What Lena Knows:
An Invariantist Interpretation of Contextualist Cases

Abstract

“The best grounds for accepting contextualism”, according to Keith DeRose “come from how knowledge-attributing (and knowledge-denying) sentences are used in ordinary, non-philosophical talk.” In way of providing such grounds he presents the story of Thelma, Louise and Lena, protagonists in the “office case”. He then appeals to our intuitive reactions to knowledge attributions and denials made within that case. In this paper I present an invariantist interpretation of those intuitions. According to it, we can’t coherently be interpreted as intuiting that both attribution and denial are true. And although we do perhaps intuit that they are appropriate, that intuition is explicable by appeal to what DeRose calls “secondary propriety” deriving from the knowledge rule of assertion, which explanation is compatible with invariantism.
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1. Stories, Intuitions, Interpretations

“The best grounds for accepting contextualism”, according to Keith DeRose, “come from how knowledge-attributing (and knowledge-denying) sentences are used in ordinary, non-philosophical talk.” (DeRose 2009, 46) This might be taken to motivate an empirical study of knowledge attributions and denials in actual, non-philosophical discourse; but DeRose and other contextualists proceed in a more indirect, yet more familiarly philosophical, fashion. They first tell carefully structured tales in which one protagonist attributes knowledge and another denies it of the very same person. They then appeal to our intuitions. They might suggest that we directly intuit that both attribution and denial are true. Contextualism then follows swiftly if that intuition is correct, so long as the case is well constructed.⁴ More cautiously, they will suggest that we at least intuit that both attribution and denial are appropriate, and then argue that it is very difficult to make sense of their being so unless contextualism is true.

In his 2009, DeRose presents a very carefully constructed story: that of Thelma, Louise, and Lena, protagonists in the “office case”. This case manifests certain virtues (from the contextualist standpoint, of course) not shared by his earlier “bank” cases and Stewart Cohen’s “airport” case, and much of his argument in his 2009 rests upon it.² I will take the office case to represent the state of the contextualist case-building art.

In this paper I will present an invariantist interpretation of the office case (and of variations of that case that will be presented along the way) that is, so far as I am

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¹ In particular, if it is constructed in such a way as to distinguish the intuitions predicted by contextualism from those predicted by competitor views such as subject-sensitive invariantism. See section 7 below.
² The bank case was introduced in DeRose 1992, Cohen’s airport case in his 1999. The virtues in question include the following: the case involves third-person (vs. first-person) knowledge attribution and denial; it does not involve dispute between attributor and denier; it does not involve a shift from attribution to denial (or vice versa) by the same person; the “high-standards” context manifests an increase in both the stakes and salience of an error-possibility; and no exceedingly high, “philosophical” standards are involved. See DeRose 2009, Ch. 2.
aware, distinct from other invariantist interpretations already on the table. According to it, we can't coherently be interpreted as intuiting that both attribution and denial are true. And although we do perhaps intuit that they are appropriate, that intuition is explicable by appeal to what DeRose calls “secondary propriety” deriving from the knowledge rule of assertion (that he favors), which explanation is compatible with invariantism.

2. Thelma, Louise, Lena

DeRose’s presentation of the office case fills almost two full pages of DeRose 2009. Instead of presenting it in full to readers who are likely already familiar with it, I will attempt to summarize the most important features.

Thelma, Louise, and Lena work in an office with John and Frank. John is often absent. But in their long experience, if his hat was hanging on the hook in the hallway, John was invariably there as well. All three see that it is hanging on the hook today. They also hear Frank shouting to another colleague that he should clear something with John. Thelma and Louise are aware that this is the only evidence any of them have of John’s presence. Thelma goes to a tavern, where she meets a friend with whom she had bet $5 that John would be in the office. She and her friend take her to have won the bet. Thelma says that Lena, who made the same bet, “knows, too” that John was in the office.

Meanwhile, Louise encounters the police who are conducting an extremely important investigation of some horrible crime. They have some reason to believe John was at work, but are seeking to verify that he was there. They ask Louise whether she could testify that he was at work. Louise says that she could “testify that I saw his hat hanging in the hall, which is a very reliable sign that he’s at work.” She also indicates that she heard Frank’s shout. But she supposes that John could have left his hat on the hook overnight, and that Frank might not actually have seen John. The police ask her whether Lena knows that John was in. She replies: “No. She was at the office very briefly, with me, and didn’t see John, either. She has the same reasons I have for thinking John was there, but, like me, she doesn’t know that John was there.”

We are also told that John was indeed at the office, that the police later verify this with Frank and some other workers, and that Thelma asserted that “She [Lena] knows, too” at the same time that Louise asserted “she [Lena] doesn’t know that John was there”.

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3 The case is presented on 4-5 of DeRose 2009.
3. Alterations

I will make two alterations to the case before proceeding. I don’t think either undermines DeRose’s arguments as grounded on this case.

First, for sheer simplicity I will remove Frank and his shout to his colleague, so that the only direct evidence Thelma, Louise, and Lena have is the presence of John’s hat. Perhaps DeRose introduced Frank because he worried that the presence of John’s hat alone is too little evidence to license even Thelma’s knowledge attribution. If the reader shares that concern, the commentary to follow can be revised to re-introduce Frank without changing the substance or conclusions.

