

Contextualism, Skepticism and Warranted Assertibility Manœuvres

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1. Contextualism and Warranted Assertibility Manœuvres

Attributer contextualists maintain that ‘knows’ is a context-sensitive term in the sense that sentences of the form “S knows that p” (call this the ‘ascription sentence’) will have different truth-values depending upon the context of utterance (which will, of course, be the *attributer’s* context). One interesting consequence of the contextualist thesis is that assertions of the very same ascription sentence can simultaneously express a truth and a falsehood relative to two different contexts of utterance,¹ and it is this component of the thesis that enables it to offer a compelling response to the problem of radical skepticism by accommodating our apparently conflicting intuitions in this regard.

In particular, it offers a straightforward explanation of why it is that (i) outside of contexts² in which we are actively considering skeptical doubts we are perfectly happy (*ceteris paribus*) to ascribe a great deal of knowledge to agents, and yet (ii) once we begin to seriously consider skeptical doubts (and thus enter skeptical contexts) we are inclined to withdraw such ascriptions. Since we can stipulate that the epistemic position of the agents under consideration is fixed, it seems that one of these intuitions must be wrong. Either we are (in non-skeptical contexts) wrong to ascribe knowledge to agents, or (in skeptical contexts) we are wrong to withdraw such ascriptions and regard the agents in question as lacking knowledge. Contextualism tries to tread an irenic path here by maintaining that, suitably qualified, *both* of these intuitions can be accommodated. In particular, contextualists typically argue that, because of the context sensitivity of ‘knows’, relative to the quotidian epistemic standards at issue in non-skeptical contexts assertions of ascription sentences will (*ceteris paribus*) express truths, whilst relative to the epistemic standards at issue in skeptical contexts assertions of those same ascription sentences will express falsehoods.³

There are a number of lines of criticism that have been levelled against contextualist theories of this sort,⁴ but perhaps the most immediate worry one might have about the view is that it confuses changes in the conditions under which it is conversationally appropriate to assert ascription sentences with changes in the truth-conditions of those sentences. That is, it might be argued by the skeptic that although it is conversationally inappropriate, in non-skeptical contexts, to deny that agents have knowledge, this is not because such denials are

false. Similarly, an anti-skeptic who was unpersuaded by contextualism might well contend that whilst it is conversationally inappropriate to ascribe knowledge to agents in skeptical contexts, nevertheless those agents do possess the knowledge that is being ascribed to them.

Keith DeRose (1999: §§8-10; 2002: §§1.2-5) has argued against this ‘conversational’ defence of an “invariantist” (i.e., non-contextualist) construal of the term ‘knows’ by placing three constraints on proposals of this sort (what he calls “Warranted Assertibility Manœuvres”, or “WAMs” for short). First, that it must be inappropriate to both assert the sentence in question *and* to assert its denial. Second, that the WAM must be able to explain the impropriety of the assertion in terms of the generation of a false implicature. And finally, third, that the false implicature should be explained in terms of a general rule of conversation rather than in terms of an *ad hoc* rule that is specific to that particular case.

To illustrate how these conditions work, DeRose contrasts a successful WAM with one that is unsuccessful. In the former case, the WAM is being employed in order to explain why assertions of sentences of the form “It’s possible that P_{ind} ”⁵ can seem false when they are asserted by an agent who knows the proposition in question. For example, suppose I know that your umbrella is in the broom cupboard but, when asked, reply that “It’s possible that your umbrella in the broom cupboard”. The idea is that such an assertion is not false, but it is conversationally inappropriate because it generates a false conversational implicature to the effect that one does not know P .

This WAM meets the three conditions set down. It meets the first condition because in this case it seems just as improper to assert “It’s *not* possible that your umbrella is in the broom cupboard”. And it meets the second and third conditions because it appeals to a general conversational principle - the “assert the stronger” principle - in order to explain why a false conversational implicature is being generated here (that one lacks knowledge of where the umbrella is). If you know that the umbrella is in broom cupboard but you merely make the logically weaker (true) claim that it is possible that it is there, then your assertion will generate the false conversational implicature that you do not know where the umbrella is because if you did then you would say so.

