Abstract.
Contextualists such as Cohen and DeRose claim that the truth conditions of knowledge attributions vary contextually, in particular that the strength of epistemic position required for one to be truly ascribed knowledge depends on features of the attributor’s context. Contextualists support their view by appeal to our intuitions about when it’s correct (or incorrect) to ascribe knowledge. Someone might argue that some of these intuitions merely reflect when it is conversationally appropriate to ascribe knowledge, not when knowledge is truly ascribed, and so try to accommodate these intuitions even on an invariantist view. DeRose (1998 and 2002) argues that any such ‘warranted assertibility manoeuvre’, or ‘WAM’, against contextualism is unlikely to succeed. Here, I argue that his objections to a WAM against contextualism are not persuasive and offer a pragmatic account of the data about ascriptions of knowledge.
**Contextualism and Warranted Assertibility Manoeuvres**

Contextualists such as Cohen and DeRose claim that the truth conditions of knowledge attributions vary contextually, in particular that the strength of epistemic position required for one to be truly ascribed knowledge depends on features of the attributor’s context (‘attributor factors’). Contextualists support their view by appeal to our intuitions about when it’s correct (or incorrect) to ascribe knowledge. For instance, in Cohen’s airport case, Smith truly believes that the New York flight stops in Chicago on the basis of his flight itinerary. If Mary and John are in a low standards context in which it’s not important to them that the flight stops there and the possibility of error has not been raised in their conversational context, it seems correct for them to attribute knowledge to Smith. However, in a different high standards context in which it is very important to Mary and John that the flight stops there and the possibility of error has been raised in their conversational context, it seems correct for them to deny that Smith knows. The case shows that the intuitive correctness of knowledge attributions depends on attributor factors. Contextualists conclude that the truth conditions of knowledge attributions depend on attributor factors. Contextualists accept that subject factors such as whether the subject’s belief is true and non-accidentally so affect the truth of knowledge attributions, but they argue that these factors play a different role to attributor factors. On their view, attributor factors, such as the importance of the issue and whether error possibilities have been raised, affect the truth conditions of knowledge attributions, in particular how good an epistemic position the subject must be in to be truthfully attributed knowledge. Such subject factors as whether the subject’s belief is true and non-accidentally so affect how good
an epistemic position the subject is in and thus the truth value of knowledge attributions. (DeRose 1992, Cohen 1998.)

Invariantists deny that the truth conditions of knowledge attributions depend on attributor factors. Nonetheless, they need to accommodate the intuitions highlighted in contextualist cases. As Bach (forthcoming a) points out, they may do so in a variety of ways. One option is to argue that the problematic intuitions arise because we are mistaken about whether the subject knows. For instance, a sceptical invariantist may argue that it seems correct to attribute knowledge in the low standards case because we mistakenly think that the subject knows. A second option is to argue that the problematic intuitions reflect when it is conversationally appropriate to ascribe knowledge, not when knowledge is truly ascribed. On this view, the contextualist mistakenly takes the fact that the conversational propriety of knowledge ascriptions depends on context to show that the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions depend on context. Again, there are a number of different ways to fill out this strategy, say by appeal to the idea that there are presuppositions or conditions of the felicitous utterance of knowledge attributions (Bach forthcoming a), or by using the idea that, via familiar Gricean mechanisms, knowledge attributions and denials pragmatically convey further claims and it is the truth value of these further claims which the problematic intuitions reflect. DeRose (1998 and 2002) focuses on the last of these options and argues that such a ‘warranted assertibility manoeuvre’, or ‘WAM’, against contextualism is unlikely to succeed. Here, I argue that his objections to a WAM against contextualism are not persuasive and offer a pragmatic account of the data about ascriptions of knowledge.

Note that the characterisation of contextualism and invariantism given so far leaves open an issue which has recently come to the fore: whether the importance of
the issue to the subject of the knowledge attribution, and whether error has been raised in her context, affects the truth value of knowledge attributions. This issue is not important for the first part of the paper (sections 1-5) so, for now, I leave it open where contextualists and invariantists stand on this issue. However, I discuss this issue in section 6 where it is central to the argument.

1: DeRose’s case against a WAM.

A WAM can be applied to a wide range of cases including some not involving the notion of knowledge. For example, consider the expression ‘it’s possible that p’, understood as expressing epistemic possibility. Suppose that you ask me whether a colleague, Carolyn, is in her office. It would seem incorrect for me to say ‘It’s possible that she is’ if I know that she’s just left to give a lecture. It also seems incorrect for me to say ‘It’s possible that she is’ if I know full well that she is in her office. If these intuitions reflect truth conditions, then S’s utterance of ‘It’s possible that p’ is true iff 1) S doesn’t know that p is false and 2) S doesn’t know that p is true. However, DeRose argues that at least some of these intuitions reflect conversational propriety. In particular, he argues that when a subject knows that p it’s true for her to say ‘It’s possible that p’ although misleading since it 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’\(^1\). DeRose uses this WAM to defend the view that ‘It’s possible that p’ is true iff S doesn’t know that p is false. (DeRose 1998:197.)

DeRose draws from his discussion of the possibility case three criteria for a successful WAM, namely that it should start from a conflict of intuitions which requires explanation, that it should involve explaining away only an intuition of
falsehood but not also an intuition of truth, and that it should appeal to a general rule
of conversation. DeRose argues that the proposed WAM against contextualism is
unlikely to succeed since it fails to meet these three criteria (1998: §10-11, 2002:
§3.2). In sections 2-3, I argue that the knowledge case does meet the conflict of
intuitions test and that, although it involves explaining away both an intuition of
falsehood and an intuition of truth, this is not problematic. In section 4, I propose a
WAM against contextualism which exploits Grice’s cooperative principle.

