# CONTEXTUALISM: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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ADAPT OR DIE: THE DEATH OF INVARIANTISM?

BY JESSICA BROWN

Contextualists support their view by appeal to cases which show that whether an attribution of knowledge seems correct depends on attributor factors. Contextualists conclude that the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions depend on the attributor’s context. Invariantists respond that these cases show only that the warranted assertability-conditions of knowledge attributions depend on the attributor’s context. I examine DeRose’s recent argument against the possibility of such an invariantist response, an argument which appeals to the knowledge account of assertion and the context-sensitivity of assertion. I argue that DeRose’s new argument does not rule out either of the two forms of invariantism, classic and subject-sensitive invariantism. Further, I argue against DeRose that an invariantist can explain the context-sensitivity of assertion.

INTRODUCTION

According to contextualism, the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions depend on the attributor’s context. Contextualists support their view by appeal to cases such as third-person versions of the bank and airport cases, which show that whether an attribution of knowledge seems correct depends on attributor factors. Invariantists argue that these cases are open to a non-contextualist interpretation on which the warranted assertability-conditions, but not the truth-conditions, of knowledge attributions depend on the attributor’s context. DeRose has recently provided a new argument against the possibility of such an invariantist response. His argument appeals to the knowledge account of assertion and the context-sensitivity of assertion. I argue that DeRose’s new argument does not rule out invariantism, and leaves us with a choice between invariantism and contextualism.

I. DeROSE ON POSSIBLE INVARIANTIST RESPONSES

The evidence which contextualists use to support their position is familiar. Contextualists construct a low and high standards context, in each of which

a subject is in intuitively the same epistemic position, e.g., she forms the same belief on the basis of the same evidence, and her belief is true. The ‘low standards’ context is so constructed that it seems correct to attribute knowledge to the subject and incorrect to deny knowledge; however, the ‘high standards’ context is so constructed that it seems incorrect to attribute knowledge to the subject and correct to deny knowledge. For instance, in Cohen’s airport case, Smith truly believes that his flight stops in Chicago, on the basis that his itinerary says it does. In a context in which it is not very important to Mary and John whether the flight stops in Chicago, it seems correct for them to attribute to Smith knowledge that his flight stops in Chicago, and incorrect for them to deny knowledge. But in a context in which it is very important to Mary and John that the flight stops in Chicago, and in which the possibility of itinerary error has been raised in their conversational context, it seems incorrect for them to attribute to Smith knowledge that the flight stops there, and correct to deny it. It seems, then, that whether an attribution of knowledge is intuitively correct depends on the attributor’s context.

Contextualists take such cases to show that the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions depend on the attributor’s context. Invariantists deny that the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions are dependent in this respect. Thus they need to explain how the intuitive correctness of knowledge attributions depends on the attributor’s context even though their truth-conditions do not. Notice that an invariantist can undertake this explanatory task within either a sceptical or a non-sceptical account of knowledge. On a non-sceptical account, Smith has knowledge in both the low and high standards contexts of the airport case. An invariantist who adopts a non-sceptical account must explain why, in the high standards context, it none the less seems correct to deny knowledge, and incorrect to attribute knowledge. Alternatively, the invariantist may adopt a sceptical account on which Smith lacks knowledge in both the low and high standards contexts. She must then explain why, in the low standards context, it none the less seems correct to attribute knowledge, and incorrect to deny knowledge. In what follows, I will concentrate on a non-sceptical invariantist response.

DeRose imagines that invariantists explain away the problematic intuitions about knowledge attributions by adopting a ‘warranted assertability manoeuvre’ or WAM. He introduces the notion of a WAM, and the related

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3 Contextualism is also defended by arguing that it provides a solution to the sceptical paradox. However, this solution would seem ad hoc if everyday non-philosophical conversation provided no evidence that the truth-conditions of knowledge-attributions are context-sensitive (AKC, pp. 168–9).

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notion of warranted assertability, by the following example. Suppose that you ask me whether a certain book is in my office. It seems incorrect for me to say ‘It’s possible that the book is in my office’ if I know that it is not there. It also seems incorrect for me to say ‘It’s possible that the book is in my office’ if I know full well that it is there. If these intuitions reflect truth-conditions, then S’s utterance of ‘It is possible that p’ is true iff (a) S does not know that p is false, and (b) S does not know that p is true. However, DeRose argues that at least some of these intuitions reflect warranted assertability-conditions. In particular, he argues that when a subject knows that p it is true for her to say ‘It is possible that p’, but not warranted. For this true assertion pragmatically conveys the falsehood that she does not know that p. DeRose explains this pragmatic implication by appeal to the general rule of conversation ‘Assert the stronger’. He uses this line of argument to defend the view that ‘It is possible that p’ is true iff S does not know that p is false.

As the possibility case illustrates, a WAM consists of an attempt to explain some intuitions about the correctness or incorrectness of applying a term, or making an assertion, by arguing that the intuitions reflect warranted assertability-conditions rather than truth-conditions. When applied as part of an invariantist response to contextualism, a WAM consists in the claim that at least some of our intuitions about when it is correct or incorrect to attribute knowledge reflect the warranted assertability-conditions rather than the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions. A non-sceptical invariantist holds that the subject knows in both the low and high standards contexts of the airport case. Such an invariantist may try to explain why, despite this, it seems incorrect to ascribe knowledge in the high standards context by arguing that in the high standards context, the ascription of knowledge is literally true but not warrantedly assertable. Using the Gricean model suggested by the possibility case, the invariantist may suggest that in the high standards context, the attribution of knowledge is literally true but not warrantedly assertable since it pragmatically conveys a falsehood.

DeRose’s use of the term ‘warrant’ in describing a WAM should not mislead us to think that a WAM is concerned with the notion of epistemic warrant. The invariantist who adopts a WAM is not correctly characterized as holding that whether an ascription of knowledge is epistemically warranted depends on context; indeed, that is a contextualist claim about the epistemic property of warrant. Rather, the invariantist who adopts a WAM holds that whether an ascription of knowledge is conversationally appropriate depends on context. That the relevant notion is that of

conversational propriety is also evident in DeRose’s discussion of the possibility case. On DeRose’s view, if a subject knows that \(p\), although it is true for her to say ‘It is possible that \(p\)’, it is not warrantedly assertable. But, plausibly, if a subject knows that \(p\), then she has epistemic warrant to assert \(p\) and to assert that it is possible that \(p\). So when DeRose says that for such a subject, ‘It is possible that \(p\)’ is not warrantedly assertable, he must mean that it is not conversationally appropriate. Of course, the conditions for an utterance to be conversationally appropriate may include epistemic conditions. As we will see, DeRose claims that \(S\) is warranted in asserting \(p\) only if \(S\) knows that \(p\). None the less the key issue between contextualists and invariantists is whether our intuitions about the correctness of knowledge attributions reflect conversational propriety or truth-conditions.