DeRose contrasts this use of a WAM with a WAM that is employed in order to defend the thesis that the truth-conditions of “S is a bachelor” do not contain any condition to the effect that S is unmarried. The intuition that when one asserts this sentence about a married man one asserts something false is then explained away in terms of how assertions of this sentence in these situations are conversationally inappropriate even though what is being

asserted is nevertheless true. Clearly, this WAM does not meet the three conditions that DeRose identifies. Whilst it is indeed conversationally inappropriate to assert the sentence in question when it applies to a married man, it is not conversationally inappropriate to assert its negation (i.e., “*It is false* that S is a bachelor”). Indeed, such an assertion seems entirely appropriate. Second, the explanation of why this claim is conversationally inappropriate does not make appeal to the generation of a false conversational implicature. DeRose (1999: 199; cf. DeRose 2002: §1.4) calls this strategy a “bare warranted assertibility manoeuvre” on the grounds that it “simply explains away the problematic intuitions of falsehood by claiming that the assertions are unwarranted [...] without further explaining *why* [...].” And even if the strategy were to incorporate a claim about how these assertions generate false conversational implicatures, it would then become susceptible to the third constraint that the conversational rules at issue should not be *ad hoc*, and it is difficult to see how the account can meet this challenge.

DeRose further argues that the invariantist response to contextualism is a version of a ‘bad’ WAM, like the bachelor case.⁶ There are two sorts of invariantism that are possible here, an *anti-skeptical* invariantism which argues that assertions of the relevant ascription sentences will (tend to) express truths in all contexts, and a *skeptical* invariantism which argues that assertions of ascription sentences will express falsehoods in all contexts.⁷ In both cases, contrary intuitions will need to be explained away using a WAM.

As regards the anti-skeptical WAM that will be required, DeRose argues that it faces the following problems. First, it will have to explain not only why assertions of ascription sentences seem to be both conversationally inappropriate and express falsehoods in skeptical contexts, but also why assertions of the negations of those ascription sentences seem to be both conversationally appropriate and express truths in those same contexts. That is, it will have to explain not only why an assertion of, say, “Keith knows that he is in his study” made in a skeptical context seems to be both conversationally inappropriate and express a falsehood, but also why an assertion of “*It is false that* Keith knows that he is in his study” made in the same context seems to be both conversationally appropriate and express a truth.

Second, DeRose contends that this strategy will typically take the form of a “bare” WAM and will hence be as a result subject to the second constraint on ‘good’ WAMs. Moreover, he argues that insofar as a further account is given, then this will tend to appeal to conversational principles that are specific to the case of ‘knows’, such as “If someone is close enough, for present intents and purposes, to being a knower, don’t say that she doesn’t know, but rather say that she knows.” (DeRose 1999: 201)⁸

DeRose further maintains that similar objections will also apply to any WAM that the skeptic puts forward.⁹ So whilst DeRose thinks that there are situations in which WAMs can be legitimately employed in order to explain away the appearance of truth (or falsity), he argues that there isn't a legitimate WAM available that can be put into service by the invariantist. His claim is thus that, as far as the linguistic data is concerned at any rate, contextualism has a considerable, if not decisive, theoretical advantage over invariantism.

2. The Prospects For an Anti-Sceptical WAM

I will not be taking issue with the constraints that DeRose imposes on 'good' WAMs, or with the conclusions that DeRose draws from the contrast he makes between the 'good' and the 'bad' WAM discussed in the last section.¹⁰ Instead, I will be arguing that there is a WAM available that supports the invariantist thesis and which meets these three constraints. Since our anti-skeptical intuitions are clearly much stronger than our skeptical intuitions, the invariantist WAM that I will focus upon is one that supports an *anti*-skeptical version of the invariantist thesis.

The prospects for mounting a successful anti-skeptical WAM against contextualism are considerably enhanced by a feature of our use of the term 'knows' in skeptical contexts that contextualists like DeRose overlook. This is that when first faced with a skeptical argument the normal response is not to *reverse* one's assessment of an agent's epistemic position (and thus to start asserting the negations of the ascription sentences that one was previously willing to assert), but rather to simply *withdraw* those ascriptions -- that is, to be reluctant to continue to assert them. More specifically, in skeptical conversational contexts it seems inappropriate and false *either* to assert that an agent has knowledge *or* to assert that the agent lacks knowledge, particularly when the agent in question is the person making the assertion.¹¹

We will look at why this is the case in a moment. First, however, it is important to note that this feature of the linguistic data enables the proponent of an anti-skeptical invariantist WAM to meet DeRose's first condition on 'good' WAMs. *Contra* DeRose, what is required is not an account that explains away both the apparent falsity and conversational impropriety of an assertion of an ascription sentence (i.e., "Keith knows that he is in his study") *and* the apparent truth and conversational propriety of an assertion of the negation of this ascription sentence (i.e., "*It is false that* Keith knows that he is in his study") but only an

account that explains the former. In particular, what we need is a description of what is happening in the skeptical context that explains why agents would be disinclined to assert anything of substance in that context. As we will see, the key seems to lie in how skeptical contexts explicitly consider the truth or otherwise of radical skeptical hypotheses, such as the hypothesis that one is presently a brain-in-a-vat (BIV) being ‘fed’ one’s experiences by neuroscientists.