DeRose uses the notion of warranted assertibility in characterising the debate
between contextualists and invariantists about whether our intuitions about knowledge
ascriptions reflect truth conditions. On this characterisation, the invariantist holds that
the contextualist mistakes the fact that the warranted assertibility conditions of
knowledge ascriptions depend on context for the different claim that the truth
conditions of knowledge ascriptions depend on context. DeRose’s use of the notion of
warrantedly assertibility should not lead us to mistakenly think that the debate
concerns the notion of epistemic warrant. The invariantist is not correctly
characterised as holding that whether an ascription of knowledge is epistemically
warranted depends on context; indeed, that’s a contextualist claim about the epistemic
property of warrant. Rather, the invariantist 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
‘It’s possible that p’. On DeRose’s view, if a subject knows that p, although it is true
for her to say ‘It’s possible that p’ it is not warrantedly assertible. But, plausibly, if a
subject knows that p, then she has epistemic warrant to assert p and so to assert the
weaker claim that it is possible that p. So, when DeRose says that, for such a subject,
‘It’s possible that p’ is not warrantedly assertible, he must mean that it is not
conversationally appropriate. Of course, the conditions for an utterance to be conversationally appropriate may include epistemic conditions, for instance DeRose claims that S is warranted in asserting p only if S knows that p. Nonetheless, the key issue between contextualists and invariantists is whether our intuitions about the correctness of knowledge attributions reflect conversational propriety or truth conditions.

2: The need for explanation.

DeRose argues that a good candidate for a WAM should start from a set of intuitions which, plausibly, cannot all be correct so that one or more needs explaining away. In the possibility case we have just such a conflict:

where a speaker knows that p, while it does indeed seem wrong, and may even seem false to some, for her to assert ‘It’s possible that p_{ind}’ it seems just as bad—in fact worse—and certainly seems false, for her to instead say ‘It’s impossible that p_{ind}’ or ‘It’s not possible that p_{ind}’. But, it seems quite unlikely that both ‘It’s possible that p_{ind}’ and ‘It’s not possible that p_{ind}’ are false, so we have good reason to believe that something is not as it seems here. (1998:198, 2002: §3.2.)

It initially seems that there is also a conflict of intuitions in the case of knowledge. Contextualists support their position by arguing that it can explain our conflicting intuitions about knowledge. For instance, they point out that the sceptic’s denial that one knows that one is not a BIV seems plausible. Combining this denial with closure, it follows that one lacks knowledge that one has hands. But, in opposition to this, it seems highly plausible that one does know such ordinary propositions as that one has hands. Contextualists argue that it is an advantage of their
response to scepticism that it can explain this conflict of intuitions (see, e.g., Cohen 1988; DeRose 1995: 183-84, 208-214). Similar conflicts of intuition characterise other key examples used to motivate contextualism. In Cohen’s airport case, Smith’s itinerary for his flight to New York includes a stop at Chicago. Since this is just the sort of evidence which would ordinarily be taken as providing knowledge, we have the intuition that Smith knows that the flight stops in Chicago. However, when we focus on the context in which Mary and John have a pressing practical need to get to Chicago (perhaps they are to perform a life-saving operation there), it seems wrong to ascribe knowledge to Smith. After all, the itinerary may contain a misprint, or the route may have changed since it was printed (Cohen 1999, 2000).

Although the contextualist cases seem to involve a conflict of intuitions, DeRose argues that there is no suitable conflict of intuitions to motivate a WAM against contextualism. DeRose argues that the contextualist cases involve a shift from a low to a high standards context such that, in each context, our intuitions are not in conflict but in harmony:

In the ‘low standards’ contexts, it seems appropriate and it seems true to say that certain subjects know and it would seem wrong and false to deny they know, while in the ‘high standards’ contexts, it seems appropriate and true to deny that similarly situated subjects know and it seems inappropriate and false to say they do know. (1998:201, 2002: §3.2.)

For instance, DeRose would hold that the airport case involves a shift from a low to a high standards context. In the low standards context, it is intuitive to say Smith knows and counterintuitive to deny that he knows; in the high standards context, it is intuitive to deny that he knows and counterintuitive to claim that he knows.
However, DeRose’s attempt to avoid a conflict of intuitions is unconvincing. DeRose is considering an opponent who accepts contextualist claims about when attributions and denials of knowledge seem correct, but offers an explanation in terms of the notion of whether an utterance is conversationally appropriate. So, this opponent accepts that, say, if one focuses only on the itinerary information, it seems correct to attribute knowledge to Smith and incorrect to deny it; and, that if one focuses only on the practical importance of the stop to Mary and John, it seems correct to deny that Smith knows and incorrect to attribute knowledge. Despite this, both foci are available to us and, prima facie, the claims made from these different foci cannot all be true. DeRose could try and remove the apparent inconsistency by arguing that ‘knows’ expresses different properties in the low and high standards contexts. On that view, we would no longer have conflicting intuitions about whether to ascribe a single property. Rather, we would be ascribing one property to the subject but denying that she has a different property and there is no contradiction in that. But, of course, the claim that context affects which property is ascribed by attributions of knowledge is a contextualist claim which would be rejected by invariantists. Thus, to appeal to this idea would be to beg the question against the invariantist view.

3: Explaining the conflict.

DeRose’s second objection to a successful WAM against contextualism concerns the type of explanation such a WAM would offer of our intuitions. He says that, in the case of a good candidate for a WAM, the proposed WAM would explain away an intuition of incorrectness by appeal to a generation of a false implicature. For instance, the proposed WAM in the possibility case explains why it seems incorrect for a subject who knows that p to say, ‘It is possible that p’, by arguing that although the
assertion is literally true, it generates a false implicature to the effect that the subject
does not know that p. However, DeRose argues that the proposed WAM against
contextualism has to explain away not only an intuition of falsity but also an intuition
of truth:

whichever set of appearances the invariantist seeks to discredit—whether she
says we are mistaken about the ‘high’ or ‘low’ contexts—she’ll have to explain
away both an appearance of falsity and (much more problematically) an
appearance of truth (1998:201; see also 2002 §3.2).

