conclusion with the negation

of many ordinary knowledge claims, but instead in thinking that the epistemic norms that a discussion of skepticism might lead us to accept are also accepted in other contexts. For the expressivist, the skeptical conclusion *does* conflict with ordinary knowledge claims, but this is a practical rather than logical conflict—it's a conflict about whether we should trust or rely on S as to whether p. In the skeptical context we accept norms which tell us not to treat S as entitled to his belief that-*o*, while in the nonskeptical context we accept norms that tell us to treat S as entitled to his belief that-*o*. We cannot follow both norms, but, just as we can drive on the right in one country and on the left in another, we can follow one epistemic norm in one context and another in another context.²⁴

Does this expressivist response to the skeptical paradox generated by consideration of SA require the posit of inexplicable semantic blindness? Again, expressivism involves treating anyone who thinks that their knowledge claims are purely descriptive, i.e. expressive of matter-of-factual beliefs, as mistaken. And although there are perhaps slightly more people who make this mistake than in the case of ethical claims, I suspect it is still restricted to philosophers caught up in the dogma of descriptivism in philosophic semantics. I doubt that ordinary speakers have opinions about the expressive force of their claims that are fine-grained enough to cut either for or against expressivism on this point.

VI. Conclusion and Some Outstanding Issues

My goal in this paper has been to motivate and articulate a nondescriptivist alternative to the descriptivist accounts of the meaning of knowledge claims represented by traditional invariantism

and the recent development of contextualism. The attempted motivation has proceeded via an analogy: In many important respects epistemic contextualism parallels metaethical speaker-relativism; both positions gain advantages for answering skeptical worries and explaining relevant linguistic data by positing implicit relativity in the semantic content of the relevant sentences. But for these advantages, both positions suffer the dialectical intuitions problem and the ad hoc semantics problem. I argued that ethical expressivism has the resources to avoid the problems without losing the advantages attaching to ethical speaker-relativism. And then I argued that parallel considerations show that the version of epistemic expressivism I sketched also has the resources to avoid the problems without losing the advantages of epistemic contextualism. There are, of course, important worries about the general expressivist approach that I have not considered here, and if one of them turns out to be a fatal problem for ethical expressivism, then my analogy suggests that it will also be a fatal problem for epistemic expressivism. I haven't, however, been concerned to defend the expressivist approach against all objections, but rather to show how the approach can be naturally and fruitfully extended to metaepistemological debates to offer an alternative to epistemic invariantism and contextualism (and in the process provide some assistance in breaking down the dogma of descriptivism).

It might be worth briefly mentioning what I would say to two common objections to expressivism that (in conversation) people have thought to be especially damning for any sort of epistemic expressivism. First, one might think that expressivism about a type of claim treats the claim as not truth-evaluable but object that knowledge claims are even more clearly truth-evaluable than ethical claims. I think both knowledge claims and ethical claims are clearly truth-evaluable, but it should be remembered that it isn't part of any contemporarily defended version of

ethical expressivism to treat ethical claims as not truth-evaluable. The key issue is whether the claims are treated descriptively or nondescriptively—not whether they are treated as truth-evaluable or not.²⁵ Second, one might think that expressivism about a type of claim requires showing that the claim has an isolatable “emotive profile”, such that certain sorts of emotions are regularly expressed with claims of the sort; and while ethical claims might have this, epistemological claims are much more emotionally inert. I think that this objection rests on confusing the species emotivism with the kind of which it is a species, expressivism. Although the full dress version of Gibbard’s norm-expressivism involves a special place for emotions in making ethical judgments, the general pragmatic-psychological story and the formal logic of disagreement doesn’t require this connection to emotions and can be easily extended to form a version of expressivism about knowledge claims.²⁶

So much for the motivation for epistemic expressivism. The articulation of the position has been, I must admit, sketchy and incomplete. Much more needs to be said about what it is for an epistemic norm to entitle a belief—why are some beliefs entitled and others not entitled? why think knowledge claims serve the role of expressing the acceptance of epistemic norms? These are complicated questions in the social-pragmatics of epistemic discourse that have been explored by others but also deserve further exploration from the point of view of epistemic expressivism before epistemic expressivism could gain the currency of ethical expressivism. Moreover, more needs to be said about the structure of epistemic norms—what gives epistemic norms their normative force? how do epistemic norms interact with one another and with other sorts of norms? These are issues at the object-level of normative epistemological theorizing; however, expressivism can shed new light on them in that it forces us to see epistemic claims as expressive

of nondescriptive states of epistemic norm-acceptance, and this encourages us to look at these expressed states rather than to a putatively described epistemic reality for the source and nature of epistemic norms.

Well, in any case, hopefully the motivation for and sketchy articulation of epistemic expressivism provided here will encourage further investigation into these issues.²⁷

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Notes

¹ This paradox and criticism of the invariantist responses is discussed in DeRose(1995).