Of course, contextualists will no doubt be inclined to simply deny this claim that agents tend to withdraw rather than reverse their assertions of ascription sentences when they enter skeptical contexts. Crucially, however, the difference between contextualists and anti-skeptical invariantists on this score does not merely reduce to a clash of intuitions, since the contextualist is under an obligation to at least *partially* accept the opposing intuition in this regard. The reason for this is that whilst contextualists have tended to focus on assertions of ascription sentences where knowledge is being ascribed to a third person (call these ‘third-person ascription sentences’), another common feature of our practices of ascribing knowledge concerns *self*-ascriptions of knowledge. Although this can be done explicitly, via sentences such as “I know that I am in my study” (call these ‘explicit self-ascription sentences’), more typically it is done less directly via the simple assertion of the embedded proposition, in this case via the assertion of the sentence “I am in my study” (call this a ‘simple self-ascription sentence’).

The problem facing contextualists is that whilst the issue of whether we withdraw our assertions where an ascription of knowledge is explicitly involved is (by their lights) moot, the issue of whether we withdraw our assertions of simple self-ascription sentences is not moot at all (by anyone’s lights). That is, in response to a mere change in the context a simple self-ascription sentence that was once assertible might well be no longer assertible, but this will not mean that the relevant contrary sentence (i.e., “*It is false that P*”) will become assertible. And given that assertions of simple self-ascription sentences are only withdrawn in response to mere changes in the context, rather than reversed, the natural question to ask is why the context-sensitivity of the propriety of assertions of ascription sentences should not simply be explained in terms of the shifting propriety conditions of the embedded proposition rather than in terms of any more robust thesis regarding the context-sensitivity of ‘knows’. As DeRose puts the point (which he terms the “Generality Objection”):

Since “P” becomes unassertable in high-standards contexts even though there is no change in its content as we move into the high-standards context, and since the drift

towards the unassertibility of “S knows that P” as we move into more demanding contexts is just what we would expect given that “P” displays a similar drift, why suppose the unassertibility of the knowledge claim in high contexts is due to a change in content *it* undergoes as we move into such contexts? According to the Generality Objection, there is no good reason to suppose there is such a variation in truth-conditions of knowledge attributions. (DeRose 2002: §1.5)

DeRose’s response to this problem has been to combine his critique of the invariantist WAM with a commitment to the knowledge account of assertion. This latter thesis maintains that when one asserts a proposition, one represents oneself as knowing that proposition, such that the overriding rule of assertion is to only assert what one knows.¹² On a contextualist reading the knowledge account of assertion takes on a relativised form such that “To be positioned to assert that P, one must know that P according to the standards for knowledge that are in place as one makes one’s assertion” (DeRose 2002: §2.2), where the applicable standards will, of course, be variable in the manner that contextualism maintains.

Whilst the knowledge account of assertion is itself a contentious thesis, by combining his contextualism with this view DeRose is seemingly able to offer an ingenious solution to the Generality Objection. If to assert that P is to represent oneself as knowing P, and if the standards for knowledge are context-sensitive, then it follows that it is little wonder that the assertibility of “P” should be context-sensitive. In epistemically undemanding contexts, “P” will (tend to) be assertible, whereas in epistemically demanding contexts it won’t (tend to) be assertible. And note that this result is achieved without stipulating anything about how the truth-conditions for assertions of simple self-ascription sentences change merely in response to conversational factors. On the contextualist account, our willingness to withdraw assertions of sentences of this sort in response to changes in the context indicates our implicit recognition that changes in the context can affect the epistemic standards in play and thus whether or not the assertion of that sentence is conversationally appropriate.

