

## **The Problem with Subject-Sensitive Invariantism**

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Thomas Blackson<sup>1</sup> does not question that my argument in section 2 of “Assertion, Knowledge and Context”<sup>2</sup> establishes the conclusion that the standards that comprise a truth-condition for “I know that P” vary with context, but does claim that this does not suffice to validly demonstrate the truth of contextualism, because this variance in standards can be handled by what we will here call Subject-Sensitive Invariantism (SSI),<sup>3</sup> and so does not demand a contextualist treatment. According to SSI, the varying standards that comprise a truth-condition of “I know that P” are sensitive to factors that attach to the speaker as the putative subject of knowledge, rather than as the speaker of the knowledge attribution. That is, according to SSI, these factors of the subject’s context determine a single set of standards that govern when the subject himself, or any other speaker, including those not engaged in conversation with the subject, can truthfully say that the subject “knows.” Thus, we do not get the result that contextualists insist on: that one speaker can truthfully say the subject “knows,” while another speaker, in a different and more demanding context, can say that the subject does “not know”, even though the two speakers are speaking of the same subject knowing (or not knowing) the same proposition at the same time. Given the possibility of SSI, Blackson concludes that I “either assumed without argument that [SSI] is false or failed to distinguish the different ways the standard for knowledge might be determined.”

I indeed have long assumed that SSI can’t be right, and so have taken a different form of invariantism to be the real threat to contextualism. But since SSI, and views like it, now seem to be getting considerable attention,<sup>4</sup> it is worth articulating why I find it unpromising.

So start with cases of first-person knowledge claims in contexts that are governed by unusually high epistemic standards. Suppose for instance that a great deal is stake: Thelma is talking with the police about whether it might have been John who committed some horrible crime. Our speakers have executed conversational maneuvers for driving up the epistemic standards, and Thelma is admitting that she does not “know” various propositions if she is not in an extremely strong epistemic position with respect to them. Thus, even though Thelma has grounds that would usually suffice for claiming to “know” that John was at the office on the day in question (she heard from a very reliable source that he was in, and she herself saw his hat in the hall), she is in her present context admitting that she does “not know” that he was in – though, she adds, she has good reason to think he was in. In this context, she would claim to “know” he

was in only if, say, she herself has a clear recollection of having herself seen him in. SSI and contextualism will agree that first-person knowledge claims in such a context are governed by extraordinarily high epistemic standards, and thus that such denials of knowledge are true.

SSI falls into trouble when we consider how speakers in such a “high standards context” will use third-person attributions (or denials) of knowledge to describe whether other subjects not present at the conversation “know” various propositions. In many such contexts, speakers will apply to such far-away subjects the same high standards that they are applying to themselves. As Jonathan Schaffer has also observed,<sup>5</sup> among the situations where this will be done are those in which the speakers are talking about these absent parties as potential sources of information to the speakers about the matters in question. Other such situations include those in which, for some reason, the speakers are comparing the epistemic position of those absent parties to their own position. Thus, for instance, if the police ask Thelma whether Louise, who is not present, but whom they are considering questioning, might know whether John was in, and Thelma knows Louise is in the same position that she’s in with respect to the matter (she too heard the report and saw the hat, but did not herself see John), Thelma will say that Louise too does “not know” that John was in – though she might again add that Louise too has good grounds to think John was in.

Note that Thelma will deny that Louise “knows” even if Thelma knows that Louise happens to be in a “low-standards” conversational context.<sup>6</sup> Suppose Louise is at the local tavern, a place renowned for the low epistemic standards that govern conversations that take place there, and that Louise is discussing the matter of where John was, not in connection with any crime or any other matter of importance, but in a light-hearted effort to decide who has to pay up on a mere \$2 bet on whether the often-absent John had been to the office more than five times in the last two weeks. Thus, in Louise’s context, having heard a reliable report of John’s presence and having seen his hat in the hall is more than enough to claim to “know” he was present on the day in question, and Louise has indeed claimed to “know” on just that basis. And suppose that Thelma is somehow aware of all this about Louise’s context. Still, in Thelma’s “high-standards context,” if Thelma is counting herself as a non-knower, then, when she is considering Louise as a potential informant, she will likewise describe Louise as a non-knower,<sup>7</sup> regardless of Louise’s conversational context.<sup>8</sup>