A WAM is not the only option for an invariantist to explain away the apparent context-sensitivity of knowledge attributions. Alternatively, she may try to explain away the problematic intuitions by appeal to an error theory and/or by appeal to the idea that there are presuppositions or conditions of the felicitous utterance of knowledge attributions. However, DeRose regards a WAM as the ‘most influential source of resistance to contextualism’ (AKC, p. 171). Here I follow DeRose in concentrating on a WAM. I will focus on his recent argument against a WAM, considering his earlier arguments against a WAM in §VII below.

II. DeROSE’S NEW ARGUMENT

DeRose’s new argument for contextualism uses two premises: the context-sensitivity of assertion, or CSA, and the knowledge account of assertion, or KAA. DeRose formulates CSA as follows:

CSA. How well positioned one must be with respect to \(p\) to assert warrantedly that \(p\) depends on context.

CSA may be defended by appeal to the very cases contextualists use to support their view. For instance, consider Cohen’s airport case. In a low standards context in which one has read in one’s flight itinerary that one’s

\[\vphantom{\text{I. DeROSE’S NEW ARGUMENT}}\]

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6 For the earlier arguments, see CED, pp. 196–203.

7 Some of DeRose’s formulations of CSA and KAA merely talk of whether one is well enough positioned to assert \(p\). However, that both concern whether one is well enough positioned to assert \(p\) warrantedly is clear from the deduction quoted in the text below.
plane stops in Chicago, it seems correct for one to assert both ‘I know the plane stops in Chicago’ and ‘The plane stops in Chicago’. But in a high standards context in which it is crucial that one gets to Chicago and one considers the possibility that the itinerary is mistaken, it no longer seems correct for one to assert either ‘I know the plane stops in Chicago’ or ‘The plane stops in Chicago’. Thus it seems that even when a proposition \( p \) does not involve the concept of knowledge, how well positioned one must be for one’s assertion of \( p \) to seem intuitively correct depends on context. DeRose characterizes this phenomenon in terms of the notion of warranted assertability: how well positioned one must be with respect to \( p \) to assert warrantedly that \( p \) depends on context.

DeRose’s argument combines CSA with KAA. Expressed as a biconditional, KAA states

\[ \text{KAA. One is well enough positioned with respect to } p \text{ to assert } p \text{ warrantedly if and only if one knows that } p. \]

Alternatively, expressed as an identity claim, KAA states

\[ \text{KAA. The standards for when one is in a position to assert } p \text{ warrantedly are identical with those that comprise a truth-condition for ‘I know that } p’. \]

What I will call DeRose’s ‘deduction’ aims to combine KAA in the form of the identity claim with CSA to infer the truth of contextualism. He presents his argument in the following brief passage (AKC, p. 187):

The knowledge account of assertion provides a powerful argument for contextualism: if the standards for when one is in a position to assert warrantedly that \( p \) are the same as those that comprise a truth-condition for ‘I know that \( p’ \), then if the former vary with context, so do the latter. In short: the knowledge account of assertion together with the context-sensitivity of assertion yields contextualism about knowledge.

According to KAA, the standards for when one is in a position to assert \( p \) warrantedly are identical with those that comprise a truth-condition for ‘I know that \( p’ \). By CSA, the former are context-sensitive. So DeRose concludes that the latter are too: the standards that comprise a truth-condition for ‘I know that \( p’ \) are context-sensitive. In addition to claiming that the combination of KAA and CSA entails the truth of contextualism and the falsity of invariantism, DeRose argues that the contextualist can offer a positive explanation of CSA. The contextualist can do so by combining her claim that knowledge is context-sensitive with the claim that one is well enough positioned to assert warrantedly that \( p \) only if one knows that \( p \).

I start evaluating DeRose’s deduction in the next section by examining which invariantist views are the target of this argument. We will see that the

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deduction is well targeted at only one form of invariantism, ‘classic invariantism’, but not at another, ‘subject-sensitive invariantism’. Despite this limitation, it would be significant if the deduction rules out at least classic invariantism. So in §§IV–V, I examine whether the deduction rules out classic invariantism.

III. DeROSE’S NEW ARGUMENT AND VARIETIES OF INVARIANTISM

In evaluating DeRose’s deduction it is useful to look at the invariantist position in more detail. Invariantism was defined as the denial of the contextualist view that the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions depend on the attributor’s context. Notice that, so defined, invariantism makes no claim about whether the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions depend on the subject’s context. Thus one possible invariantist view combines the denial that the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions depend on the attributor’s context with the claim that they do depend on the subject’s context, and, in particular, on such factors as the importance of the issue to the subject of the attribution and whether error possibilities have been raised in her context. Invariantism of this kind has been labelled ‘subject-sensitive invariantism’, or SSI. By contrast, some invariantists claim that the truth-conditions of a knowledge attribution depend neither on the attributor’s context nor on such subject factors as the importance of the issue to the subject or whether the possibility of error has been raised in her context. We may use the term ‘classic invariantism’, or CI, for this second version of invariantism. I will refer to those who hold SSI as SS-invariantists, and those who hold CI as C-invariantists.