Moreover, although DeRose himself does not appear to have noticed this, one of the immediate consequences of adopting the knowledge account of assertion is that a skeptical invariantist WAM is not going to be available. After all if one should only assert P when one knows that P then, given that knowledge is factive (in that one can only know that P where P is true), the knowledge account of assertion will straightforwardly rule-out the possibility that one could properly assert P even though P is false, and this would be a central component of any skeptical invariantist WAM.¹³ It seems then that DeRose has not only found a way of

dealing with the Generality Objection, but has also aligned his view with an account of assertion which excludes a skeptical invariantist WAM from ever getting off the ground.

3. Responding to the Linguistic Data

We can take the following claims to capture the agreed features of the linguistic data in this dispute:

- I. Agents withdraw (but do not reverse) their assertions of simple self-ascription sentences when they move from a quotidian to a skeptical context.
- II. Agents *at the very least* withdraw their assertions of third-person and explicit self-ascription sentences when they move from a quotidian to a skeptical context.
- III. Agents do not assert ascription sentences (including simple and explicit self-ascription sentences) which involve skeptical hypotheses in any context.

We have already remarked on I and noted that whilst contextualists will accept II they will want to add that agents do more than merely withdraw their assertions, claiming instead that agents actually reverse them (i.e., assert the relevant contrary sentence). III has been implicit in much of what we have been discussing so far in that all parties to this dispute grant that there is something about the assertion of an ascription sentence involving a skeptical hypothesis that entails that (*ceteris paribus*) the context is now (if it wasn't already) a *skeptical* context. Note that whilst it is usually the *denials* of skeptical hypotheses that will be at issue in this regard (such as when one asserts "I am not a BIV" or "S knows that she is not a BIV"), what is important is only that it is the truth or otherwise of a skeptical hypothesis that is in question. The thought is that the mere raising of this issue changes the context to a skeptical context.

With the agreed linguistic data so characterised, the first task in hand is to determine whether there is an alternative explanation available of why the propriety conditions for assertions of simple self-ascription sentences shift in response to changes in the context that does not make use of the knowledge account of assertion. In particular, what is required is an account of why the propriety conditions for assertions of this sort are affected by the move to a skeptical context in which the truth of a skeptical hypothesis is at issue.

In order to see why the introduction of a skeptical hypothesis could affect the

propriety of one's assertions, one needs to consider how the conversational propriety of assertions is constrained by the Gricean conversational maxim of evidence which demands that agents should not make assertions if they are unable to back-up that assertion with adequate evidence (see Grice 1989: 26). What counts as 'adequate' evidence in this regard will, however, be a context-sensitive matter. In particular, as we will now see, regarding the assertion of the same sentence the evidential demands in skeptical contexts are greater than in non-skeptical contexts.

Suppose that an agent asserts, in a non-skeptical quotidian context, "I am in my study", perhaps because she wants to indicate to someone in another room of the house where she is. The maxim of evidence demands that this assertion be backed-up by the appropriate evidence which, in this context, would normally only require such relevant evidence as to indicate that she is in the study *as opposed to*, for example, the kitchen. Here, basic perceptual evidence would typically suffice to rule-out these 'local' error-possibilities. Accordingly, the conversational implicature generated by this assertion that our agent has adequate evidence to back-up her assertion will generally be true.

Compare this example with a situation in which our agent asserts the following anti-skeptical sentence, "I am not a BIV", perhaps in response to a skeptical challenge raised in an epistemology seminar. The problem with an assertion of this sort is that there are *no* adequate grounds that can be offered in support of it since one does not possess adequate reasons for thinking that one is not a BIV (which is what ensures the enduring attraction of skeptical arguments).¹⁴ Accordingly, this assertion will inevitably generate the false conversational implicature that one is able to adduce these grounds. As a result, such an assertion is conversationally inappropriate in *all* contexts (i.e., it is *in principle* conversationally inappropriate). And note that the same goes for assertions of the contrary sentence, "I *am* a BIV".

The interesting case, however, is the assertion of a 'non-skeptical' sentence - that is, one that does not explicitly or implicitly concern a skeptical hypothesis, such as the example given above, "I am in my study" - in a *skeptical* context, such as one in which the BIV skeptical hypothesis is at issue. Crucially, the relevant grounds that need to be offered in support of this assertion in this context are far more demanding, since now our agent needs to offer evidence in support of her assertion which supports what is asserted (that she is in her study) *as opposed to* the skeptical hypothesis under consideration (that she is a BIV). And since grounds of this sort are in principle unavailable, assertions of non-skeptical sentences in skeptical contexts will inevitably generate false conversational implicatures and thus be

conversationally inappropriate. Moreover, notice that what applies to an assertion of the sentence “I am in my study” will apply with just as much force to an assertion of the sentence “I am *not* in my study”. Accordingly, it is little wonder that in skeptical contexts agents only withdraw assertions of simple self-ascription sentences that they would ordinarily assert in non-skeptical contexts, rather than reversing those assertions.