² See Cohen(1988, 1999), DeRose(1995), and Lewis(1996).

³ The classic examples of these are DeRose's(1992) bank cases and Cohen's(1988) airport cases. Such cases can be misleading when the knowledge claims are first-personal because the speaker's context collapses into the subject's context. See DeRose(2005) for discussion and third person cases which appear to support contextualism.

⁴ Not all invariantists would agree. Hawthorne(2004) and Stanley(2005) argue that these variations can be explained in the case of first-person knowledge claims by treating knowledge as a more subtly sensitive to the subject's practical situation than has been traditionally recognized and variations in third-person cases are due to a tendency to project our own practical situation onto others. Rysiew(2001) argues that these intuitions are due to contextual variations in the speaker-meaning rather than sentence-meaning of knowledge claims, where, for him, sentence-meaning is a matter of the semantic content of the claim and speaker-meaning is a matter of what propositions a speaker typically intends to convey to his audience by making the claim. Williamson(2005) argues that the intuitions about variation can be explained in terms of psychological bias caused by salience effects. It's outside the scope of this paper to argue fully against these more subtle versions of invariantism. In other work in progress, I argue that they fail to explain the semantic data as well as contextualism and require implausible accounts of what is going on with SA, although they also avoid some of the problems facing contextualism. See also DeRose(2004).

⁵ It is perhaps worth mentioning that this point applies both to object-level knowledge claims and meta-level evaluations of knowledge claims as true or false. Sharon could have just as easily said things like "What I said earlier was false/true", but the contextualist would have had the same problem capturing the dialectical connections. Often contextualism's critics charge that contextualism cannot explain the typical way we evaluate knowledge claims made in a different

context as true or false—see, e.g., Rosenberg (2002: 164). However, I think that problem is only symptomatic of the deeper problem of contextualism of capturing the apparent dialectical connections between both object-level knowledge claims and meta-level evaluations of knowledge claims.

⁶ This is effectively the objection pressed by Schiffer (1996).

⁷ Stanley (2004) argues that there are important syntactic differences between ‘flat’ and ‘knows’ that undermine Cohen’s analogy. My argument here doesn’t turn on these differences, and even though they seem real, I am unconvinced that they undermine anything more than a strong reading of early contextualist rhetoric to the effect that ‘knows’ is context-sensitive *like ‘flat’*. See DeRose(forthcoming) for more discussion of Stanley’s objection.

⁸ Rysiew(2001) argues that contextualism requires thinking that ordinary speakers are ignorant of the sentence-meaning and speaker-meaning of knowledge claims. The former sort of error is not, in his view, implausible, but he finds “it manifestly *implausible* to suppose that speakers can be wrong about what it is *they* mean—about what their communicative intentions are—in uttering certain sentences”(2001: 483). I’m unsure whether this is always true, since if Cohen is right that we can “get competent speakers to question their everyday flatness ascriptions by implicitly raising the standards”(2004: 193), this would seem to be a case where ordinary speakers are ignorant of their (at least past) speaker intentions. See Hofweber(1999) for a similar objection as that pursued by Schiffer and Rysiew, but see also Neta(2003) for an independent argument that speakers can manifest other sorts of semantic ignorance besides ignorance of the sentence-meaning of their claims. It seems to me, however, that the deeper issue is not only about ordinary speakers but also about philosophers who are exercised by SA. It may be more plausible to think that speakers are making an error about the literal content of knowledge claims than about their communicative intentions in making them, but is it plausible to think that they’re *so* mistaken about either that they would think that SA generates a *paradox*?

⁹ Dreier(1990) argues that his subjectivist version of the view also has the advantage that it can explain the truth in ethical internalism.

¹⁰ Of course, Mackie argues that our ordinary ethical claims are not relative in their semantics, but it would take me too far a field to enter into the debate between Mackie and relativists here.

¹¹ However, see Wright (2005) for an argument that contextualism cannot really neutrally allow that skepticism and ordinary epistemological discourse both correct in their own contexts. I think the contextualist might welcome this conclusion, while arguing that contextualism nonetheless better explains the pull of skepticism, but I won't go into this issue further here.

¹² This distinction appears to be due to Creswell(1973); see Lycan(2000), p. 165-170.

¹³ I add the qualification “standardly” because I disagree with Gibbard that “the expressivist starts with states of mind, and uses these to elucidate normative beliefs or seeming beliefs”(2003: 180); or, at least I think there can be other ways to start. In work in progress, I suggest that a version of expressivism more resilient to many of the objections to expressivism is one that starts with states of commitment (practical and theoretical), which are conceived of inferentially rather than psychologically, and uses these to elucidate normative claims. See Chrisman (ms-a) and Chrisman (ms-b). However, here I stick to the standard way to make the point that expressivism offers a fruitful alternative to both relativist and universalist accounts.