With this distinction between invariantist positions in mind let us return to consider DeRose’s deduction. We may be struck by the fact that the conclusion of DeRose’s deduction is formulated in first-person terms: the standards which comprise a truth-condition for ‘I know that \( p \)' are context-sensitive. In a first-person knowledge attribution, the subject of the attribution is identical with the attributor. As a result, the claim that the standards which comprise a truth-condition for ‘I know that \( p \)' are context-sensitive may be accepted both by contextualism and SSI; the contextualist will interpret the claim as showing that the truth-conditions for ‘I know that \( p \)' depend on the attributor’s context; the SS-invariantist will interpret the

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8 Examples of this style of view may be found in KLot (under the label ‘sensitive moderate invariantism’), and in J. Stanley, ‘Context, Interest-Relativity and Knowledge’, *Philosophical Studies* (forthcoming).
claim as showing that the truth-conditions for ‘I know that \( p \)’ depend on the subject’s context. It seems, then, that the conclusion of DeRose’s deduction is compatible with both contextualism and SSI.9

This conclusion is reinforced when we consider in more detail one of the key premises of the deduction, CSA (how well positioned one must be with respect to \( p \) to assert warrantedly that \( p \) depends on context). CSA is plausibly understood as claiming that how well positioned a subject must be with respect to \( p \) to assert warrantedly that \( p \) depends on that subject’s own context. Whether one is well enough positioned to assert \( p \) warrantedly plausibly depends on one’s own conversational context, but not on what is transpiring in other conversational contexts of which one is not a participant. Reconsider the airport case which was used to defend CSA. Suppose that one has read in one’s flight itinerary that the New York flight stops in Chicago and that the flight indeed stops there. If one is in a conversational context in which it is not important whether the New York flight stops in Chicago and in which error possibilities have not been raised, it seems intuitively correct for one to assert ‘The New York flight stops in Chicago’. By contrast, if one were instead in a conversational context in which it is very important whether the flight stops there and error possibilities have been raised, it seems intuitively incorrect for one to assert ‘The New York flight stops in Chicago’. Notice that if one is in a context in which it is not important that the flight stops in Chicago and no error possibilities have been raised, then it seems intuitively correct for one to assert ‘The New York flight stops in Chicago’, even if, unbeknownst to one, some other subjects are in a context in which it is very important to them that the flight stops in Chicago and error possibilities have been raised. Thus the airport case shows that whether a subject is warranted in asserting \( p \) depends on the subject’s own context.

DeRose’s deduction combines CSA with KAA, the claim that the standards for when one is in a position to assert warrantedly that \( p \) are identical with those that comprise a truth-condition for ‘I know that \( p \)’. He claims that since the former are context-sensitive, so are the latter. But we now see that the standards for when one is in a position to assert \( p \) warrantedly are context-sensitive in the specific sense that they depend on the subject’s own context. Thus the deduction establishes only that the standards which comprise the truth-condition for ‘I know that \( p \)’ depend on the subject’s own context. That conclusion is compatible with both contextualism and SSI.

In a recent paper, DeRose agrees that the deduction provides reason to reject only CI and not SSI. He suggests that SSI is ruled out by other

considerations, in particular by third-person versions of contextualist cases such as the airport case. In particular, he argues against one of the most developed SS-invariantist accounts of third-person contextualist cases, that provided by Hawthorne. Given that SSI and CI seem to exhaust the invariantist’s options, he argues that the deduction together with third-person versions of contextualist cases provide an argument for contextualism and against the different versions of invariantism.  

Hawthorne provides the following account of why, in the high standards context of Cohen’s airport case, Mary and John do not attribute knowledge to Smith although, on his (Hawthorne’s) SS-invariantist view, the attribution would be literally true. Hawthorne suggests that Mary and John fail to attribute knowledge to Smith since (i) this attribution would be conversationally appropriate only if they, Mary and John, know that the flight stops there, and (ii) given that Mary and John are in a high standards context, it is a consequence of SSI that they do not know that the flight stops there (KLot, p. 160). DeRose objects that this explanation fails to explain the fact that Mary and John go so far as to deny that Smith knows (PSSI, p. 348 fn. 7). Further, he claims that it fails to explain the fact that Mary and John would continue to deny that Smith knows on the basis of the flight itinerary, even if Mary’s and John’s own epistemic position were so improved by gaining additional evidence that, even in their tough context, it is correct for them to say ‘We know that the flight stops in Chicago’ (PSSI, p. 349 fn. 10).

However, DeRose’s arguments against Hawthorne’s position misfire. Hawthorne admits that the fact that in the original version of the case, Mary and John would not attribute knowledge to themselves does not explain their denial that Smith knows. Instead, Hawthorne explains the denial by appeal to psychological bias. He argues that the availability heuristic leads Mary and John to overestimate the probability of itinerary error, and so falsely judge that Smith does not know (KLot, p. 164). This mechanism could still operate to explain the denial of knowledge to Smith even if Mary and John, but not Smith, come to acquire new evidence against the possibility of itinerary error and so take themselves to know that the plane is stopping in Chicago.

In conclusion, the deduction does not rule out SSI, and it is not clear that SSI is ruled out by third-person versions of contextualist cases. In the rest of the paper I concentrate on whether the deduction rules out CI.


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DeRose’s deduction provides reason against CI only if we have reason to accept its premises, namely KAA and CSA. We have already seen how CSA may be supported by contextualist cases such as the airport case. So the key question is whether we have reason to accept KAA, according to which one is well enough positioned with respect to \( p \) to assert \( p \) warrantedly if and only if one knows that \( p \).

DeRose defends KAA by appeal to two further claims – the knowledge rule (KR), and what I will call ‘the uniqueness claim’ (UC):

KR. One must know that \( p \) in order to be well enough positioned with respect to \( p \) to be warranted in asserting \( p \).

UC. The knowledge rule is the only rule governing how well positioned one must be to assert \( p \) warrantedly.\(^{11}\)

Both KR and UC are essential to DeRose’s deduction, which exploits the putative identity between the standards for one’s being well enough positioned to be warranted in asserting \( p \) and the standards which comprise the truth-condition of ‘I know that \( p \)’. The deduction exploits this putative identity to argue that since the former are context-sensitive, so are the latter. If UC were false and KR were one of several rules governing how well positioned one must be to assert \( p \) warrantedly, the putative identity on which the deduction relies would not obtain. Further, on this supposition, not only would CSA provide no reason against CI, but CI could explain CSA. A C-invariantist who endorses KR could explain the context-sensitivity of assertion if UC is false and assertion is governed not only by KR (which on her view is context-insensitive) but also by some further rule which is context-sensitive.