The second change pertains to DeRose’s having the police ask Louise whether she could testify that John was at work. Louise (and we) might reasonably think that she can only legitimately so testify if she actually saw him in the office. That does not imply that she is employing higher, rather than more specific standards: she might reasonably believe that one can only testify to P if one is a witness to P, even if one has other sources of knowledge for P.

If so, the question whether she and Lena can testify is not really the question whether they know that John was in the office, but instead the more specific question whether they know this in virtue of having seen him. It is true that, at the end of the relevant passage, Louise denies that she and Lena know (and not merely that neither can testify). Given that the possibility of testifying is in the air, however, it would be no surprise if Louise thought that asserting that she and Lena know would be tantamount to claiming that they saw him.

DeRose’s case does not require that the police mention testifying. They are only attempting to “verify” that which they have some reason to believe—that John was in the office—in the course of an investigation. Presumably the police will have conveyed enough of the seriousness of the issue that Louise recognizes the stakes involved.

So suppose the police don’t mention the possibility of testifying: they’re conducting a “preliminary investigation” and just asking what she knows. The police do still tell her that the investigation concerns a horrible crime, and in light of this she remains disinclined to say that she knows that John was there in virtue having seen his hat.

4. Non-Gettierization as Implicit Fictional Truth
DeRose explicitly indicates that “John was at the office today” is true. And so he should. These are, after all, fictions. Knowledge being factive, if the story DeRose tells leaves it unsettled whether John was in fact at the office then we, the readers, are in no position to affirm or deny that the knowledge claims made by the speakers about the subject are true.

But we are told: John was at the office. We are then to intuit whether Thelma and Louise speak the truth. The implicit suggestion is that the rest of the story will provide us, the readers, with the wherewithal to intuit correctly. After all, if more were needed—if we could not reasonably be expected to consider whether the speakers’ knowledge attributions and denials were true unless other crucial details are filled in—then we should reserve judgment, as would be appropriate if DeRose were unwilling to tell us that John was in the office.

But there is something odd in the suggestion that the rest of the information DeRose provides about the case is adequate in this way. That information falls into two categories: that pertaining to the stakes and salience of an error-possibility; and that pertaining to the evidence available to the speakers. Given that these cases are designed to persuade us of the truth of contextualism, the former information is to be expected. The oddity pertains to the latter information.

In the office case, the three protagonists share the same evidence: they all saw John’s hat hung in the hall at the office, which has been a “sure-fire” indication of his presence in the past. But on almost nobody’s view does this constitute enough information to determine whether the speakers speak truly when they affirm and deny that the subject knows, not even when supplemented by the information that John was in the office. For the information that DeRose provides does not tell us that the protagonists are not Gettiered. It is consistent with the office case as DeRose presents it that John had been at the office and had left his hat overnight.

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4 He also says, in the bank case, that the bank will in fact be open on Saturday (in both his 1992 and 2009). However Cohen does not, in his description of the airport case, explicitly say that there is in fact a stopover in Chicago.

5 Sartwell 1991 is an exception.

6 Various theories of knowledge—especially those with an “externalist” slant—will also, of course, impose other conditions. There is nothing in the office case that ensures that Lena’s belief is either sensitive or safe, for example. It may be that her having seen John’s hat contributes to the sensitivity and/or safety of Lena’s belief: if he weren’t there, perhaps, neither would it have been (and so Lena wouldn’t believe he was), and there are, perhaps, no nearby possible worlds in which he would have been absent and his hat present. But perhaps not: nothing in the office case as DeRose presents it ensures that these conditions hold. Indeed, if Lena is Gettiered, her belief is assuredly neither sensitive nor safe. That she could be Gettiered consistently with the information DeRose has provided therefore implies that her belief could be insensitive and/or unsafe.
But if that’s what actually happened—that is, what actually happened in the story—then although John was in the office, intuitively none of the protagonists know that he was (not even Thelma). So we, well aware of the threat of Gettierization, should refuse to formulate an opinion as to whether the speakers’ knowledge attributions and denials are correct on the grounds that inadequate information has been provided, just as we would if DeRose had not told us that John was in the office.⁷

DeRose might counter that there is always more that is true “in the story” than is explicitly mentioned. Indeed, at the end of his presentation of the bank cases DeRose tells us to assume “that there is nothing unusual about either [high-standard or low-standard scenario] that has not been included in my description in it” (DeRose 2009, 2). No such instruction is explicitly stated with respect to the office case; but perhaps it is implicit that it is explicitly (?) stated there too. Or perhaps DeRose thinks that no explicit statement is required because one should generally assume that fictional truths include those that render the story as usual as possible. Since Gettierization is, although occasionally realized, nevertheless unusual, it is an implicit fictional truth that the stories’ protagonists are not Gettiered, which we then assume while intuiting.

5. Making it Explicit

If it is an implicit fictional truth that the protagonists are not Gettiered, then making it explicit should either have no effect at all or reinforce the intuitions originally elicited when it was implicit, since doing so merely confirms an assumption we, the readers, made when arriving at those intuitions.