This is trouble for SSI, which predicts that Thelma will apply the lower standards to Louise. For SSI holds that the context of the subject sets the standards that govern all attributions and denials of knowledge to that subject, and Thelma is aware of the facts that make Louise’s a low-standards context.<sup>9</sup>

Now, on other occasions, where different conversational purposes are in play, speakers will apply to absent subjects standards that are appropriate to the practical contexts of those subjects. This often happens when, for example, the speakers are discussing practical decisions those subjects face: “She should do that only if she knows that...” This may seem to favor SSI over contextualism, since according to SSI, the subject’s context sets the standards, while, according to contextualism, the speaker’s context calls the shots.

But contextualism can in fact easily handle such cases. There’s nothing in contextualism to prevent a speaker’s context from selecting epistemic standards appropriate to the subject’s context, even when the subject being discussed is no party to the speaker’s conversation – which is good, because speakers often do select such standards when their conversational purposes call for it.

But, on the other hand, SSI cannot handle the equally evident fact that speakers often apply the epistemic standards appropriate to their own contexts to far-away subjects that are not (or are not thought to be) in contexts governed by similar standards, since SSI has the subject’s context set the standards that govern any speaker’s description of the subject.

This problem seems lethal to SSI,<sup>10</sup> which is why, in “Assertion, Knowledge, and Context,” and elsewhere, I’ve taken the real threat to contextualism to be another form of invariantism (“Classical Invariantism,” we may call it), which, like contextualism, recognizes that epistemic standards vary according to speakers’ context (though it can and should also recognize that sometimes a speaker’s context selects standards appropriate to the subject’s situation), but that insists, against contextualism, that these varying standards are only standards for when it would be appropriate to ascribe knowledge to ourselves or to other subjects, and are not varying truth-conditions for knowledge attributions.

My argument (of section 2 of “Assertion, Knowledge and Context”) shows, against this Classical Invariantism, that the varying standards that govern first-person knowledge claims comprise a truth-condition of those claims.<sup>11</sup>

For those tempted by SSI, I’ve here presented my reasons for holding that this variance in truth-conditions should be given a contextualist, rather than an SSI, treatment. In short, it’s because this variance in standards that governs whether we’ll count ourselves as knowers also affects whether we’ll so count other subjects not present at our conversations, and the standards that govern whether we’ll count ourselves as knowers do not always govern whether others can truthfully count us as “knowers,” since, as their context calls for it, they will often apply quite different standards to us.

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<sup>1</sup> Blackson, “An Invalid Argument for Contextualism,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, preceding.

<sup>2</sup> DeRose, “Assertion, Knowledge, and Context,” *Philosophical Review* 111 (2002): 167-203.

<sup>3</sup> Here I’ll use “Subject-Sensitive Invariantism” to cover any view on which the standards a subject must meet for an attribution of knowledge to her to be true vary, but on which they are set by the subject’s context in such a way that they comprise the key truth-condition for any speaker’s attribution of knowledge to that subject. Such a view is what Blackson has in mind. Following John Hawthorne (in Hawthorne’s forthcoming *Knowledge and Lotteries* (Oxford UP)), Blackson calls the view he’s discussing “sensitive moderate invariantism,” but his characterization of the view Hawthorne develops doesn’t seem quite right to me (at least based on the most recent manuscript of Hawthorne’s book that I’ve seen). While Hawthorne writes a lot about different “standards” in explaining the contextualist view (as he must, given how much we contextualists use the word), the word seems to drop out of the discussion when Hawthorne comes to the exposition of “sensitive moderate invariantism.” Best, then, not to read the view Hawthorne develops as one on which different standards are set by the subject’s situation. So we will use a new label, “SSI,” to cover the view Blackson has in mind, leaving open its connection to the view Hawthorne develops.