In support of KAA DeRose cites the familiar literature linking assertion with knowledge. For instance, Slote and Unger invoke the paradoxical character of the Moorean statement ‘\( p \) but I do not know that \( p \)’.\(^{12}\) Unger notes that it seems problematic for a sceptic to express her view by saying ‘Nobody knows anything’, and that an assertion \( p \) may be challenged by the response ‘How do you know that \( p \)?’. Further, he provides cases in which it seems incorrect for a subject to assert \( p \) when she does not know that \( p \), but

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\(^{11}\) ‘I will join Williamson in holding that [KR] is the only rule governing assertion that has to do with asserting only what one is well enough positioned with respect to’ (AKC, p. 180).

merely justifiably believes it, and it is true. Note, though, that the phenomena cited by Slote and Unger support only KR, and not UC. How, then, might we defend UC?

An immediate difficulty faces any defence of UC, a difficulty which arises from the fact that assertion is widely agreed to be governed by a number of rules or norms in addition to KR, for instance, the norms of relevance and informativeness. There seem two broad options for attempting to reconcile the existence of these other norms with UC, according to which KR is the only rule governing how well positioned one must be to assert \( p \) warrantedly.

First, one could argue that although the norms governing assertion other than KR concern whether the subject is warranted in asserting \( p \), they do not concern how well positioned the subject must be to assert \( p \) warrantedly, but rather concern whether the subject meets other types of conditions for warranted assertion, say, the condition that the assertion must be relevant to the on-going conversation. This first option can accept that KR and the other rules governing assertion concern the same notion of warrant.

A second option for attempting to defend UC would be to argue that although the norms other than KR do concern how well positioned one must be to assert \( p \), they do not concern the notion of warranted assertion with which KR is concerned. Of course, in an everyday sense, we may use the term ‘unwarranted’ to describe an assertion that fails to conform to the norms of relevance or informativeness. However, we could try to distinguish one notion of warrant from the more general everyday sense, call this ‘warrant*’, and argue that KR is the only rule governing how well positioned one must be to assert \( p \) with warrant*. In this way we may hope to reconcile the existence of norms governing assertion other than KR with UC.

I will examine both strategies for defending UC and argue that each faces objections. In doing so, I will look at Williamson’s work on assertion and knowledge. We have already seen that the phenomena cited by Slote and Unger support only KR and not UC. However, perhaps Williamson’s more recent work may support UC. Indeed, DeRose explicitly appeals to Williamson in defending UC (see the quotation on the next page).

V. WILLIAMSON’S VIEWS

Williamson accepts that there are many different ways in which we can evaluate an assertion, say, as true or false, relevant or irrelevant, sincere or insincere, or warranted or unwarranted. Corresponding to these various ways of evaluating an assertion are various norms or rules. Some of these

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rules apply to a range of speech acts and do not seem to have anything specifically to do with assertion. However, it may be that one or more applies only to assertion and is intimately connected with the very nature of that speech act— it is constitutive of assertion. Williamson suggests that assertion is governed by the unique constitutive rule, the C-rule: assert \( p \) only if \( p \) has C. Further, Williamson suggests that the C-rule is individuating, that assertion is the unique speech act whose unique constitutive rule is the C-rule. He argues that the property C is identical with the property of knowing that \( p \). Thus on his view, assertion is the unique speech act whose unique constitutive rule states ‘Assert \( p \) only if one knows that \( p \)’ \((KL, \text{ch. 11}).\)

According to the first strategy for reconciling UC with the fact that assertion is governed by rules other than KR, these other rules do not concern how well positioned one must be to assert \( p \) warrantedly. In defending UC by appeal to Williamson, DeRose \((AKC, \text{p. 180})\) seems to endorse this strategy:

I will join Williamson in holding that this [KR] is the only rule governing assertion that has to do with asserting only what one is well enough positioned with respect to. What we leave open here is whether all of the other, quite different rules of assertion that don’t have to do with asserting only what one is well enough positioned with respect to—to like those enjoining us to assert only what’s conversationally relevant—can be derived from the knowledge rule together with other rules not specific to assertion.

In this passage DeRose claims that KR is the only rule governing assertion which has to do with asserting only what one is well enough positioned with respect to. The other rules, DeRose suggests, concern other issues, such as whether an assertion would be relevant to the on-going conversation.

However, Williamson does not seem to endorse this first strategy. He accepts that assertion is governed by (non-constitutive) rules other than KR, and places no restriction on the kinds of condition which these other rules concern. Indeed, he explicitly argues that there may be rules governing assertion other than KR which concern one’s epistemic position: ‘There may be other evidential norms for assertion, if they can be derived from the knowledge rule and considerations not specific to assertion. The reasonableness of asserting \( p \) when one reasonably believes that one knows \( p \) has just been derived in exactly that way’ \((KL, \text{p. 257}).\) So for Williamson, the rule that it is reasonable to assert \( p \) when one reasonably believes that one knows that \( p \) provides an example of a rule governing assertion other than KR which does concern one’s epistemic position.

Independently of Williamson’s work, it seems plausible to suppose that some of the other rules governing assertion may concern the subject’s epistemic position. Consider the rule of relevance which enjoins subjects to make their contributions relevant to the purpose or direction of the
conversation. There seems nothing to prevent the purpose or direction of a conversation from concerning the level or type of the participants’ epistemic position with respect to a target proposition. For instance, a conversation may be concerned with whether the participants have a strong enough epistemic position with respect to a proposition to warrant a certain kind of action. In such a context, the rule of relevance would concern the participants’ epistemic position. Indeed, we will see later how the idea that what is relevant to a conversation may sometimes be the participants’ epistemic position is a natural idea for an invariantist tempted by a WAM.

Perhaps, instead, we could see Williamson as defending the second strategy, according to which the rules other than KR governing assertion do not concern the same notion of warranted assertion as KR. Indeed, he does argue that KR concerns a specific notion of warrant with which the other rules of assertion are not concerned. He provides the following slogan for his account, ‘Only knowledge warrants assertion’, which suggests that knowledge is a sufficient condition for warrant, and the only sufficient condition. However, he immediately goes on (KL, p. 243) to make it clear that he is not using the everyday notion of warrant, but a more specific notion:

... ‘warrant’ is here used as a term of art, for that evidential property (if any) which plays the role of property C in the correct simple account of assertion. This use need not correspond exactly to that of ‘warrant’ in everyday English. It is not denied that false assertions are sometimes warranted in the everyday sense that they are sometimes reasonable; the claim is rather that the reasonableness of such assertions is explicable as the joint outcome of the knowledge rule and cognitive considerations not specific to assertion.14

Williamson further elaborates his account of assertion in his discussion of alleged counter-examples to it. On his account, assertion is governed by the unique constitutive rule ‘Assert \(p\) only if one knows that \(p\)’. It may be objected that if a subject reasonably but falsely believes that she knows that \(p\), then it is warranted for her to assert that \(p\) even though she does not know that \(p\). Similarly, someone may object to Williamson’s claim that knowledge warrants assertion by claiming that if a subject reasonably but falsely believes that she does not know that \(p\), then it would be unwarranted for her to assert \(p\) even though she knows that \(p\). Williamson argues that such examples are no objection to his theory, by distinguishing the notion of being warranted in asserting \(p\) and the notion of being reasonable in asserting \(p\).