But those intuitions seem instead to dissolve, or at least weaken, when that assumption is made explicit. Consider the office case with this information

I will nevertheless concentrate directly on the non-Gettier condition itself in what follows, since it (or whatever it turns out to be) is virtually universally recognized to be a truth-condition of knowledge.

⁷ DeRose does take seriously the possibility that a context’s standards could be low enough that mere true belief counts as knowledge, although he doesn’t ultimately endorse it (DeRose 2009, 13-18). He also cites what he takes to be a plausible instance of Gettiered knowledge (originating in Hawthorne 2000, 203). But he presumably does not suggest that Thelma occupies so liberal a context. Certainly it is very unintuitive that Thelma’s assertion that “Lena knows he was in the office” would still be true if John had left his hat overnight. From here on I will assume that not being Gettiered is a truth-condition of knowledge. Those who demur—including, possibly, DeRose, for some contexts—can restrict that assumption to the contexts occupied by Thelma, Louise, and the protagonists of the other standard cases offered in support of contextualism, without damage to the arguments below.
emphasized: it is now part of the explicitly stated backstory that John did indeed take his hat when he left the office, and that no other Gettier-generating scenario was realized. (Nobody in the office has an identical hat, for example.)

We the readers are now fully aware that the possibility that worried Louise and led her to deny that Lena knows—that John might have left his hat overnight—is not realized: the hat’s presence is as indicative of his presence today as it has always been in the past. Call this the “no-Gettier variation” of the office case.

I no longer share the intuition that, when Louise says that “Lena doesn’t know that John was in the office”, what she says is true. Her assertion might still seem appropriate, given that she is not privy to this new information concerning John’s hat. But I no longer find myself clearly inclined to agree with her with that information in hand. Certainly I am considerably less comfortable doing so than when the tale was originally told with this detail left out.

The information to which we have become privy when this is made explicit does put us in a much better position than is Louise with respect to the question whether Lena knows. We can be confident that the possibility that worried Louise, and led her to deny that Lena knows, is not realized, in the infallible way that a reader can know that a proposition explicitly stated by the author is a fictional truth.

But then it’s all the more difficult to see why our more enviable position should incline us to affirm what she says. The possibility that John left his hat is naturally described as a threat to Lena’s knowing that he was in the office on the basis of its presence. We now know that this threat is defused. It’s hard to see why we should nevertheless endorse Louise’s claim that “Lena doesn’t know”.

Why should including this information have this effect on our intuitions? One explanation suggests itself (to be developed in more detail below). Before the information that John didn’t leave his hat overnight is provided, we the readers share Louise’s uncertainty: we do not take it to be a clear fictional truth that this obstacle to Lena’s knowing is out of the way. The information that we do have is that shared by Louise, Thelma, and Lena: some evidence that Lena knows, but which evidence is compatible with her not knowing if that obstacle is in place.

We (and Louise) might reasonably assume that John didn’t leave his hat overnight. We know (because we’ve been told) that the presence of his hat has invariably been accompanied by John’s own presence in the past. So perhaps it is a fictional truth that John probably didn’t leave his hat yesterday. But that does not imply that it is a fictional truth that he did not in fact do so.

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8 From here on I will assume that the only plausible threat of Gettierization is John’s having left his hat.
9 See sections 13-16 below.
10 This is an interesting feature of each of the contextualists’ cases. See section 14 below.
Perhaps the difference between Thelma and Louise is that Thelma assumes, where Louise does not, that John did not leave his hat when considering the evidence in support of the claim that Lena knows. And perhaps the reasonability of that assumption is itself a function of the stakes and/or salience of alternatives, so that it is reasonable for Thelma to so assume, but not for Louise. Perhaps, finally, whether Lena does in fact know is solely a function of whether John actually left his hat overnight, which is not, in the original case, a fictional truth.¹¹

So understood, the contextualist is right to focus on the difference in stakes and/or salience between Thelma’s and Louise’s contexts. But what that difference impacts is not the truth-conditions of their claims concerning Lena’s knowing, but the reasonability of their taking Lena to know given the evidence available to them concerning the proposition that she knows and what they can reasonably assume.¹²

To explicitly indicate that John didn’t leave his hat is, so understood, to change the story, from one within which this was not an implicit or explicit fictional truth to one in which it is. In the no-Gettier variation, Louise is not privy to that information, but we are. While her caution remains laudable, we are now assured—in the omniscient fashion available to readers of explicitly stated fictional truths—that Lena knows.¹³ We are correspondingly unwilling to endorse Louise’s assertion that Lena doesn’t know as true. This explanation is compatible with invariantism.

6. From Propriety to Truth

I will present that explanation in more detail in sections 11-16 below. Before doing so, we must contend with DeRose’s second intuition-based, ordinary-language argument for contextualism. The first, which we have been discussing, runs from the (supposed) intuition that the knowledge-attribution and denial made by Thelma and Louise, respectively, are true. The second argument runs instead from the (more plausible) intuition that they are appropriate, and then utilizes a bridge principle concerning proper assertion from that intuition to the conclusion they are true.