For instance, if she seeks to explain away the high standards intuitions, she needs to
explain away both the intuition that it is correct to deny that the subject has knowledge
and that it is incorrect to ascribe knowledge to the subject. If she seeks to explain away
the low standards intuitions, she needs to explain away both the intuition that it is
correct to ascribe knowledge to the subject and that it is incorrect to deny that the
subject has knowledge. But, DeRose argues that a fundamental difficulty faces any
attempt to explain away an intuition of truth rather than falsity. In the case of an
apparently false claim, one can argue that it is literally true although it seems false
since it pragmatically conveys a falsehood. In the case of an apparently true claim, one
could argue that it is literally false but seems true because it pragmatically conveys a
truth. But DeRose argues that this suggested explanation is unlikely to succeed:

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 (1998:200 and 2002
§3.2).
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. Indeed, in introducing the notion of a conversational implicature, Grice applied it to precisely such examples. Still, DeRose may say that the knowledge attributions which are his focus plausibly involve non-figurative uses of language. Is DeRose’s argument plausible when restricted to non-figurative uses?

It may seem so if we interpret the notion of warranted assertibility as the notion of epistemic warrant. For, a subject is not epistemically warranted in asserting p if she takes p to be false or, on factive accounts of epistemic warrant, if p is false. However, as we saw earlier, the relevant notion is not that of epistemic warrant but rather conversational propriety. So our question is whether, for non-figurative uses of language, one can explain away an intuition of correctness by saying that although the relevant utterance is false it seems conversationally correct since it pragmatically conveys a truth. Suppose that a false utterance pragmatically conveys a truth. If speakers concentrate on what the utterance pragmatically conveys rather than on what’s literally said, or if speakers mistake what the statement pragmatically conveys for what it literally says, then the utterance will seem correct even though it is literally false. Indeed, we will see that there is a wide range of non-figurative uses of language where one standard approach involves supposing that a literally false statement seems correct because it pragmatically conveys a truth. The existence of such cases is a corollary of the existence of cases in which a true statement seems incorrect since it pragmatically conveys a falsehood. It is no part of the brief of this paper to determine whether this approach is the right one to take about the relevant cases. Rather, the point is to show that DeRose’s dismissal of the possibility of a successful WAM
against contextualism is too quick. For what he sees as a serious problem for such a WAM—that it would involve arguing that a false utterance can seem correct because it pragmatically conveys a truth—is part of a standard and well-entrenched approach in the philosophy of language.

3.1: Definite descriptions.

On the Russellian approach, the semantic value of a definite description of the form ‘the F’ is equivalent to the semantic value of the expression ‘the unique F’. Thus, for instance, the semantic content of 1) is equivalent to the semantic content of 2):

1) The man in the corner drinking a martini is a lawyer.

2) There is a unique man in the corner drinking a martini and he is a lawyer.

Donnellan (1966) challenged this treatment by arguing that definite descriptions may be used ‘referentially’ to refer to a salient object regardless of whether that object uniquely fits the description. For instance, 1) could be used to refer to a salient man regardless of whether he is the unique man in the corner drinking a martini. Further, the truth value of the utterance intuitively turns on the properties of this salient individual, even if there is some other man who uniquely fits the description.

A Russellian may accommodate the referential use of definite descriptions by arguing that even though the expression ‘the man in the corner drinking a martini’ literally denotes the individual who uniquely fits this description, the expression may be used to pragmatically convey information about a salient individual regardless of whether he fits the description (e.g., Kripke 1977, Bach 1984 and forthcoming b)). Suppose that the salient man is not a lawyer, but the individual who uniquely fits the description is a lawyer. In this case, an utterance of 1) is literally true but pragmatically conveys the false claim that the salient individual is a lawyer. As a
result, although the utterance is literally true it seems incorrect. Further, and more importantly for our purposes, this pragmatic defence of the Russellian view seems committed to the existence of cases in which an utterance is literally false but seems correct since it pragmatically conveys a truth. Consider a different party at which the salient person is not drinking a martini and is a lawyer, but the man who uniquely fits the relevant description is not a lawyer. On the proposed pragmatic account, in this second scenario, an utterance of 1) is literally false but conveys the truth that the salient man is a lawyer and, as a result, seems intuitively correct.\(^5\)

3.2: Impliciture.

There seem to be numerous cases in which what a speaker means goes beyond what she literally says, where what’s said is determined compositionally by the semantic contents of the constituents of the sentence uttered as a function of their syntactic relationship (this compositional determination is relative to disambiguation and an assignment of referents to indexicals, etc) (Sperber and Wilson 1986, Bach 1994). For instance, in normal circumstances, a speaker uttering 3) would mean, and be taken to mean, that she has eaten recently:

3) I have eaten.

Thus, her utterance would seem correct if and only if she has eaten recently. However, there is no obvious component of the utterance which corresponds to the qualification ‘recently’ (though see Stanley and Szabo 2000). Such examples are ubiquitous. In a suitable context, the following utterances could be used to mean the expanded claim indicated by the bracketed material: ‘It’s raining’ [here], ‘Everyone got an A’ [everyone on the course], ‘Howard is too old’ [to be leader of the Tory party], etc.
One way to treat such examples is to take our intuitions about the correctness and incorrectness of the relevant utterances as indicating the truth conditions, and thus the content, of what’s said. On this view, what’s literally said by an utterance of 3) in normal circumstances is that the speaker has eaten recently. As a result, what’s said by an utterance is not wholly determined by the constituents of the sentence uttered together with its syntax, relative to a given disambiguation and assignment of referents to indexicals, etc. Rather, what is said is partly determined by the extralinguistic context, e.g. Sperber and Wilson 1986, and Carston 1988.

However, Bach defends the alternative view that what’s said is a function of the semantic content of the constituents of the sentence uttered as a function of their syntactic relationship, given disambiguation and assignment of referents to indexicals. On this view, what is said by an utterance of 3) is that the speaker has eaten at some time or other. This view may seem to conflict with our intuition that, in ordinary circumstances, an utterance of 3) is correct if and only if the speaker has eaten recently. However, the proposed view explains these intuitions by claiming that, in ordinary circumstances, a utterance of 3) pragmatically conveys that the speaker has eaten recently. (Bach 1994, 2001, Borg 2004.)