14 See also the remarks ‘If an assertion satisfies the rule [the C-rule: assert \(p\) only if \(p\) has C] whatever derivative norms it violates, it is correct in a salient sense’ (KL, p. 241); ‘Granted that it is reasonable for me to believe that I have warrant to assert \(p\), it does not follow that I do have warrant to assert \(p\). The term “warrant” has been reserved for the property C in the rule C of assertion [assert \(p\) only if \(p\) has C]’ (KL, p. 252).
He argues that the examples do not show that knowledge is neither necessary nor sufficient for warrant, but only that it is neither necessary nor sufficient for being reasonable in asserting $p$.

It seems, then, that Williamson is aiming to capture one sense in which an assertion may be warranted, a sense which is narrower than the everyday sense. He accepts that in its everyday use, ‘warrant’ is used both for what he calls ‘warrant’ and for what he calls ‘reasonableness’. However, he is not interested in this everyday notion but rather in a narrower sense of warrant, call it ‘warrant*’. He holds that one’s assertion of $p$ is warranted* if and only if one knows that $p$.

We might try to use Williamson’s claims about the specific notion of warrant, warrant*, to elaborate the second strategy for attempting to reconcile UC with the fact that assertion is governed by rules other than KR. According to the second strategy, the other rules do not concern the same notion of warrant as KR. So assume, then, that KR concerns warrant*, the specific notion of warrant, and that none of the other rules governing assertion concerns this notion. This would enable us to defend UC, understood as the claim:

**UC.** The knowledge rule is the only rule governing how well positioned one must be to assert $p$ with warrant*.

Thus we could defend a version of KAA concerned with warrant*:

**KAA.** One is well enough positioned to assert $p$ with warrant* if and only if one knows that $p$.

We have seen that Williamson provides the materials to defend UC and KAA when understood as involving the notion of warrant*. The above discussion of Williamson focused on two elements of his work, the idea that assertion is the unique speech act governed by the unique constitutive rule, the knowledge rule, and his claim that only knowledge warrants assertion. We have seen that Williamson’s views cannot be used to defend the first strategy for defending UC, but may be used to defend the second. Other elements of Williamson’s view do not provide any alternative defence of UC, e.g., his argument against rival accounts on which a condition weaker than knowledge is required for assertion, e.g., truth, warranted belief, or the reasonable belief that one knows.

It is a further question whether UC and KAA understood as involving warrant* are suitable for use in DeRose’s deduction. I now turn to consider this further issue. As we saw earlier, DeRose’s deduction combines KAA with CSA, the claim that how well positioned one must be with respect to $p$ to assert warrantedly that $p$ depends on context. DeRose’s deduction
requires that it is the same notion of warrant with which CSA and KAA are concerned. The deduction implicitly relies on the thought that the very same standard – the standard for being well enough positioned to assert \( p \) warrantedly – is context-sensitive (by CSA) and identical with the truth-condition of ‘I know that \( p \)’ (by KAA), in order to deduce contextualism about knowledge. The deduction would be open to a charge of equivocation if it turned out to involve different notions of warrant.

It seems, then, that if DeRose’s deduction uses a version of KAA which is concerned with the specific notion of warrant, warrant*, then CSA must concern the same notion of warrant. However, DeRose has given us no reason to think that CSA concerns the specific notion of warrant, warrant*. As we saw earlier, CSA is supposedly supported by contextualist cases like the airport case in which it seems that it would be correct for a subject to assert a proposition \( p \) in one context, but not another, even though, intuitively, she is in the same epistemic position in the two contexts. These cases certainly show that whether a subject is well enough positioned for it to be intuitively correct for her to assert \( p \) depends on her own context. We might put the point in terms of warrant: whether a subject is well enough positioned for her to assert \( p \) warrantedly depends on her own context. However, DeRose has provided no argument that this claim involves Williamson’s notion of warrant, which is designed to pick out just one specific dimension in which an assertion may be evaluated. An alternative hypothesis is that CSA concerns the ordinary intuitive notion of warrant, which is broader than Williamson’s notion. To put this in terms of Williamson’s framework, there is no reason to suppose that CSA concerns one particular dimension of evaluation of assertion, warrant*, rather than reflecting a number of the different dimensions of evaluation.

Even if it is not obvious that the cases used to defend CSA support a claim about Williamson’s notion of warrant, warrant*, could DeRose provide an argument that the cases do support a claim about warrant*? It seems dialectically difficult for DeRose to do so. At the start of the discussion, DeRose accepted that the bank and airport cases are open to an invariantist description on which the cases show only that the warranted assertability-conditions, rather than the truth-conditions, of knowledge claims vary with context. DeRose’s new argument aims to rule out this invariantist response. However, it seems that on the invariantist description DeRose is hoping to rule out, the bank and airport cases do not support CSA understood as concerning Williamson’s notion of warrant*. To illustrate the point, consider the non-sceptical invariantist view that in both contexts of DeRose’s bank case, DeRose knows that the bank will be open on Saturday. Despite this, the invariantist holds that although, in the easy
context, it would be warranted for DeRose to assert both ‘I know the bank will be open on Saturday’ and ‘The bank will be open on Saturday’, he would not be warranted in making these assertions in the tough context. Thus there is an invariantist description of the bank case in which, in the tough context, DeRose is not warranted in asserting ‘The bank is open on Saturday’ even though he knows that it is. So on this invariantist description, the sense in which DeRose is not warranted in asserting that the bank is open on Saturday is not Williamson’s sense of warrant in which one is warranted in asserting \( p \) iff one knows that \( p \). It seems hard, then, for DeRose to argue that the bank and airport cases support CSA understood as involving the notion of warrant*, without begging the very question at issue, namely, whether the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions depend on the attributor’s context, or whether only their warranted assertability-conditions do.