[G]enerally (though there are some exceptions), one cannot properly claim something that from one’s point of view (given one’s beliefs about the underlying matters of fact relevant to the claims in

¹¹ Nor is it a fictional falsehood. Failure of bivalence is arguably quite common in fictions. (Was Sherlock Holmes’ maternal great-grandmother left-handed?)
¹² I will formulate this below more precisely, and cautiously, as concerning the reasonability of Thelma’s and Louise’s reasonably taking themselves to know that Lena knows.
¹³ DeRose will undoubtedly hasten to point out that Louise is in fact incautious: she does not only refuse to assert that Lena knows, but positively asserts that she doesn’t know. See sections 13-16 below.
question) is false. So, since the contextualist’s cases do not involve speakers who are involved in some mistaken belief about a relevant underlying matter of fact, there is good reason to think that their claims, which are made with perfect propriety, are true.... (DeRose 2009, 50-51).

Call this the “argument from proper assertability”. Here is a representation of it.

1. Thelma’s and Louise’s assertions concerning what Lena knows are appropriate. (Intuition)

2. Typically, if a speaker’s assertion is false given her beliefs about underlying matters of fact relevant to the claims in question, then that speaker’s assertion is not appropriate. (General presumption concerning assertion)

3. If Thelma’s and Louise’s assertions are false given their beliefs about underlying matters of fact relevant to their assertions, then their assertions are not appropriate. (2, UI)

4. Therefore, Thelma’s and Louise’s assertions are not false given their beliefs about underlying matters of fact. (1,3 MT)

5. Thelma’s and Louise’s beliefs about underlying matters of fact are all correct. (Stipulation)

6. Therefore, Thelma’s and Louise’s assertions are not false. (4,5 MP)

7. Therefore, Thelma’s and Louise’s assertions are true. (6, Bivalence)

Premise 4, however, is ambiguous between “It is not the case that Thelma’s and Louise’s assertions are false given their beliefs about underlying matters of fact” and “Given Thelma’s and Louise’s beliefs about underlying matters of fact, their assertions are not false.” Call the former the negation reading (because the negation has widest scope) and the latter the implication reading (because the implication relation has widest scope). These readings are distinct because one’s underlying beliefs might imply neither that the assertion is true nor that it is false. If so, 4 is true under the negation reading but false under the implication reading.

For 1 and 3 to imply 4 by MT, 4 must be the antecedent of 3. But that antecedent is “Thelma’s and Louise’s assertions are false given their beliefs about underlying matters of fact relevant to their assertions”, the negation of which (delivered by MT) is clearly the negation reading, not the implication reading, of 4. So as it stands, either 1 and 3 don’t imply 4 (on the implication reading of 4) or 4 and 5 don’t imply 6 (on the negation reading of 4). The argument, so represented, is invalid.

In order for the argument to go through, 2 must be rewritten as follows:

2*. Typically, if a speaker’s assertion is appropriate, then it is true given her beliefs about underlying matters of fact.
2 is undoubtedly more plausible than 2*. 2 essentially says that, generally speaking, you shouldn’t go about asserting propositions whose denials follow from, and so are incompatible with, your other beliefs. This is intuitive, and expectable on virtually every proposed “rule” of assertion.\textsuperscript{14} If that rule is “you should assert $P$ only if $P$ is true” (the “truth rule”) then since $P$ is false given your background beliefs, those background beliefs also imply that you cannot satisfy this rule with respect to $P$.\textsuperscript{15} If the rule is “you should assert $P$ only if you know $P$” (the “knowledge rule” favored by DeRose and many others), then since your other beliefs imply that $P$ is false they also imply that you cannot know it, knowledge being factive.\textsuperscript{16} And if the rule is “you should assert $P$ only if it is reasonable for you to believe $P$” (the “reasonability rule”) then, assuming you typically can’t reasonably believe $P$ when your background beliefs imply that $P$ is false, those background beliefs imply that you can’t reasonably believe $P$.\textsuperscript{17}

2* by contrast requires that, typically, one cannot properly assert $P$ unless one’s underlying beliefs do imply that $P$ is true, so that one cannot properly assert $P$ if one’s underlying beliefs either imply that $P$ is false or do not imply either that it is true or false. That is, on its face, much more demanding, and does not obviously follow from any of the proposed rules of assertion.

It is also implausible, at least as a general principle. It requires that, typically, one can only properly assert that which follows from one’s other beliefs. This would prohibit the assertion of propositions that are thoroughly, albeit non-deductively, supported by those underlying beliefs, as well as those the believing of which does not depend on other beliefs (and so those that many internalists and externalists alike might regard as basic). The result is a kind of assertoric skepticism: many assertions that are intuitively proper—those that are either basic or non-deductively supported by the asserter’s other beliefs—are not in fact proper.\textsuperscript{18}

2* is more plausible, however, if we count as among one’s relevant underlying beliefs those that encompass the assertion’s truth-conditions; for they do imply that the assertion is true. DeRose is mobilizing the intuition concerning whether the assertion is appropriate, after all, in order to make those truth-conditions (or at least an interesting characteristic of those conditions, namely, their contextual variability) explicit. That mobilization succeeds, if it does, because those intuitions

\textsuperscript{14} “Virtually”, because the three rules to follow are not exhaustive of such rules in the literature. They are, however, the three primary approaches around which other rules cluster, and so that they sufficiently resemble for my purpose here.