¹⁴ This is actually only his “second approximation”, which he goes on to refine into a notion of “normative content” modeled on possible-worlds semantics for ordinary indicative statements. The general approach is defended in more detail and applied to more cases in Gibbard(1990), where this complex state of mind falls under the rubric of “norm acceptance”. In Gibbard(2003), he has developed a different but ostensibly compatible version of expressivism in terms of a distinction between thinking what to do and thinking what is the case rather than the distinction between representational beliefs and norm acceptance. For more on recent developments in Gibbard's version of expressivism, see Chrisman (2005).

¹⁵ To be precise, this is not exactly Gibbard's view. He argues that the emotions of guilt and resentment are intimately tied to specifically ethical norms. So, according to him, specifically ethical sentences express the speaker's acceptance of norms that permit or forbid guilt and resentment. This complication is both controversial and not relevant here, so I shall suppress it.

¹⁶ Thanks to James Dreier for pressing me to express this point this way.

¹⁷ See especially Ridge(forthcoming) and many of the articles he cites in his discussion.

¹⁸ Some may worry that expressivism cannot really capture the sense in which two ethical claims disagree because a *difference* in which mental states expressed by an ethical claim and its negation is not *genuine disagreement* unless these mental states are factual beliefs. But notice that the theoretical burden posed by the dialectical intuitions problem is not to establish that accepting different norms is itself *genuine* disagreement—this would require establishing what “genuine” disagreement is—but rather to account for the intuition of dialectical connections between the claims. If the pragmatic opposition and agreement exhibited by expressions of states of norm acceptance counts as genuine, then the norm-expressivist has the resources to *underwrite* these intuitions. But if the only “genuine” disagreement is logical contradiction, then the norm-expressivist will be happy to *explain away* these intuitions by recourse to the pragmatic opposition and agreement he finds in ethical expressions.

¹⁹ Or at least he has a better way to explain them away. See preceding note.

²⁰ An alternative way to go here is to follow Williamson (forthcoming) in taking there to be a tight connection between thinking that S knows p and thinking that S is entitled to use p as a premise in her practical reasoning. Then on the norm-expressivist view, knowledge claims could be used to regulate entitlements and obligations in the strictures of practical reasoning.

²¹ This is similar to the account pursued in Craig(1990); see especially p. 11-17.

²² For an independent argument that at least some epistemological discourse is partially nonfactual, which is motivated by similar observations about the intractability of certain sorts of epistemological debates, see Field(1998). Sellars' (1963) claim that knowledge attributions place one in the “space of

reasons” and thus cannot be analyzed in purely descriptive terms without committing something like the “naturalistic fallacy” can also be interpreted as a denial of the factuality of knowledge claims.

²³ Again, one will wonder whether this is “genuine” disagreement and agreement, but there’s no reason to think that this is a special problem for the epistemic expressivist. So insofar as the response to this worry was satisfactorily answered in the metaethical case, it is answered here too. See note 18 above.

²⁴ Are there some contexts where we *have* to accept the skeptical norms—i.e. where SA is sound? On the expressivist account, it is intelligible that some people do (in some contexts) accept skeptical norms while others (in the same context) refuse to. This could explain the “endless” character of some epistemological debates, but it could also provide some traction for moving forward: the question becomes one of whether there are some contexts in which the information economy is best managed by following norms that would not count a person’s belief that-*o* based on ordinary evidence as trustworthy. Maybe there are and maybe there aren’t. The issue here is not to answer this normative epistemological question but to frame it anew in light of the emerging metaepistemological view.

²⁵ Some may want to insist that the issue is rather whether epistemic claims could plausibly be construed as “noncognitive”. But for this to be an independent objection, then a claim’s being noncognitive has to come to something more than its not being truth-evaluable. The most plausible suggestion is that it comes to the claim’s expressing a noncognitive mental state, but then we need an account of the difference between cognitive and noncognitive mental states. I think it would beg the question to say that only matter-of-factual beliefs are cognitive mental states, but I also recognize that the question of whether states of “norm-acceptance” cognitive or noncognitive is vexed. In Chrisman (ms-a, ms-b), I develop a way of adverting it (and some of the problems with noncognitivism that it is symptomatic of) by arguing for a version of expressivism based on the inferentially articulated distinction between theoretical and practical commitments rather than the psychologically articulated distinction between cognitive and noncognitive mental states.

²⁶ This is a possibility to which Gibbard himself sometimes hints, see his (2003: ch 10-11).

²⁷ For helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper, I would like to thank Stewart Cohen, Jamie Dreier, Hartry Field, William Lycan, Ram Neta, Jesse Prinz, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, Ted Parent, and Jay Rosenberg.