In any case, even setting aside the role of this conversational maxim as regards assertions of simple self-ascription sentences, asserting the denial of what one previously asserted purely in response to conversational factors would offend against what I will refer to as the ‘commitment’ principle. In general, this is the principle that in asserting a proposition one is thereby committing oneself to that proposition, where this means that, all other things being equal, one is obliged to ‘stick with’ what one has asserted in all subsequent contexts.¹⁵ An assertion thus generates the conversational implicature that one has this commitment to the proposition asserted. Accordingly, the assertions of agents who lack this kind of commitment to what they assert - such that they are willing to reverse their assertions in response to mere changes in the context - will generate false conversational implicatures and so will be conversationally inappropriate.¹⁶

Note, however, that it does not follow from this principle that agents should be willing to continue (*ceteris paribus*) to assert what they are committed to in all subsequent contexts because, as we have seen, there can be conversational constraints in play which make even true assertions unassertable. If one is in a context in which the assertion of the sentence “I am in my study” carries the anti-skeptical conversational implicature that one has evidence in favour of this assertion that suffices to eliminate the skeptical error-possibilities under consideration in that context, then one ought not to make the assertion. Nevertheless, given that, *ex hypothesi*, all that has changed is the context, the agent’s previous assertion of this proposition in a non-skeptical context brings with it a commitment to the proposition asserted which carries over to the current skeptical context (albeit in a tacit form).

When it comes to assertions of simple self-ascriptions of knowledge, then, there is a WAM available that can meet the three conditions that DeRose sets down on ‘good’ WAMs but which does not employ a contextualized version of the knowledge account of assertion. It meets the first condition because the problem assertions in question are just as problematic when one deals with assertions where the sentence at issue is negated. Moreover, it meets the second and third conditions because it employs general conversational maxims and principles in order to explain the inappropriateness of the assertions in terms of the generation of false conversational implicatures.

4. Applying the WAM to Other Assertions of Ascription Sentences

Given this *impasse* between contextualists and anti-skeptical invariantists as regards the best interpretation of the linguistic data when it comes to assertions of simple self-ascription sentences, the issue then becomes whether we can extend this WAM so that it applies to assertions of explicit self-ascription sentences and third-person ascription sentences.

At first pass, one might think that the WAM just described as regards assertions of simple self-ascription sentences will straightforwardly apply, *a fortiori*, to assertions of explicit self-ascription sentences as well. That is, the natural thought would be that by asserting the logically stronger claim the agent thereby incurs additional commitments and evidential burdens such that insofar as the weaker assertion is conversationally inappropriate, then the stronger assertion will be even more so. In terms of assertions of non-skeptical explicit self-ascription sentences (such as “I know that I am in my study”) in skeptical contexts, and skeptical explicit self-ascription sentences (such as “I know that I am not a BIV”) in any context, this is certainly true. Complications arise, however, once one notices that one cannot simply apply the WAM set out above to explain why assertions of the relevant contrary assertions are also (in certain contexts) conversationally inappropriate, such as assertions of “I do *not* know that I am in my study”, or “I do *not* know that I am not a BIV”. The reason for this is that, unlike contrary assertions in the case of simple self-ascription sentences, these contrary assertions are not assertions about the *falsity* of the embedded proposition, but merely concern the epistemic status of the agent’s belief about this proposition. Accordingly, we cannot explain their conversational impropriety by citing, as we did above, the agent’s lack of relevant evidential grounds in support of the assertion of the *opposing* proposition in the context in question.