<sup>4</sup> Here I have in mind the work of Jason Stanley (see his “Context, Interest-Relativity, and Knowledge,” forthcoming, *Philosophical Studies*), as well as of John Hawthorne in the forthcoming book cited in the above note. While I am, as mentioned in note 1 above, a bit suspicious about whether Blackson’s way of construing the view (essentially involving talk of varying “standards”) exactly fits the view Hawthorne develops, and though that matter may be important to how the advocate of such a view will respond to my pro-contextualist argument of section 2 of “Assertion, Knowledge, and Context,” the views being pursued by Hawthorne and Stanley do seem to be like SSI (as I’m here construing it) in being vulnerable to the cases I’m about to present.

<sup>5</sup> Schaffer, “Knowledge in the Image of Assertion?”, talk at the Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association, 28 March 2003.

<sup>6</sup> This case is an expanded version of a case I used to similar effect in my entry, “Contextualism,” in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy -- Supplement* (New York: Macmillan, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> It is essential to the case that Thelma will not just refrain from describing Louise as a knower, but will go so far as to deny that Louise knows. The mere reluctance to describe Louise as a knower wouldn’t show that Thelma is applying high standards to Louise; it could rather be that Thelma is applying high epistemic standards to herself, and since she doesn’t count herself as knowing that John was in, she doesn’t count herself as knowing and as being in a position to assert that Louise “knows” that fact (since Louise doesn’t know it if it isn’t true).

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<sup>8</sup> One could try to save SSI by claiming that the fact that the police are thinking of questioning Louise is part of Louise's "practical context" and thus raises the standards for knowledge that govern any speaker's talk about Louise. On this suggestion, since Louise is not aware of this far-away feature of her own context, she only mistakenly takes herself to know. But such a suggestion will quickly come to grief when easily constructible cases, like one where Louise is aware that something like Thelma's conversation is somewhere going on, show that we as speakers often ignore such facts about far-away conversations when our conversational purposes call for us to apply standards appropriate to our own local contexts.

<sup>9</sup> It's a bit artificial to suppose that Thelma has so much information as I've given her about Louise's conversational situation. I did so to make the argument simpler. In more realistic situations, where Thelma doesn't know what standards govern Louise's context, SSI makes somewhat more complicated, but equally false, predictions: It predicts that Thelma will be agnostic about whether Louise "knows", since she doesn't know what standards are appropriate to Louise's context. (In fact, since the standards Thelma applies are extraordinarily high, she should be highly dubious that these are the standards that govern whatever context Louise is in.) But that's not how speakers in fact behave in Thelma's situation. If Thelma knows that Louise doesn't meet the unusually high standards that govern Thelma's context, Thelma will say that Louise, like Thelma, "does not know."

<sup>10</sup> The best defense I can see for SSI here is a projectivist strategy like the one that Hawthorne pursues in defense of an invariantist view much like SSI in the manuscript I've seen for his forthcoming book: Speakers like Thelma rightly sense that they do not know (she does not meet the standards set by her context), and they then mistakenly project their own ignorance onto absent knowers like Louise (who does meet the standards set by her own context). The problem with this strategy is that in the relevant cases speakers like Thelma will deny that subjects like Louise "know" even when the speakers have no ignorance to project. Suppose that Thelma does meet even the extraordinarily high standards that govern her context – she does clearly recall herself seeing, and even having a conversation with, John. So, Thelma does know, and has claimed to know, that John was in the office. Still, if the police are wondering whether Louise might also know (so they can have two witnesses), Thelma (who knows and takes herself to know, and thus has no ignorance to project) will still deny that Louise knows if all Louise is going by is having heard the report and having seen John's hat.

<sup>11</sup> I suppose this leaves open the possibility that contextualism is true of first-person knowledge claims, while invariantism is true of third-person knowledge attributions: That varying standards sensitive to a subject's context govern whether that subject can truthfully claim to "know" using a first-person knowledge claim, while a single set of standards, not sensitive to anyone's context, govern all third-person attributions. (We will leave open what such a view will do with second-person attributions.) Note that this is significantly different from (and stranger than) SSI. But such a view has not been put on the table yet – for good reason, it seems.