A further difficulty for the idea that CSA involves warrant* arises from DeRose’s initial characterization of the notion of warranted assertability which is in play in the debate between contextualists and invariantists. As we saw earlier, DeRose initially characterizes the notion through his discussion of the possibility case. In response to the question whether \( p \), it seems intuitively wrong for someone who knows that \( p \) to assert ‘Possibly \( p \)’. On one view, the incorrectness of asserting ‘Possibly \( p \)’ in such a situation reflects the truth-conditions of the relevant expression: ‘It is possible that \( p \)’ is true only if it is not the case that \( S \) knows that \( p \). However, an alternative view sees the intuitive incorrectness as reflecting not truth-conditions but warranted assertability-conditions, DeRose endorses this latter interpretation of the case. As he puts it, if \( S \) knows that \( p \), then although her utterance ‘Possibly \( p \)’ is true, it is not warranted. Note, though, that a subject who knows that \( p \) and considers whether \( p \) is possible can easily come to know that \( p \) is possible. But even if the subject does know that possibly \( p \), it remains the case that it would be unwarranted for her to reply to the question whether \( p \) by saying ‘Possibly \( p \)’. Thus DeRose should accept that the subject is not warranted in asserting ‘Possibly \( p \)’ even if she knows that possibly \( p \). But then the notion of warranted assertion by which DeRose elucidates the notion of a WAM is not equivalent to Williamson’s notion in which \( S \) is warranted in asserting \( p \) iff \( S \) knows that \( p \).

The discussion illustrates a general problem with the second strategy for reconciling UC with the fact that assertion is governed by rules other than KR. The second option defends UC by arguing that KAA concerns a specific notion of warrant different from that with which the other rules governing assertion are concerned. DeRose’s arguments for contextualism are valid only if CSA is concerned with that same specific notion of warrant.
But the cases DeRose uses to support CSA do not show that CSA does concern that specific notion. Those cases are open to an invariantist description on which the notion of warrant in play is not identical with the notion of warrant in which one is warranted in asserting $p$ iff one knows that $p$.

Indeed, on DeRose’s own elucidation of the notion of warranted assertability through the example of the term ‘possibly’, the notion of warrant is not identical with the notion of warrant in which one is warranted in asserting $p$ iff one knows that $p$.

I have been examining how DeRose could defend one of the crucial premises of his deduction, UC. According to UC, KR is the only rule governing how well positioned one must be to assert $p$ warrantedly. We have seen that there are two strategies for defending UC in the face of the fact that assertion is governed by rules other than KR. According to the first strategy, KR is the only rule governing assertion which has to do with the subject’s epistemic position. According to the second, KR concerns a specific notion of warrant, warrant*, with which the other norms governing assertion are not concerned. I have argued that neither strategy is successful and that, so far, we have been given no reason to accept UC. If that is right, then DeRose’s deduction, which relies on UC, provides no reason to reject even CI. When combined with our earlier conclusion that the deduction is not well targeted at SSI, it seems that the deduction fails to favour contextualism over its invariantist rivals.

However, even if the deduction fails to support contextualism, it may be that other considerations do support contextualism. In the next section, I consider whether the contextualist’s positive explanation of CSA provides a reason to prefer contextualism over invariantism. This positive contextualist explanation of CSA is distinct from the deduction which claimed negatively that invariantism is incompatible with CSA. Indeed, we will see that, unlike the deduction, the positive contextualist explanation of CSA does not depend on UC. As a result, the problems in defending UC do not undermine this positive contextualist explanation of CSA.

VI. THE CONTEXTUALIST EXPLANATION OF CSA

DeRose argues that contextualism in combination with KR offers a positive explanation of CSA. As we have seen, CSA is plausibly interpreted as claiming that how well positioned a subject must be to assert $p$ warrantedly depends on that subject’s context. Contextualists claim that the truth-conditions of knowledge ascriptions depend on the attributor’s context. We might wonder how the contextualist thesis which concerns sensitivity to the
attributor’s context could explain CSA, which concerns sensitivity to the subject’s context. In fact contextualism combined with KR can explain CSA, as we can illustrate using Cohen’s airport case. Suppose that one has read in one’s itinerary that one’s flight stops in Chicago and one has no reason to suppose the itinerary mistaken; further, the plane does in fact stop there. If one is in a context in which the stakes are low and no error possibility has been mentioned, it seems intuitively correct for one to say ‘The plane stops in Chicago’. However, if one is in a context in which the stakes are high and an error possibility has been mentioned, it seems intuitively incorrect for one to say ‘The plane stops in Chicago’. A contextualist can explain this example of CSA by exploiting KR, according to which one is well enough positioned with respect to \( p \) to assert \( p \) warrantedly only if one’s self-attribution ‘I know that \( p \)’ is true. According to contextualism, in the low context, one’s attribution ‘I know that the plane stops in Chicago’ is true, and so one meets the knowledge requirement for assertion. However, contextualism has the result that in the high context, one’s attribution ‘I know that the plane stops in Chicago’ is false, and so one fails to meet the knowledge requirement for assertion.

Given that the contextualist can explain CSA, it is natural to ask whether, and how, the invariantist can explain CSA. This explanatory challenge to invariantism arises independently of DeRose’s earlier deduction. We saw that the deduction relies on UC, a principle we have been given no reason to accept. However, the contextualist’s positive explanation of CSA relies only on KR, not UC. Thus even if DeRose’s deduction fails to show that invariantism is incompatible with CSA, the invariantist may seem at an explanatory disadvantage \textit{vis à vis} the contextualist if she cannot offer a positive account of CSA.