Bach coins the term ‘impliciture’ to cover such examples. In both impliciture and Gricean implicature, the speaker exploits Grice’s cooperative principle to pragmatically convey something other than what she literally says. In Gricean implicature, the implicatum is conceptually independent of what’s said, and may have no constituents in common with what’s said. For instance, by saying ‘It’s raining’, one might implicate that one won’t be playing tennis that day. However, in impliciture what’s meant is ‘built up from the explicit content of the utterance by conceptual strengthening… which yields what would have been made explicit if the appropriate
lexical material had been included in the utterance’ (Bach 2001). For instance, a likely impliciture of an utterance of ‘It’s raining’ is that it’s raining here.

What’s important for our purposes is that Bach’s view not only creates cases in which a literally true utterance seems incorrect since it pragmatically conveys a falsehood but also cases where a literally false utterance seems correct since it pragmatically conveys a truth. Suppose with Bach that an utterance of ‘I’ve eaten’ literally says that the speaker has eaten at some time or other in the past but, in normal circumstances, pragmatically conveys that the speaker has eaten recently. On this view, if I have not eaten recently, my utterance of ‘I’ve eaten’ is literally true since I have eaten at many points in the past, but seems incorrect since it pragmatically conveys the falsehood that I have eaten recently. In the same circumstances, my utterance of ‘I’ve not eaten’ is literally false since I have eaten on many occasions in the past, but seems correct since it pragmatically conveys the truth that I have not eaten recently. Bach explicitly considers the objection that, on his view, the literal truth conditions of an utterance may diverge from the truth conditions intuitively ascribed; an utterance treated by his account as literally true may seem false and an utterance treated by his account as literally false may seem true. He dismisses this objection, treating both types of case alike. He argues that, in cases of impliciture, we focus on what’s pragmatically conveyed, not what’s said, and it is the truth value of what is pragmatically conveyed by an utterance which our intuitions of truth value reflect. (For similar comments, see Borg 2004.)

We have seen that it is part of a common strategy in the philosophy of language to argue that the intuitive truth value of an utterance may reflect not its literal truth value but rather the truth value of what it pragmatically conveys and, in particular, that an utterance may seem true although it is literally false since it
pragmatically conveys a truth. Given this, DeRose fails to undermine the proposed WAM against contextualism by arguing that it involves explaining away intuitions of truth as well as intuitions of falsity.

4: A WAM against Contextualism.

According to DeRose’s third objection to a WAM against contextualism, no one has yet offered such a WAM which appeals to a general rule of conversation. However, Rysiew (2001) offers a WAM against contextualism which appeals to the Gricean rule that participants in a conversation should make their contribution relevant. Rysiew’s WAM makes use of a notion employed in contextualist accounts, the 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. On Rysiew’s proposed invariantist account, there is a context-invariant level of strength of epistemic position required for a knowledge attribution to be literally true. However, Rysiew argues that an attribution of knowledge may sometimes pragmatically convey that the subject has a stronger epistemic position. Rysiew uses this framework to explain away contextualist cases. On his moderate invariantist view, in both the easy and tough contexts of the contextualist’s cases, the attribution of knowledge is literally true. However, in tough, the knowledge ascription pragmatically conveys that the subject is in a stronger epistemic position than she actually is and thus seems incorrect.

Contextualists offer various different accounts of the notion of strength of epistemic position. Some contextualists explain the notion in terms of the range of alternatives which the subject can rule out (e.g. Cohen 1988, Lewis 1996). By contrast, DeRose (1995) explains the notion in terms of the range of possible worlds
across which the subject’s beliefs track the truth. Rysiew explains the notion of strength of epistemic position in terms of the notion of ruling out alternatives, however he points out that this is inessential to his account and invites others to substitute their own preferred explanation (487-88).

On his proposal, a subject knows that p iff she can rule out the relevant alternatives to p, i.e. those alternatives which ‘we (normal) humans take to be the likely counter-possibilities to what the subject is said to know’ (488). However, even an irrelevant alternative may be salient in a conversation, say because it has been mentioned (488). In such a context, Rysiew claims that an attribution of knowledge pragmatically conveys that the subject can rule out the salient alternative(s). Consider DeRose’s bank case in which DeRose and his wife are discussing whether to queue to deposit their pay cheques in the bank today or wait till the next day, a Saturday.

DeRose initially claims to know that the bank will be open on Saturday on the basis that the bank was open when he was there just two weeks ago on Saturday. However, after his wife reminds him of the importance of paying in the cheques before Monday and points out that banks do sometimes change their hours, DeRose says ‘Ok, I don’t know the bank will be open. I better check’. Rysiew argues that, throughout the conversation, DeRose’s claim that he knows that the bank will be open on Saturday is true for DeRose can rule out the relevant alternatives. However, once DeRose’s wife makes salient the irrelevant error possibility that the bank has changed its hours, an assertion of knowledge by DeRose would pragmatically imply that DeRose can rule out this possibility. Since DeRose cannot do so he no longer claims to know (though the claim would be literally correct). Instead, he makes the false assertion that he does not know, pragmatically conveying the true claim that he cannot rule out the possibility that the bank has changed its hours (490). (Contextualist cases provide
better support for contextualism when formulated in the third, rather than the first, person. However, here I follow Rysiew’s discussion of DeRose’s original first person formulation of the case.)

As DeRose (2002) points out, a good WAM against contextualism should show how the supposed pragmatic implications of knowledge ascriptions follow from the semantics of ‘knows’ plus general conversational principles, rather than introducing a second pragmatic meaning for ‘knows’ which is unrelated to its semantic meaning. Rysiew’s attempt to fulfil this condition of adequacy occurs in the following discussion of the bank case:

Witness, then, how natural it would be for the speaker’s audience to reason as follows: He has just said ‘I [guess I] don’t know that the bank’ll be open tomorrow.’ And he has said this in response to my raising a doubt as to whether he can really be so sure—after all banks, as I’ve just reminded him, do change their hours. Presumably (on the assumption that he’s conforming to the CP [Grice’s cooperative principle]), he wouldn’t have said what he has unless he thought that there were possibilities incompatible with the bank’s being open tomorrow—specifically, that it has recently changed its hours—that he could not rule out. (491).