\textsuperscript{15} See, e.g., Weiner 2005.

\textsuperscript{16} See, e.g., Williamson 2000 and DeRose 2009.

\textsuperscript{17} See, e.g., Lackey, 2007.

\textsuperscript{18} Note that weakening 2* to “typically, if a speaker’s assertion is appropriate, then it is probably true given her beliefs about underlying matters of fact” won’t mitigate assertoric skepticism with respect to basic beliefs.
are caused by, and so are symptoms of, the intuiter’s implicit grasp of those truth-conditions.

For one to intuit that an assertion is appropriate is, so understood, for one to intuit that the assertion’s truth-conditions are satisfied on the assumption that the assertor’s underlying beliefs are true. If we are then informed that those beliefs are true, we can conclude that the truth-conditions are satisfied, and so that the assertion is indeed true, as DeRose suggests. We can then use that information to clarify what the truth-conditions actually are.

So understood, 2* is not obviously unreasonable. It essentially says that you shouldn’t assert P when your underlying beliefs don’t encompass P’s truth-conditions. It’s not crazy to suggest that you can only assert P if your worldview includes those states of affairs that would have to be realized in order for P to be true. For example, someone who asserts “P and Q” but who doesn’t believe P, or who asserts “Bob is a bachelor” but doesn’t believe that Bob is unmarried, has intuitively made an inappropriate assertion.

Presumably this is the strategy that DeRose really means to employ. We intuit that Thelma’s and Louise’s assertions are appropriate. We also know at least this much about their relevant underlying beliefs, at least as explicitly presented in the story: Thelma and Louise share them. We know, moreover—because this is stipulated—that these beliefs are true. And our intuitions tell us (on the view we are considering) that, if those underlying beliefs are true, their assertions’ truth-conditions are satisfied. So when Thelma says that “Lena knows” and Louise that “Lena doesn’t know” they are both correct.

But their assertions are, prima facie, incompatible: one seems to be affirming what the other denies. So the truth-conditions of “Lena knows” must be different when Thelma affirms and Louise denies it, despite the common form of words. So that form of words can encode distinct truth-conditions in distinct circumstances of assertion. This variation in truth-conditions must be a function of the only remaining difference in their circumstances: the salience and/or stakes involved. So contextualism is true.

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19 There are still problems with this principle. It appears to require that the truth-conditions of any assertion A must be expressible by propositions that do not employ any of the terms (or at least the essential terms) in A, so that it is possible for the would-be believer to believe in those “underlying, relevant” truth conditions without already believing in, and asserting, A. That this is so is far from trivial, even with respect to terminology concerning “knows”. (Those who consider this to be a primitive term might object, for example.) But put that concern aside for now.

20 If not, then I see no representation of it that both is valid and has plausible premises.
Thelma’s relevant, underlying beliefs must then include the belief that John was in the office, since his being so is an obvious truth-condition of her assertion that “Lena knows”. Given that she takes Lena to know that he was there in virtue of having seen his hat, she must also believe that he didn’t leave it overnight. If she didn’t believe these things, her underlying, relevant beliefs would not encompass the truth-conditions for “Lena knows”, and so her assertion would (by 2*) be inappropriate.\(^{21}\) In intuiting that her assertion is appropriate, we must then be attributing these beliefs to her.

Louise must believe these propositions as well. For otherwise, she and Thelma would have different underlying relevant beliefs, which difference could then account for our intuiting that their apparently contradictory assertions are both appropriate.\(^ {22}\)

Making it explicit that Louise has these underlying beliefs—and, moreover, fleshing out the story in such a way as to ensure that she does—should only strengthen the argument from proper assertability, since it assures us that Louise’s underlying relevant beliefs do encompass the requisite truth-conditions as required by that argument.

So suppose that, after she voices her concern to the police that John might have left his hat, the police indicate that they’ve had the office under surveillance by close-circuit video, and show her last evening’s footage in which John takes his hat with him. (Sadly, the video shorted out just when work began and so doesn’t indicate whether he was there today.) Louise is convinced: the hat would only have been on its hook if John had indeed come to the office. This is the “video variation” of the office case.

DeRose should prefer this version of the story because it avoids a problem with the original. If Louise were to attribute knowledge to Lena, she’d intuitively have to

\[^{21}\] To be clear, I’m not suggesting that “John didn’t leave his hat overnight” is a truth-condition for “Lena knows that John was there” in general. It isn’t; she could have learned that John was there by having seen him even if he had left his hat. Rather, the point is that, given that the only way in which Lena could know under the circumstances is in virtue of having seen the hat (so that if John had left it overnight Lena would have been Gettiered) his not having left his hat is now a condition of her knowing.

\[^{22}\] If Louise believed, reasonably yet incorrectly, that John wasn’t in the office, then obviously the fact that her assertion that Lena doesn’t know is appropriate—because it is true given that false yet reasonable belief—would hardly constitute evidence for the truth of contextualism.
attribute it to herself. This is because there is a pragmatic incoherence in attributing knowledge to someone else while denying it of oneself. But as a result, one of contextualism’s competitors, subject-sensitive invariantism (SSI), will also affirm that Louise does not know. And yet, DeRose constructed the office story—in which third-person attributions are involved—in part to distinguish the predictions of these two views.