Nevertheless, although the maxim of evidence does not gain a purchase on this issue of why such contrary sentences can be unassertable, the commitment principle does still have application in this case. Indeed, since the propositions expressed by explicit self-ascription sentences are logically stronger than those expressed by the counterpart simple self-ascription sentences, one would naturally expect there to be a greater level of commitment involved in the former case.¹⁷ With such a commitment in play, whilst agents might not continue to assert the explicit self-ascription sentences that they previously asserted because of changes in the context, they won’t assert anything that they are aware directly conflicts with their previous

assertions (such as, “I do not know that I am not a BIV”), much less will they tend to reverse their previous assertions (and thus assert, for example, “I do not know that I am in my study”) merely in response to changes in the context.¹⁸

Of course, the contextualist response to this will no doubt be to claim that what the agent is committed to is simply the proposition at issue and that it is part of their thesis that the proposition that is being expressed in each case is different. Accordingly, whilst agents should retain their commitment to the propositions expressed by assertions of explicit self-ascription sentences in quotidian contexts even when they enter skeptical contexts, this is consistent with them asserting the relevant contrary sentence in the new context because in doing so they are signalling their lack of commitment to a *different* proposition.

Whilst there is nothing wrong with this move, it does alter the dialectical landscape somewhat. What we were promised were considerations which demonstrated that there was linguistic data which was firmly on the side of the contextualist, whereas what we have ended up with is merely the claim that there is *an* interpretation of the relevant linguistic data available that is consistent with contextualism. A supposedly knock-down argument against invariantism has thus become an argument to the effect that the relevant linguistic data alone doesn't entail this view. Intuitively, this weaker claim isn't something that the invariantist should be overly concerned about since it simply means that the battle between contextualists and invariantists needs to be fought on other grounds and here one would expect invariantists to be in a strong position. In any case, the invariantist cause has turned out to be a lot better off than was advertised by DeRose.

Finally, we can extend the WAM under consideration here to third-person ascription sentences, such as the non-skeptical sentence “*Keith knows* that he is in his study”. Notice that the evidential burdens incurred by assertions of this sort do not merely relate to the ascription of knowledge itself, but also to the embedded proposition (in this case, that Keith is in his study) since the truth of this proposition is part of the truth-conditions for this sentence as a whole. As a result, in order to properly assert this sentence, agents not only need to be able to offer relevant evidence in favour of the knowledge ascription, but also in favour of the embedded proposition. In this sense, then, assertions of third-person ascription sentences, like assertions of explicit self-ascription sentences, are logically stronger than assertions of simple self-ascription sentences and thus incur greater evidential burdens. Accordingly, the considerations offered above as regards the conversational impropriety of certain assertions of simple self-ascription sentences will have even greater force when it comes to (i) assertions of non-skeptical third-person ascription sentences (e.g., “Keith knows

that he is in his study”) in skeptical contexts and (ii) assertions of skeptical third-person ascription sentences (e.g., “Keith knows that he is not a BIV”) in all contexts.

As with assertions of explicit self-ascription sentences, however, one cannot simply adduce the maxim of evidence in order to explain why the relevant contrary sentences in this case are not assertible because these assertions do not entail the falsity of the embedded proposition. Just as with assertions of explicit self-ascription sentences, however, the commitment principle *will* be applicable here to account for why agents do not in skeptical contexts assert anything that directly conflicts with what they previously asserted in a non-skeptical context (e.g., “Keith does not know that he is not a BIV”). Still less will they explicitly reverse their previous assertions in response to a mere conversational change (e.g., “Keith does not know that he is in his study”).

Again, contextualists can respond to this claim by maintaining that by their lights the proposition that the agent is committed to is not inconsistent with the proposition expressed in the new context by the agent’s assertion of the relevant contrary sentence. But as we saw above, this move simply highlights the fact that what is being presented here are merely grounds for the claim that there is a stand-off between invariantism and contextualism when it comes to the linguistic data, as opposed to the stronger contention which was supposed to be on offer that the linguistic data is firmly on the side of contextualism.

5. Concluding Remarks

So despite DeRose’s claims to the contrary, there is a WAM available which can meet the three conditions that he sets down. The considerations that DeRose offers in favour of a contextualist - as opposed to an anti-skeptical and invariantist - interpretation of the linguistic data are thus indecisive, and hence whatever the other merits of the contextualist approach (and demerits of the anti-skeptical invariantist stance), one cannot evade the challenge that the anti-skeptical invariantist WAM presents contextualism via the argument that DeRose offers.

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Notes

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¹ Here, for example, is Cohen (2000: 94):

“I [...] defend the view that ascriptions of knowledge are context sensitive. According to this view, the truth-value of sentences containing the words “know”, and its cognates will depend on contextually determined standards. Because of this, such a sentence can have different truth-values in different contexts. Now when I say “contexts”, I mean “contexts of ascription”. [...] This view has the consequence that, given a fixed set of circumstances, a subject S, and a proposition p, two speakers may say “S knows that p”, and only one of them thereby say something true. For the same reason, one speaker may say “S knows p”, and another say “S does not know p”, (relative to the same circumstances), and both speakers thereby say something true.”