According to Grice’s cooperative principle, one should ‘make [one’s] conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which [one is] engaged’ (Grice 1975). Rysiew’s general idea seems to be that it follows from this injunction that DeRose should say something that immediately addresses the point his wife has just made, namely that the bank may change its hours, and that his utterance will be interpreted in that light. While this idea seems plausible, it would be nice to have it fleshed out in
some more detail. In particular, how does DeRose’s wife’s mentioning an error change the direction or purpose of the conversation in such a way that an assertion of knowledge pragmatically conveys that the speaker can rule out that error, and a denial of knowledge pragmatically conveys that the speaker cannot rule out that error? I will attempt to fill in the details of how the pragmatic implications of knowledge attributions are generated in the course of developing Rysiew’s account to deal with a rather different objection, namely that it cannot, as he hopes, accommodate the way in which practical importance affects knowledge attributions.

Rysiew suggests that the practical importance of an issue affects knowledge attributions by making the possibility of error salient. For instance, he says that, in the bank case, ‘as soon as [DeRose’s] wife has brought to salience the importance of their depositing their paychecks before Monday morning—if they don’t, some ‘large and important’ checks they’ve written will bounce, etc.—it’s going to be natural for them to consider some hitherto unconsidered possibilities (490)’. However, one cannot explain the full impact of practical importance on knowledge attributions in this way. The classic cases which Cohen and DeRose use to motivate contextualism, the airport and bank cases, involve both error being raised and practical significance (DeRose 1992: 913; Cohen 1999:58-9). If the practical importance of the relevant issue were to affect knowledge attributions only by making error salient, why do these two key cases not only involve error being raised but also the practical importance of the issue?

Further, in many cases, the impact of error possibilities on knowledge attributions seems to be affected by whether the issue in question is also practically important. As we have seen, mentioning an error possibility tends to undermine the relevant knowledge attributions, where for now it’s left open whether that’s because
mentioning an error tends to make the relevant knowledge claims false or merely 
unwarranted. Contextualists accept that after an error possibility has been mentioned, 
its knowledge-undermining tendency may be resisted, say by questioning the 
likelihood of that error^{8}. I will argue that the likelihood and success of this kind of 
attempt to resist the knowledge-undermining tendency of a mentioned error is affected 
by whether the issue in question is practically important.

Consider a variant of Cohen’s airport case in which Mary and John don’t 
figure. Instead, Smith is talking to his travelling companion Jones. As they both know, 
it’s unimportant to them whether the flight stops in Chicago. In response to Jones’ idle 
inquiry, (‘Out of curiosity, does the flight stop in Chicago?’) Smith says ‘Yes, I know 
it stops there – look my itinerary says so’. Suppose that Jones now mentions the 
possibility that the itinerary contains a misprint. Mentioning this error possibility tends 
to undermine the relevant knowledge attribution. However, when it’s unimportant that 
the flight stops in Chicago, the knowledge-undermining tendency of mentioning this 
error possibility may well be resisted. For instance, Smith may reply, ‘Well how likely 
is that?’ Now consider a different situation in which it is very important to Smith and 
Jones that the flight stops in Chicago, say because they are heart surgeons due to 
perform an emergency operation there. Suppose as before that after Smith points out 
that his itinerary contains a Chicago stop, Jones mentions the possibility of itinerary 
error. In principle, Smith could try to resist the knowledge-undermining tendency of 
the mentioned error possibility by saying, ‘How likely is that?’ . However, in a 
situation in which it is very important that Smith and Jones get to Chicago, this 
attempt to resist Jones’s knowledge-undermining manoeuvre seems much less 
successful. Given the stakes, it is important that Smith and Jones consider even 
unlikely error possibilities. As a result, it is harder to resist Jones’ knowledge-
undermining manoeuvre merely by pointing out that it’s unlikely that the itinerary is wrong.

It seems, then, that practical importance affects the likely success of an attempt to resist the knowledge-undermining tendency of mentioned error and, thus, how likely it is that such an attempt will be made. To say this is not to say that if the issue is not important, raising error never undermines knowledge. When the relevant issue is not practically important, the knowledge-undermining tendency of a mentioned error need not be resisted and, even if it is resisted, further knowledge-undermining manoeuvres may be made. (E.g. after Smith has pointed out that itinerary error is pretty unlikely, Jones may make a further knowledge-undermining manoeuvre, say by asking ‘Do you know that the itinerary doesn’t contain a mistake?’). Further, when the issue is practically important, although it is important to consider some unlikely error possibilities, it doesn’t follow that it’s important to consider every possibility of error no matter how unlikely. Despite these caveats, a distinction remains. Considered in isolation from any further conversational manoeuvres, pointing out that the relevant error possibility is unlikely is in general more powerful in resisting the knowledge-undermining tendency of a mentioned error when the issue is not practically important as compared to when it is practically important. The reason is simple: when the issue is practically important we should consider some unlikely error possibilities (though not all).

Given that the dialectical impact of a mentioned error possibility is affected by whether the issue is practically important, I suggest that one cannot, as Rysiew hopes, capture the impact of practical importance on knowledge attributions by supposing it functions merely to make error salient. I will develop Rysiew’s account both to better capture the impact of practical importance on knowledge attributions, and to further
clarify how the pragmatic implications of knowledge attributions are generated by Grice’s rule of relevance. In doing so, I avoid Rysiew’s explication of the notion of strength of epistemic position in terms of the notion of ruling out alternatives and, instead, use the explication central to one of the most detailed current contextualist views, that offered by Keith DeRose.

DeRose’s explicates the notion of strength of epistemic position in terms of the range of possible worlds across which one’s belief matches the facts. He claims that ‘[A]n important component of being in a strong epistemic position with respect to p is to have one’s belief as to whether p match the fact of the matter as to whether p is true, not only in the actual world, but also at the worlds sufficiently close to the actual world’, (DeRose 1995, p.204). For DeRose, context determines how strong an epistemic position one must be in to count as knowing, that is it determines the size of the ‘sphere of possible worlds, centered on the actual world, within which a subject’s belief as to whether p is true must match the fact of the matter in order for the subject to count as knowing’ (p.206). As the standards rise the size of this sphere of ‘epistemically relevant worlds’ increases. Although DeRose uses his account of the notion of strength of epistemic position to develop his contextualist position, it could instead be used as part of a non-sceptical invariantist account. According to the suggested invariantist view, there is a context-invariant range of possible worlds across which the subject’s belief must match the facts in order to constitute knowledge, although in some contexts, via Grice’s rule of relevance, an attribution of knowledge may pragmatically convey that the subject’s belief matches the facts across a wider range of possible worlds.