According to SSI, whether a subject knows depends (in part) on the practical situation of the subject. Since Louise is in a high-stakes situation, her self-ascription requires that she meet quite high standards. But she does not meet those standards in the original version of the office case. So SSI predicts that she will not self-ascribe knowledge. She will also not ascribe such knowledge to Lena. This is not because it is Louise’s practical situation that is relevant to that ascription rather than Lena’s—according to SSI it would be the latter—but because she would otherwise be pragmatically incoherent in the manner sketched above. So Louise’s unwillingness to attribute knowledge to Lena is predictable by both contextualism and SSI; the example doesn’t discriminate between those views.

In the video variation, however, Louise meets the relevant standards and so should self-attribute knowledge (on both views). She therefore need not avoid attributing knowledge to Lena for fear of pragmatic incoherence. However, on the contextualist account—but not on the SSI account—she should nevertheless stick with her denial that Lena knows. For while she meets the high standard set by her context in virtue of the new information she has obtained, Lena does not (since her evidence remains unchanged).

However, if Louise still insists that “Lena doesn’t know” after seeing the video, her doing so does not seem (to me, at least) to be obviously appropriate. Quite the contrary, it seems acceptable for her to say, “OK, then, John really was in the office if his hat was there today, as before. Well, then, I can assure you that John was in the office, since I did see his hat. Lena saw it there as well, so she knows he was in the office too.”

Notice, however, that Louise’s affirming that Lena knows is distinct from her recommending that the police should question Lena after they are finished with her. There would be little point in their doing so. They know that Louise saw the hat.

23 That is, it is incoherent to say “S knows that P, but I don’t.” The knowledge rule can explain this. I can properly assert “S knows that P” only if I know that S knows that P. But then I know that P is true (knowledge being factive), which contradicts the second conjunct.
25 DeRose will again hasten to point out that this doesn’t explain Louise’s willingness to assert that Lena doesn’t know (as well as her being unwilling to assert that she does). See sections 13-16 below.
26 Unless, I suppose, they wanted more witnesses to the presence of John’s hat.
and also know (thanks to the video) that it would only be there if John was. So they already know that John was there.

Louise might therefore worry that her saying “Lena knows”, at least without qualification—“in the same way that I do, by seeing the hat”, say—might suggest to them that Lena is in possession of additional evidence which, even without seeing the video, would allow her to reasonably claim knowledge if the police were to question her as well.

But Louise is well aware that Lena’s evidential circumstances are precisely the same as were Louise’s before being shown the video, and so that Lena is in no better position to claim such knowledge if they were to question her than was Louise, whether or not Lena does in fact know. Background conversational circumstances—that the police are wondering whether to question Lena as well—might then explain any residual hesitation on Louise’s part before asserting that Lena knows. She might well worry that doing so would be, although true, misleading; it might suggest, incorrectly, that they can get something evidentially relevant out of Lena that they haven’t already got out of her.

8. Only Lena Looks

DeRose emphasizes that it is compatible with contextualism that the attributor’s context sometimes selects the subject’s practical situation as relevant for the determination of the epistemic standard that a putative knower must meet. This is what would be expected if the attributor were considering the rationality of the actions taken by the subject. This is in contrast to the attributor’s considering the subject as a potential source of information with respect to the proposition putatively known, wherein we would expect the attributor’s context to set a standard in light of her own situation.27

So long as Louise is careful to indicate to the police that, in saying “Lena knows”, she does not mean to suggest that Lena has access to a source of information distinct from that available to Louise, perhaps we then endorse her assertion because we select Lena’s own practical circumstances as relevant. Assuming Lena is herself in a low-stakes situation, Louise’s assertion is consistent with this flexible characterization of contextualism.

But now consider another variation of the case. Suppose that, when they were all in the office, only Lena looked to see whether John’s hat was there. Louise and Thelma were aware that Lena did so, but they never got around to asking after the result before they parted. The police later ask Louise if Lena knows that John was in the office. Louise raises the concern that John might have left his hat overnight, and the

27 DeRose exploits this flexibility in chapter 7 of his 2009.
police reassure her that he did not by the video footage as in the video variation. Call this the “only Lena looks” variation.

Louise’s insisting, nevertheless, that Lena doesn’t know whether John was in the office now sounds very odd. Louise is assured that, if the police do consult Lena as an informant to determine that which neither Louise nor they know—whether John’s hat was on the hook, and so whether John was in the office—what she would tell them would be correct, because she would be appealing to evidence that is a “sure-fire” indication of John’s presence, both in the past and, crucially, today. It seems reasonable for Louise to say, after viewing the video, “OK, good; Lena does know whether John was in the office. You should go ask her”, and bizarre for her to say “Lena checked whether John’s hat was there; it has, as she knows, been a sure-fire indicator of his presence in the past; and it was a sure-fire indicator of his presence today. So whatever she says on the matter will be correct. But she doesn’t know whether he was in the office.”