It is this feature of the view that distinguishes attributer contextualist theories from subject contextualist theories, as advanced, for example, by Williams (1991). For discussion of this contrast, see DeRose (1999: §4) and Pritchard (2002b). Henceforth, when I refer to ‘contextualism’, I will have attributer contextualism in mind.

² Following most attributer contextualists, by ‘context’ here I mean (at least primarily) *conversational* context.

³ Numerous versions of contextualism of this sort have been proposed in the recent literature, with each version of the thesis incorporating a specific account of, *inter alia*, the mechanisms that raise and lower the epistemic standards. See especially DeRose (1995), Lewis (1996) and Cohen (2000).

⁴ For the main discussions of contextualism in the recent literature, see Schiffer (1996); Feldman (1999); Heller (1999); Vogel (1999); Fogelin (2000); Sosa (2000); and Pritchard (2001). For a partial survey of the literature on contextualism in general, see Pritchard (2002a, §§5-7; 2002b).

⁵ The subscript here is meant to indicate that the proposition in question is to be understood

in the indicative mood.

⁶ Interestingly, DeRose's focus when it comes to the invariantist WAM is not on how this proposal works in *skeptical* contexts at all, but on how it would function in non-skeptical contexts where the epistemic standards are 'high' (such as contexts in which a lot hangs on the correctness of the knowledge ascription). Quite reasonably, DeRose (2002, §1.1.) motivates this focus on non-skeptical but epistemically demanding contexts by contending that we want contextualism to be motivated on grounds independent of the skeptical problem. This way of putting matters tends to assume that the considerations that indicate that an invariantist WAM is problematic when it comes to non-skeptical but epistemically demanding contexts will be just as applicable when it comes to skeptical contexts. As I argue below, however, there are good reasons for thinking that there is an invariantist WAM that meets the conditions that DeRose lays down for it when it is applied to skeptical contexts. If this is right, then that an invariantist WAM is implausible in non-skeptical 'high' contexts will not in itself suffice to motivate the application of its rival theory, contextualism, to the skeptical problem. Since one of the chief advantages of contextualism is meant to be its resolution of the skeptical problem, this is a major difficulty for the view. At any rate, I won't be questioning here DeRose's claim that the invariantist WAM is implausible in non-skeptical 'high' contexts, although I do think that this claim is problematic and that the considerations offered here will have application to assertions of ascription sentences in non-skeptical 'high' contexts. In what follows, I will take DeRose's remarks about invariantist WAMs to be directly applicable to the issue of how those WAMs function in skeptical contexts.

⁷ Unger (1971; 1975) endorses a version of the skeptical invariantist position and Stroud (1984: chapter 2) expresses sympathy with the general skeptical line. In later work, Unger's (1984) position evolves into a third type of position that we might term 'quasi-invariantism'. According to this view, there are no grounds for preferring an anti-skeptical contextualist thesis over a skeptical invariantist thesis.

⁸ DeRose has Unger's (1975) version of invariantism specifically in mind here.

⁹ DeRose does argue, however, that the situation is a little more complicated when it comes to the skeptical WAM proposed by Unger (1975; cf. Unger 1971) because he motivates an invariantism-based skepticism via the claim that 'knowledge' is an absolute concept like 'flat' or 'empty'. Unger's view thus raises special problems because he is adverting to conversational rules that apply to a fairly wide class of terms.

¹⁰ Both of these points have been contested. See, for example, Brown (2003; 2005) and Bach (2004).

¹¹ Black (2002) argues for a similar claim, though on different grounds to those put forward here. The exceptions to this claim are, of course, those agents who respond to the skeptical argument with a reaction of complete defeat and who are therefore willing to reverse their assertions in the way that DeRose envisages, though this is (in my experience of teaching skepticism at any rate) rare. Nevertheless, it is important to note that these reactions of defeat do not immediately play into the hands of the contextualist because such defeatism is most naturally understood as the agent in question *changing her mind* rather than as reflecting the context-sensitivity of 'knows'. That is, one who is genuinely inclined to concede defeat in the face of a skeptical argument will tend to retain this pessimistic judgement about our epistemic position in non-skeptical contexts, at least until she convinces herself that she was right all along. Accordingly, that agents are liable to change their minds does not in itself lend support to contextualism.