As background to the account, consider one of Grice’s examples of how the rule of relevance works. Suppose that a man is standing beside a car in obvious need
of repair and asks as passer-by, ‘Is there a garage nearby?’ In this situation what’s conversationally relevant is not merely whether there is a garage nearby, but whether it’s open. As a result Grice argues that although the response ‘Yes, there’s one round the corner’ literally states only that there is a garage there, it would pragmatically convey that the garage is open (1975:66). For, if the passer-by did not think that it is possible that the garage is open then her utterance would infringe the maxim, ‘Be Relevant’. Thus, the passer-by’s utterance would be intuitively incorrect if she knows that the garage is shut. Rather, in such a scenario, and assuming that she believes that there is no other nearby open garage, it would be correct for her to reply ‘No, there’s no garage nearby’. While this utterance is literally false, it pragmatically conveys the true claim that there is no open garage nearby.

Using Grice’s rule of relevance we can explain the contextualist intuitions about the bank case. In low, it seems appropriate for DeRose to self-attribute knowledge that the bank is open on Saturday, although in high, it seems inappropriate for DeRose to self-attribute knowledge. DeRose explains the case by claiming that, between low and high, there is an increase in the strength of epistemic position required for an attribution of knowledge to be true, i.e. an increase in the range of worlds over which the subject’s belief must match the facts in order to count as knowledge. As a result, DeRose’s self-attribution is literally true in low, but would be false in high. The proposed non-sceptical invariantist account holds that, in both low and high, there is a context-invariant level of strength of epistemic position required for DeRose to know, i.e. there is a context-invariant range of worlds across which DeRose’s belief must match the facts in order to constitute knowledge. On this view, DeRose’s self-attribution is true in both low and high. However, the invariantist argues that in high, an attribution of knowledge would pragmatically convey the
falsehood that DeRose is in a stronger epistemic position, that his belief matches the facts across a wider range of worlds.

The invariantist can explain how this pragmatic implication is generated by appeal to Grice’s rule of relevance. Recall that, in the bank case, DeRose’s wife points out that it’s practically very important that they deposit the cheques before Monday (or there’ll be big trouble with the bank). By doing so, she makes it clear that what’s relevant to the conversation is a very strong epistemic position; in other words what’s relevant to the conversation is whether DeRose’s belief matches the facts not only at the actual and nearby worlds, but also at some further away worlds which are ordinarily too far away to undermine knowledge. Specifically, given that DeRose’s wife mentions the possibility that the bank has changed its hours since DeRose’s last visit, what’s relevant is whether DeRose’s belief matches the facts out to the possible world in which the bank has changed its hours since DeRose’s last visit. As a result, DeRose’s assertion ‘I know that the bank is open on Saturday’ pragmatically conveys that he is in a very strong epistemic position with respect to that proposition, that his belief matches the facts out to the world in which the bank has changed its hours since the last visit. For, if DeRose did not think that he is in such a position, then his utterance would break Grice’s maxim of relevance. Further, given the context, DeRose’s assertion ‘Ok, I don’t know that the bank is open on Saturday’ pragmatically conveys, though it does not literally state, that DeRose is not in a very strong epistemic position with respect to the relevant proposition, that his belief does not match the facts out to the world in which the bank has changed its hours.

The account can be used to fill out Rysiew’s suggestion that raising the possibility of error may change the pragmatic implications of knowledge attributions. Consider first a case in which error possibilities are mentioned in a context in which
the issue is practically important. As we have seen, in such a context, a knowledge attribution pragmatically conveys that the subject has a strong epistemic position, that her belief matches the facts across a range of worlds including worlds ordinarily regarded as too far away to undermine knowledge. If, within this context, some specific error scenario is raised, then a knowledge attribution also pragmatically conveys that the subject’s belief would match the facts even in this error scenario. This is what is happening in the bank and airport cases.

Next consider a case in which an error scenario is raised although the issue is not practically important. We have seen that raising an error possibility in such a context has a different dialectical impact than when the issue is practically important; in particular, it seems that the knowledge-undermining force of a mentioned error may be more easily resisted by pointing out that the error is unlikely. Nevertheless, raising an error possibility even when the issue is not practically important does tend to undermine knowledge attributions. We can explain this by a mechanism similar to that used in explaining why practical importance affects knowledge attributions. When a subject mentions an error possibility in a situation in which the issue is not practically important, she suggests indirectly that what is relevant to her interests is a very strong epistemic position with respect to the relevant proposition. Consider a version of the bank case in which it’s not practically important that the bank is open on Saturday. After DeRose claims to know the bank is open, his wife mentions that banks do sometimes change their hours. On the proposed invariantist account, the literal truth of DeRose’s claim to know that the bank is open does not require that DeRose’s belief match the facts in the possible scenario in which the bank has changed its hours since the last visit. Why, then, does DeRose’s wife raise that possibility? Plausibly, she is not merely interested in whether DeRose knows, but
whether he has a stronger epistemic position. Thus, after she has mentioned the change in hours scenario, a knowledge attribution would pragmatically convey that the subject’s beliefs match the facts in a larger range of worlds including the possible world in which the bank’s hours have changed since the last visit. However, the pragmatic implication is rather weaker than in a case in which a subject has made it clear that she regards the issue as practically important. For, raising error without making it clear that the issue is practically important is a more indirect and weaker way of making a strong epistemic position relevant. As a result, when a subject only mentions the possibility of unlikely error, other participants may reply by making the knowledge claim while simultaneously suggesting that the mentioned error scenario is too far away to undermine knowledge.

5: Two objections considered.