And yet this is the sort of case that should elicit, if anything, a stronger intuition that Louise’s assertion that Lena doesn’t know is true on DeRose’s account. Louise is clearly considering the question whether Lena knows in a context that considers Lena as a potential source of information.28 This is, then, precisely the sort of context that should select Louise’s own situation as relevant to the determination of the truth-conditions of knowledge-claims, so that “know” in her mouth is governed by the high standards of her context. She should then apply that standard to Lena and, since Lena has not seen the video footage, decide that Lena doesn’t know. But again, that attribution seems inappropriate (and incorrect). Our intuitions are shifting in the opposite direction from that predicted by contextualism.

There is a general pattern here. DeRose’s argument requires that evidence commonly available to Thelma and Louise does not merely constitute evidence pertaining to the assertion “Lena knows” in their respective mouths, but also satisfies (or fails to satisfy) a truth-condition for the propositions asserted. For only then will our intuitions with respect to the propriety of those assertions given that evidence be relevant to the evaluation of contextualism, which is precisely a thesis concerning those truth-conditions. But then explicit introduction into the story of truth-conditions that are virtually universally recognized as such—that the proposition is true, and that the subject is not Gettiered—should either have no effect or strengthen those intuitions. For doing so only ensures that our intuitions are responding only to the variation in the evidence-related truth-condition (assuming it to be such) that the examples are meant to emphasize. And yet, the opposite happens: our intuition that Louise’s assertion that “Lena doesn’t know” is true or appropriate weakens, or dissolves, when those other conditions are

28 Of course, she is considering Lena as such a source, not so much for herself, as for the police. But she is well aware that the stakes for the police are high; that’s precisely why they are high for her as well. So this shouldn’t matter.
explicitly introduced. This suggests in general that those intuitions are responding to that evidence only as evidence warranting the assertion that the subject knows (or not) rather than as part of the truth-conditions of the assertion thereby warranted.

9. Knowledge Rules

DeRose might attempt a more direct approach. According to the knowledge rule of assertion, which he favors, one should only assert that which one knows. This suggests the following swift argument:

1) One’s assertion is appropriate only if one knows the proposition asserted. (Knowledge Rule)

2) Thelma’s assertion that “Lena knows” and Louise’s assertion that “Lena doesn’t know” are both appropriate. (Intuition)

3) Thelma knows “Lena knows” in her mouth and Louise knows “Lena doesn’t know” in hers. (1, 2)

4) If both assertions are known, they are both true. (Facticity of “know”)

5) They can’t both be true if the truth-conditions of “Lena knows” are the same in both their mouths. (They would be contradictory.)

6) Therefore, the truth-conditions of “Lena knows” are distinct in their mouths. (4, 5 MP)

7) Therefore, contextualism is true.

Call this the “knowledge rule argument”. The knowledge rule is both stronger and weaker than the corresponding principle 2* in the argument from proper assertability. It is weaker because 2* required that “Lena knows” follows from Thelma’s other beliefs (and, in particular, those beliefs that encompass the assertion’s truth-conditions), and correspondingly for Louise and “Lena doesn’t know”. It is, however, at least not obvious that Thelma’s and Louise’s knowing "Lena knows” and “Lena doesn’t know”, respectively, demands this much. Perhaps the

29 This pattern continues, moreover, when more theory-specific conditions—such as sensitivity and safety—are introduced. Suppose, for example, that not only did John not leave his hat in fact, there’s absolutely no threat that he would do so because he is utterly obsessive when it comes to his possessions. Suppose further that the police successfully assure Louise that he has this trait. It seems even more inappropriate for her to nevertheless insist that “Lena doesn’t know” that John was in the office in virtue of having seen his hat.
evidence they have—that Lena saw John’s hat on its hook—provides enough non-deductive evidence for them to know these things (given their contexts).

However, the knowledge rule is stronger in that it requires that “Lena knows” be known by Thelma, and so also true. 2* did not require either; it only required that “Lena knows” be true given Thelma’s other beliefs. (We are then independently given that those beliefs are true.) It is therefore compatible with 2*, but not the knowledge rule, that “Lena knows” in Thelma’s mouth is appropriate but false. The knowledge rule then also requires that John didn’t leave his hat, since this must be the case for “Lena knows” to be true, and so for Thelma to know that it is true.

And in this latter respect the knowledge rule is implausible, at least as wielded in the above argument. Consider another variation of the office case. In the original version, DeRose explicitly indicated that John was in the office. Suppose instead that he wasn’t, but had left his hat in the office overnight. (Call this the “no-John variation”.) From Thelma’s standpoint, of course, nothing has changed; she has what seems to be precisely the same evidence that led her to assert “Lena knows”. So she will assert it as before.

So far as I can intuit, Thelma’s assertion is as appropriate as in the original version. But obviously Lena doesn’t know that John was in the office (since he wasn’t). So Thelma’s assertion—“Lena knows”—is false. So Thelma doesn’t know it. So Thelma’s assertion is appropriate despite her not knowing it, in apparent violation of the knowledge rule.