To assess the force of this explanatory challenge to invariantism we need to examine whether it is reasonable to expect invariantism to explain CSA. Only if this explanatory demand is reasonable would it be an objection to invariantism that it fails to meet it. Invariantism, like contextualism, is a theory about the semantics of the term ‘knows’. It is not obvious that an account of the semantics of ‘knows’ should explain facts about the warranted assertability of propositions in general, whether or not they contain the term ‘knows’. Indeed, even DeRose seems to accept that the invariantist need not explain CSA. On one potential way of filling out the invariantist view which he considers, the generality objection, the invariantist takes CSA for granted and tries to use it to explain away the apparent context-sensitivity of knowledge (AKC, §1.5). It is not clear, then, why it is a reasonable demand on invariantism that it explain CSA. In any case I will argue that the invariantist can explain CSA.
Earlier, we distinguished classic from subject-sensitive invariantism. Both deny that the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions depend on attributor factors. However, SSI affirms, whereas CI denies, that the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions depend on such subject factors as how important the issue is to the subject and whether any error possibilities have been raised in her environment. Given that SSI accepts that the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions depend on such subject factors, SSI can explain CSA by exploiting KR. If one is well enough positioned to assert $p$ warrantedly only if one knows that $p$, and the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions depend on subject factors, then whether one is well enough positioned to assert $p$ warrantedly depends on subject factors. It seems, then, that the only remaining question is whether CI can explain CSA. CI cannot offer the same explanation of CSA as SSI, for CI denies that the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions depend on such subject factors as how important the issue is to the subject and whether any error possibilities have been raised in her environment. I will suggest that we can extend a natural C-invariantist account of the context-sensitivity of knowledge ascriptions to explain the context-sensitivity of simple assertions.

The C-invariantist who endorses a WAM holds that the context-sensitivity of knowledge ascriptions does not reflect the truth-conditions of knowledge ascriptions, but only their warranted assertability-conditions. For instance, a non-sceptical invariantist holds that in both the easy and tough contexts of the bank case, it is true for DeRose to assert ‘I know that the bank is open on Saturday’. If this invariantist endorses a WAM she will argue that it seems incorrect for DeRose to make this assertion in the tough context since, in that context, it is not warrantedly assertable. A natural way for a C-invariantist to fill out this view is by appeal to the contextualist’s notion of strength of epistemic position. According to contextualism, the strength of epistemic position required for a subject to count as knowing depends on context. Contextualists offer various accounts of the notion of strength of epistemic position, in terms of the range of alternatives which the subject can rule out (e.g., Cohen and Lewis), or the range of possible worlds across which the subject’s beliefs track the truth (e.g., DeRose). An invariantist can use the contextualist’s notion of strength of epistemic position in formulating her view. On this invariantist view, there is a context-invariant level of strength of epistemic position required for a knowledge attribution to be literally true; however, in some contexts, an

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attribution of knowledge may pragmatically convey that the subject has a stronger epistemic position.

For instance, suppose the invariantist adopts an understanding of the notion of strength of epistemic position in terms of the range of alternatives which the subject can rule out.\textsuperscript{16} Suppose that a subject knows that if she can rule out the relevant alternatives to \( p \), where relevance does not depend on attributor factors, but that in some contexts, an attribution of knowledge may pragmatically convey that the subject is in a stronger position, that she can rule out some irrelevant alternatives. In particular, suppose that in both the easy and tough contexts of DeRose’s bank case, DeRose knows that the bank is open, for he can rule out the relevant alternatives: in neither easy nor tough is the possibility of a change in hours a relevant alternative. However, the invariantist may appeal to Grice’s rule of relevance to argue that, in tough, the attribution of knowledge would convey the falsehood that DeRose can rule out the change in hours, and so seems inappropriate. The conversation between DeRose and his wife in tough concerns the practical question of whether they should wait in the queue to deposit their pay-cheques or wait until the next day, a Saturday. Further, in tough, DeRose’s wife reminds DeRose how important it is that the cheques are paid in before Monday, and raises the possibility that the bank has changed its hours since the last time DeRose was there. Given the stakes and the mentioned error possibility, it seems that what is relevant to the conversation in tough is a strong epistemic position, one strong enough to rule out even unlikely errors, such as the possibility that the bank has changed its hours. Thus were DeRose to reply to his wife by asserting ‘I know that the bank is open’, he would implicate that he is in such a strong epistemic position. For if he were not in such a strong epistemic position, his assertion would not be relevant to the on-going conversation. Since, by hypothesis, DeRose is not in such a position, the assertion that he knows would be unwarranted even though it is true. (Rysiew offers a slightly different account of how the pragmatic implication is generated in tough; his account appeals to the salience of error.)

Now consider the simple assertion ‘The bank will be open on Saturday’. We have already seen that the focus of the conversation in tough is what DeRose and his wife should do – stand in the queue or go to the bank on Saturday – given that the stakes are high and an error possibility has been raised. As a result, what is relevant to the conversation is a strong epistemic position, one strong enough to rule out the possibility that the bank has


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changed its hours. Suppose that in reply to his wife, DeRose were to make the simple claim ‘The bank will be open on Saturday’. Given that what is relevant to the conversation is a strong position with respect to whether the bank is open, DeRose’s simple assertion would implicate that he is in such a strong epistemic position. For if he were not in such a position, his assertion that the bank will be open on Saturday would be irrelevant. By hypothesis, DeRose is not in such a strong position. It follows that the simple assertion ‘The bank will be open on Saturday’ is not warranted, for it implicates the falsehood that DeRose is in a strong epistemic position.

Notice that the suggested account of why, in tough, it is unwarranted for DeRose to make the simple assertion ‘The bank will be open on Saturday’ does not appeal to the claim that, in general, the conditions for being warranted in asserting \( p \) are identical with the conditions for being warranted in asserting ‘I know that \( p \)’. Rather, the rule of relevance has been used to argue that, in tough, both the knowledge ascription ‘I know that the bank will be open on Saturday’ and the simple assertion ‘The bank will be open on Saturday’ implicate that the speaker is in a strong epistemic position with respect to the target proposition, one strong enough to rule out the possibility that the bank has changed its hours. It is important that the suggested account does not claim that the conditions for being warranted in asserting \( p \) are identical with the conditions for being warranted in asserting ‘I know that \( p \)’. Throughout the discussion we have not questioned KR, that \( S \) is well enough positioned to assert \( p \) warrantedly only if \( S \) knows that \( p \). It is a consequence of KR that \( S \) is warrantied in asserting ‘\( S \) knows that \( p \)’ only if \( S \) knows that \( S \) knows that \( p \). Thus KR has the result that the conditions for being warranted in asserting ‘\( p \)’ and for being warranted in asserting ‘\( S \) knows that \( p \)’ are distinct (see AKC, pp. 185–6).17