Before leaving the details of this pragmatic account, I will consider two objections. According to the first, a standard test of whether an utterance pragmatically implies some claim is whether one can ‘cancel’ the implication (Grice 1989:44). However, it is said, the relevant pragmatic implication cannot be cancelled. On the proposed account ‘S knows that p’ may pragmatically convey that S is in a very strong epistemic position, that her belief matches the facts across a wide range of worlds, including some so far away they are not normally taken to undermine knowledge. Contrary to the objection, it may be possible to cancel this implication. To my ear, the claim that ‘S knows that p, but S is not in a really strong epistemic position with respect to p’ or ‘S knows that p, but her belief wouldn’t match the facts in a really distant possible world’ do not seem obviously inconsistent or uncomfortable. Although intuitions about this proposed cancellation may well differ, the defence of
the pragmatic account does not turn on whether there are circumstances in which the relevant cancellation can be comfortably made. Grice himself accepted that some implicatures cannot be ‘comfortably’ cancelled (1989:46). Indeed, we should expect an uncomfortable cancellation in a case where speakers tend to confuse what’s literally said by an utterance with what it pragmatically conveys.

A second, distinct objection to the pragmatic account abstracts from the details of the account, and argues that any pragmatic account cannot hope to explain the power of the sceptical argument when merely considered in thought, rather than uttered in conversation. Even a successful pragmatic account offers an explanation only of a subject’s making, or refraining from making, a verbal attribution of knowledge. In response, note first that the same objection may be levelled at some contextualist accounts. For instance, it’s unclear how the power of the sceptical argument in thought is explained by DeRose’s rule of sensitivity: ‘When it is asserted that some subject S knows (or does not know) some proposition p, the standards for knowledge (the standards for how good an epistemic position one must be in to count as knowing) tend to be raised, if need be, to such a level as to require S’s belief in that particular p to be sensitive for it to count as knowledge’ (1995:206). DeRose himself accepts that his account needs to be extended to cover scepticism in thought. DeRose provides several suggestions, of which the following could also be applied to extend the pragmatic account: ‘our judgement regarding whether something can or cannot be truly asserted (under appropriate conditions) might be held to affect our judgement regarding whether it’s true or false, even when we make this judgement in solitude, with nothing being said at all’ (1995:187). Second, even if the pragmatic account were to fail to explain the power of the sceptical argument in thought it would still undermine the contextualist account. As DeRose and other contextualists admit,
contextualism would seem ad hoc if it were required only to solve the sceptical problem. If contextualism were to invoke just two standards for the truth of knowledge attributions, the sceptical, introduced in philosophical discussions of scepticism, and the ordinary, used in all other contexts, then contextualism fails to make it clear why we are taken in by the sceptic’s argument, rather than recognising that she is merely raising the standards for the truth of knowledge attributions (1998:195). But if we anyway need to posit a variety of standards and a mechanism for raising standards even in ordinary, nonphilosophical conversations, then the contextualist diagnosis of scepticism is much more plausible. So, it’s an important part of the defence of contextualism that it is required to explain not only the power of the sceptical argument, but also our attributions of knowledge in everyday nonphilosophical contexts. If a pragmatic account could explain these everyday attributions, the force of the contextualist’s case would be much undermined.

6: Weatherson’s cases.

We have seen how an invariantist can use a WAM to explain away third person contextualist cases. In this last section, I show how the suggested WAM can also deal with another important type of case discussed in the literature, due to Brian Weatherson. Weatherson’s cases are distinct from standard contextualist cases in that they suggest that the intuitive correctness of an attribution of knowledge to a subject may depend on whether, in the subject’s context, the issue is important and error has been raised. Consider a variant of DeRose’s bank case which is the same as the original except that, after his wife has pointed out how important it is that the cheque is paid in before Monday and has raised the possibility of error, DeRose nonetheless decides to leave paying in the cheque until Saturday because of the long queues.
Further, the bank is open on Saturday morning and DeRose deposits the cheque then.

On Saturday evening, the following conversation takes place:

Friend: Why didn’t you deposit the pay cheque Friday afternoon if it was so important?

DeRose: Because I knew the bank would be open on Saturday.¹²

As Weatherson points out, DeRose’s claim to know seems just as unacceptable on Saturday evening after the cheque has been paid in as it would have been on Friday afternoon. In other words, DeRose’s self-attribution seems incorrect although, in the context of attribution, the stakes are low and error is not salient.

Weatherson used the case to argue against contextualism and in favour of one kind of invariantism which he calls ‘subject sensitive invariantism’, or SSI for short. This position denies that the truth value of an attribution of knowledge depends on attributor factors but allows that it is affected by the importance of the issue to the subject, and whether error has been mentioned in the subject’s conversational context (for examples of this kind of view see Hawthorne 2004 and Stanley forthcoming).

Against Weatherson, DeRose argues that the contextualist can plausibly explain Weatherson’s case. The core contextualist idea is that the epistemic standards for an attribution of knowledge depend on the attributor’s context which includes the direction or purpose of the attributor’s conversation. Although the purpose of the attributor’s conversational context often determines that the truth conditions of knowledge attributions are fixed by the attributor’s context, it is compatible with contextualism that they should sometimes by fixed by whether, in the subject’s context, the issue is important and the possibility of error has been raised (DeRose 2004b).¹³
It is important to see that the proposed pragmatic account can deal with Weatherson’s case, even though it is conceived as a ‘classic invariantist view’, which holds that the truth value of an attribution of knowledge depends on neither the attributor’s context, nor on whether, in the subject’s context, the issue is important and error has been raised. On the proposed account, in both contexts of the original bank case, DeRose knows that the bank will be open but, in the high context, the attribution seems incorrect since it conveys the falsehood that DeRose is in a very strong epistemic position. This account can easily be extended to deal with Weatherson’s variant. The Saturday evening conversation starts with DeRose’s friend’s query ‘Why didn’t you deposit the pay cheque Friday afternoon if it was so important?’ This query makes it clear that what’s relevant to the Saturday evening conversation is whether DeRose’s Friday action (not paying in the cheque) was appropriate in the light of how high the stakes were to him then. As a result, what’s relevant to the conversation is whether, on Friday, DeRose had a very strong epistemic position with respect to the claim that the bank would be open on Saturday. Although the attribution ‘I knew the bank would be open’ is literally true, in the context it pragmatically conveys the falsehood that DeRose was in a very strong epistemic position. As a result, the attribution seems incorrect even though it is literally true.