¹² The key discussion (and defence) of the knowledge account of assertion in the recent literature (and the discussion that DeRose has in mind), is Williamson (2000a: chapter 11; cf. Williamson 1996).

¹³ For more on this point, see Brown (2003; 2005).

¹⁴ At any rate, contextualists are usually happy to grant this feature of the skeptical argument. Cohen (1988: 111; 1999: 67) notes, for example, that radical skeptical hypotheses such as the BIV hypothesis are "immune to rejection on the basis of any evidence". Accordingly, one of the key difficulties facing contextualism is to explain how agents can have knowledge of the denials of skeptical hypotheses even at 'low' epistemic standards. For discussion of this issue, see Cohen (1999; 2000: 103-6) and DeRose (2000; cf. Williamson 2000b).

¹⁵ The commitment principle is closely bound up with the conversational maxim that one should only assert what one believes to be true (though note that, for Grice (1989: 26), this maxim is understood as the slightly weaker "Do not say what you believe to be false"). Since believing that P is itself a form of commitment to P - and moreover a commitment which, if genuine at all, is not easily lost - then arguably one could just as well focus on the close relationship between belief and assertion. One finds discussions of this general commitment that is incurred by assertion in a number of places, though perhaps the most famous recent discussion is Brandom (1994: chapter 4; cf. Brandom 1995).

¹⁶ It should be noted that there is an issue here as to whether Grice would agree that this is a genuine conversational implicature, since he tends to employ this term in such a way that it excludes commitments that are trivially generated by the cooperative principle and the associated conversational maxims (see Grice 1989: 41-2). Nevertheless, Grice is not always consistent on this point and there are places where he seems willing to countenance a broader sense of conversational implicature that includes these direct implicatures. Moreover, since DeRose has argued elsewhere for a broad reading of the notion of conversational implicature, it ought not to be problematic to adopt this reading in this regard (see DeRose & Grandy 1999: footnotes 13 & 19).

In general, the account of a conversational implicature that I'm employing here is more relaxed than that which Grice had in mind in his official pronouncements on this topic. For example, it is essential to Grice's conception of a conversational implicature that the assertion in question be in apparent tension with the co-operation principle, and yet many of the implicature-generating assertions that I focus on here are not so in tension (e.g., 'I am in the study', uttered in a normal conversational context). Nevertheless, this more relaxed conception of conversational implicature (at least in this respect) is quite common in the literature, and so ought not to be objectionable here.

Relatedly, a (defeasible) test that Grice offered for conversational implicature question was whether they could be comfortably cancelled, and yet a number of the implicatures that I describe are not comfortably cancellable. To assert "P, but I am unable to offer any (relevant) evidence in support of this claim" is puzzling to say the least. Nevertheless, we should be careful about reading too much into this. As even DeRose admits (DeRose & Grandy 1999: footnote 13), when it comes to very direct implicatures such as this it becomes increasingly difficult to cancel them (the extremal case being the Moorean paradox where one asserts "P, but I don't believe that P"), and even Grice (1989: 46) conceded that not every implicature can be comfortably cancelled.

Interestingly, Cohen (1999: 60) has been one commentator who, in response to remarks made by Sosa, has argued that the play with implicatures will not work because such implicatures are *not* comfortably cancellable. The putative implicature of a claim to know that Cohen focuses upon is that there is no need for further investigation, which is a very different implicature to those considered here. Accordingly, Cohen could be right that this putative implicature cannot be comfortably cancelled without this generating problems for the approach sketched above. In any case, as I have just noted, even if one grants that the

implicatures in question cannot be comfortably cancelled, one should be cautious about drawing any dramatic conclusions from this observation. For further critical discussion of Cohen's remarks in the respect, see Rysiew (2001: §7).

¹⁷ This intuition is borne out by many of the standard discussions of assertions of explicit self-ascription sentences. Here, for example, is Austin (1961: 99, *italics in the original*):

“When I say, ‘I know’, I *give* others my word: I *give* others *my authority for saying* that ‘S is P’.”

And Austin is not alone in advancing this performative thesis as regards assertions of explicit self-ascription sentences - one can find similar claims in, for example, the work of A. J. Ayer (1956: chapter 1) and Wittgenstein (1969: *passim*).

¹⁸ Unless, of course, they are convinced by the skeptical argument, in which case they incur a commitment to the proposition expressed by the contrary sentence when they return to a non-skeptical context.