The suggested invariantist account not only shows how an invariantist can offer a positive explanation of CSA, but also casts light on DeRose’s earlier deduction. The deduction uses as premises KAA and, in particular, UC, the claim that the knowledge rule is the only rule governing how well positioned one must be to assert \( p \) warrantedly. Earlier I suggested that there may well be rules other than KR which both govern assertion and concern how well positioned a subject must be to make an assertion. This suggestion is reinforced by the discussion of how the C-invariantist may explain CSA. We have seen that it is natural for an invariantist to argue that sometimes what is relevant to the purpose or direction of a conversation is the type or

17 DeRose seems to think that an invariantist’s best way of explaining CSA is to assume that the conditions for being warranted in asserting \( p \) are identical with the conditions for being warranted in asserting ‘I know that \( p \)’ (AKC, pp. 185–6). But the account offered does not make such an assumption.
strength of epistemic position with respect to a target proposition, and so the rule of relevance can concern the subject’s epistemic position.

VII. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

In the previous sections I have argued that DeRose’s new argument fails to establish contextualism. The argument is designed to answer what DeRose takes to be the most influential invariantist objection, a WAM, according to which the contextualist cases show only that the warranted assertability-conditions, rather than the truth-conditions, of knowledge attributions depend on context. Even if DeRose’s new argument fails to rule out invariantism, it is possible that other considerations may do so. In an earlier paper, DeRose argued that a WAM against contextualism fails to meet what he regards as three criteria for a plausible WAM, that it should (i) start from a conflict of intuitions; (ii) involve explaining away only intuitions of incorrectness, not intuitions of correctness; and (iii) appeal to a general rule of conversation (CED, pp. 196–203; AKC, §3.2). I have argued elsewhere that these considerations do not undermine the proposed WAM of contextualism (CW, passim). I will briefly summarize my case here.

According to DeRose’s last criterion, a plausible WAM should appeal to a general rule of conversation. But we saw in the last section how an invariantist could develop a WAM against contextualism based on the general conversational rule of relevance. So DeRose’s last criterion can be satisfied. Now consider DeRose’s criterion that a WAM should start from a conflict of intuitions. It does seem that there is a conflict of intuitions to motivate a WAM against contextualism, for standard contextualist cases involve a conflict of intuitions about whether the relevant subject has knowledge or not. For example, in sceptical contexts, it seems that one lacks knowledge that one is not a brain in a vat and that if one lacks such knowledge one lacks knowledge that one has hands; however, in ordinary contexts, it seems that one does know that one has hands. Or consider Cohen’s airport case. Reflecting on the fact that Smith has read in his itinerary that the flight stops in Chicago, it seems plausible that Smith knows that the flight stops there, but reflecting on the importance of the issue to Mary and John and the error possibilities raised in their conversational context, it seems implausible to attribute knowledge to Smith. Contextualists would not regard these ascriptions as contradictory, for they hold that in different contexts, ‘knows’ expresses different properties. There is no contradiction in saying of a single subject that she has one property and lacks a different one. But to appeal to this contextualist view to argue that there is
no conflict of intuitions in the contextualist case begs the question against the invariantist.

Now consider DeRose’s remaining criterion, that a WAM should explain away only intuitions of incorrectness and not intuitions of correctness. It does seem that a WAM against contextualism must explain away both intuitions of correctness and incorrectness. For instance, a non-sceptical invariantist must explain why, in tough, it seems incorrect to attribute knowledge and correct to deny knowledge, even though, on her view, an attribution of knowledge would be literally true. DeRose accepts that one can explain away apparent falsity or incorrectness by arguing that the relevant claim is literally true, but seems false since it pragmatically conveys a falsehood. However, he thinks there is a fundamental difficulty in explaining away an apparently true or correct claim by arguing that it is literally false, but seems true because it pragmatically conveys a truth:

Even if you can come up with a good explanation for why the assertion would generate some true implicature, this wouldn’t seem to help much. For don’t we want to avoid falsehood both in what we implicate and (especially!) in what we actually say?

So, it would seem that it would be unwarranted to assert a falsehood, even if doing so generates a true implicature (CED, p. 200, and AKC, §5.2). To be plausible, it seems that DeRose’s argument should be restricted to non-figurative uses of language. In a variety of figurative uses, e.g., irony, metaphor and hyperbole, a literally false utterance may seem apt because it pragmatically conveys a truth.

The philosophy of language contains a variety of examples of accounts which involve supposing that a literally false statement may seem correct because it pragmatically conveys a truth, including pragmatic defences of the Russelian analysis of sentences containing definite descriptions,18 and the extensive literature on implicature.19 (I discuss these cases further in my CW.)


So an invariantist WAM can meet two of DeRose’s criteria, that it should start from a conflict of intuitions and use a general rule of conversation. But there seems no reason to agree with DeRose that a plausible WAM should explain only intuitions of incorrectness, not correctness.

VIII. CONCLUSION

DeRose regards the contextualist cases, such as the bank and airport cases, as providing the main source of support for contextualism. However, he thinks the main objection to the contextualist interpretation of these cases is a WAM, according to which the cases show only that the warranted assertability-conditions, and not the truth-conditions, of knowledge attributions depend on the attributor’s context. DeRose aims to rule out this response by his new argument which exploits CSA and KAA. However, we have seen that the new argument is not well targeted at one version of invariantism, SSI. Furthermore, it provides reason to reject the other form of invariantism, CI, only if we have reason to accept KAA and, in particular, UC. However, we have seen no defence of UC such that, as DeRose’s new argument requires, it plausibly concerns the same notion of warrant as CSA. Further, invariantism combined with a WAM is not at any explanatory disadvantage with respect to contextualism, and a WAM of contextualism seems to meet reasonable criteria for a WAM.

It seems, then, that we are left with two competing pictures. On DeRose’s view, the contextualist cases show that the truth-conditions of knowledge attributions depend on the attributor’s context. He combines this contextualist view with KR to explain CSA. On an opposing invariantist picture, the contextualist cases show that the warranted assertability-conditions, rather than the truth-conditions, of knowledge attributions depend on the attributor’s context. We have seen that by appealing to the rule of relevance, this invariantist view can explain both how the warranted assertability-conditions of knowledge attributions depend on the attributor’s context, and CSA. So far both of these pictures seem coherent; the question remains which we should choose.20

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