7: Conclusion.
DeRose thinks that the prospects of a pragmatic explanation of contextualist data are very poor. However, his arguments are not convincing. The standard cases used to support contextualism are characterised by a conflict of intuitions ripe for a pragmatic explanation. Such an explanation would involve explaining away both intuitions of incorrectness and intuitions of correctness. However, there is no reason to suppose that
the latter task is more problematic than the former. Rather, pragmatic treatments
standardly suppose that a literally false statement may seem correct because it
pragmatically conveys a truth. I have developed Rysiew’s pragmatic account of the
contextualist data which appeals to the Gricean notion of relevance, stressing practical
importance as well as the salience of error. We have seen that this pragmatic account
can naturally deal with both third-person contextualist cases in which our intuitions
about the correctness of knowledge attributions are affected by attributor factors, and
Weatherson’s cases in which our intuitions about the correctness of knowledge
attributions are affected by subject factors.\footnote{14}
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1 This general rule needs more careful formulation since we don’t think that one should always make the strongest claim possible for that might be irrelevant, or very boring or lengthy. So, perhaps, the rule should be something like ‘Provide the appropriate amount of information’.
2 Schaffer (forthcoming) treats knowledge attributions as instances of hyperbole, whose literal meaning is that the subject can rule out all logically possible alternatives. Unlike the pragmatic account offered here, Schaffer endorses a sceptical view.

3 Of course, one could have some other kind of warrant, say a pragmatic or moral warrant, for asserting a known falsehood.

4 DeRose (2002) holds that assertion is governed by the rule: assert p only if one knows that p. This rule can be trumped by moral or pragmatic considerations. But, suppose it follows that it is conversationally (cf. morally, or pragmatically etc.) appropriate to assert p only if one knows that p. It follows that if p is false, it is not conversationally appropriate to assert p. This knowledge account of assertion is controversial. There are rival views on which it may be conversationally appropriate to assert p even if not-p, e.g. views on which it is conversationally appropriate to assert p only if one warrantedly believes that p, or believes that one knows that p, etc. Even on the knowledge account of assertion, if a subject doesn’t realise that p is false, it may seem conversationally appropriate to assert p. Consider a literally false utterance which pragmatically conveys a truth. If S confuses the truth the utterance conveys with its literal meaning, then the utterance seems conversationally appropriate to S even though it is not. Thus, even on the knowledge account of assertion, one can explain away an intuition of correctness by saying that although the utterance is literally false it seems conversationally appropriate since it conveys a truth. (Invariantists can explain away an intuition of truth either by saying that although the utterance is literally false it is conversationally appropriate or that it seems so. For both are rivals to the contextualist claim that the utterance seems correct because it is (literally) true.)
Though it’s no part of this paper to defend the particular semantic views discussed, it may be worth commenting on two challenges to the description of the cases as involving a literally false utterance which seems correct since it pragmatically conveys a truth. According to the first challenge, the literal meaning of an utterance, u, is the proposition p only if the speaker intended to convey p by u. On this view, the literal meaning of 1) concerns the salient man, not the man who fits the description. However, it is implausible that literal meaning is so constrained by speaker intentions. Suppose I say ‘Anne is a taxidermist’ intending to convey that Anne works on the classification of biological creatures since I mistakenly think that ‘taxidermist’ refers to someone engaged in this work. Despite this, my utterance literally says that Anne prepares and stuffs dead animals to make them look life-like. The second challenge focuses on the psychological process of utterance interpretation. On this view, u literally means that p only if the audience takes u to say that p. On this view, the utterance of 3) ‘I have not eaten’ would (normally) literally mean that I have not eaten recently. Saul objects to the idea that literal meaning is constrained by audience interpretation. She points out that the literal meaning of Clinton’s infamous utterance ‘There is no sexual relationship’ is merely that, at the time of utterance, no such relationship exists even though, at the time of the utterance and for some time after, the public and commentators took Clinton’s utterance to state that there had never been any such relationship (2002:357). More generally, Saul argues that Grice’s distinction between what is said and implicated is not part of the project of providing a psychological description of audience interpretation of utterances, and Grice allows that an audience may be mistaken both about what an utterance says and what it implicates.
See also Cohen: ‘In the case of Mary and John it was the importance of arriving on
time that made the chance of error salient’ (2000: 98).

Rysiew says that the knowledge claim conveys the further implicature that DeRose’s
epistemic position is strong enough to warrant putting off depositing the cheques til
the following day (490). However, this doesn’t answer the objection below that
Rysiew’s account makes it puzzling why raising irrelevant error alone has a different
impact on knowledge than mentioning irrelevant error in a context in which the issue
is practically very important. For, on Rysiew’s view, in both cases the attribution of
knowledge is literally true but carries a false implicature. The only difference is that,
in the first case, the attribution implicates the false claim that the subject can rule out
the salient error possibilities whereas, in the second, the attribution also implicates the
false claim that the subject’s epistemic position is strong enough to warrant some
specific action.

DeRose 2004a discusses what happens in cases where ‘the sceptic has executed a
manoeuvre that has a tendency to raise the epistemic standards, and that her opponent
has responded by executing a manoeuvre which has at least some tendency to keep
lower, ordinary standards in place’.

One can have a purely theoretical interest in whether one’s epistemic position with
respect to a proposition is very strong even when the issue is not practically important.

Compare Rysiew’s claim that, in some circumstances, the assertion ‘S knows that p,
but S cannot rule out all the bizarre ways in which p may be false’ does not seem
inconsistent or uncomfortable (2001:495).

See his comments on the web and DeRose’s response at
http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Philosophy/tar/Archives/002074.html
This is part of Weatherson’s dialogue, which also includes a third character Suzanna.

For some problems with SSI, see DeRose 2004b, and Cohen forthcoming.

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