10. Secondary Propriety

DeRose will likely point out that he recognizes a “secondary” kind of propriety and impropriety arising from the knowledge rule.

While those who assert appropriately (with respect to this rule) in a primary sense will be those who actually obey it, a speaker who broke this rule in a blameless fashion, by asserting something she didn’t know but reasonably thought she did know, would in some secondary sense be asserting properly, and a speaker who asserted something she reasonably thought she did not know, but in fact did know (if this is possible), would be asserting improperly in that secondary sense. (DeRose 2009, 94)

Perhaps Thelma’s assertion in the no-John version of the office case is appropriate in this secondary sense.30 So understood, Thelma reasonably believes that she

30 One might insist that there is only one kind of propriety, or warrant, and that what DeRose calls secondary propriety should instead be characterized as justified
knows “Lena knows that John was in the office”, although she doesn’t in fact know this. But if so, the rest of the argument doesn’t go through. All that follows is that Thelma reasonably believes that she knows “Lena knows”. The truth of that assertion does not follow (and can’t, since Thelma’s is false), and so neither does contextualism.

11. Invariantist Interpretation

We can now discern an alternative to the contextualist account of the intuitions invoked in the office and similar cases, one founded on the same knowledge rule that DeRose favors (and foreshadowed at the end of sections 5 and 8 above).

DeRose is right to emphasize the impact that context has on the standards relevant to the propriety of knowledge attributions. This is not, however, because those standards are relevant to the truth-conditions of those attributions, but because a shift in standards affects whether it is reasonable for the speaker to take herself to know that those attributions are true. In a word, the intuitions track changes in the secondary propriety of the attributions, not their primary propriety. But it is consistent with an attribution’s being secondarily proper that it is false, and so that (at least) one of the two attributors in the office and similar cases is incorrect. The intuitions are then consistent with invariantism.

Others have suggested that taking oneself to know P is, in part, to treat the question whether P as settled, in the sense that one assigns that proposition to one’s background worldview against which incoming claims are evaluated and possible courses of action assessed, at least until something comes along that prompts re-examination. There is surely more involved in taking oneself to know than this. But that taking oneself to know involves at least this much is very intuitive; it explains, for example, the infelicity in saying “I know that P, but need to investigate further whether P.”

An agent’s subsequent beliefs and courses of action are therefore a function, in part, of the propositions that are already settled for her. Whether those beliefs are correct or actions successful might not matter much to the believing and acting agent. But

or excusable, and yet improper or unwarranted, assertion. (See Williamson 2000, Ch. 11 and Lackey 2007, for example.) This strikes me as little more than a terminological dispute. There seems something wrong with one’s asserting something one doesn’t know. And yet, there is also a sense in which it is acceptable for one to assert that which one doesn’t know, so long as one reasonably takes oneself to know it. Nothing of substance seems to me to hinge on whether one calls the latter an improper but excusable or blameless assertion or a secondarily proper assertion, at least for present purposes.

then again it might: perhaps the agent will substantially benefit if those propositions are true and/or be greatly harmed if not. Whether she should take P to be settled—how much evidence for P she should require before taking it to be settled, and what she can legitimately assume in evaluating that evidence—therefore is, arguably, a function in part of how practically significant the consequences are, for her, of P’s being true (or false), that is, of the stakes involved.

This does involve a kind of pragmatic encroachment; not on the truth of P, nor on the quantity or quality of evidence for P, but on the agent’s reasonably taking P to be settled in light of that evidence when engaging in subsequent doxastic and practical reasoning. It therefore also implies a kind of contextualism: variation in the stakes impacts the reasonability of the agent’s taking P to be settled, so that it might be reasonable for one agent to take P to be settled and yet another not to do so, despite their sharing the same evidence. But this is compatible with invariantism with respect to the truth-conditions of P, since it does not imply a corresponding variation in those truth-conditions.

Now suppose with DeRose that, typically, one can properly assert P in the secondary sense only if one reasonably takes oneself to know P. Then, the higher the stakes, the more evidence the agent needs that P is true to properly assert P in that sense.

Here is a representation of the argument.

1) One can properly assert P only if it is reasonable to take oneself to know P.
   (Knowledge rule for secondary propriety)

2) To take oneself to know P is, in part, to treat P as settled.
   (Intuition concerning taking oneself to know)

3) One can properly assert P only if it is reasonable to treat P as settled.
   (1,2)

4) The higher the stakes involved in P’s being true, the more evidence is required that P be true before one can reasonably treat P as settled (perhaps because some background assumptions that are legitimate in low-stakes contexts are not legitimate in higher-stakes contexts).
   (Reflection upon the potential consequences of treating P as settled in relation to the stakes)

5) The higher the stakes involved in P’s being true, the more evidence is required that P be true before one can properly assert P.
   (3, 4)

Now run the argument over, with “S knows that R” as P. The conclusion will then be:
4*) The higher the stakes involved in “S knows that R”’s being true, the more evidence is required that “S knows that R” is true before one can properly assert “S knows that R”.

We now have an explanation for why we would intuit that the assertion “Lena knows that John is in the office” is proper for Thelma but not for Louise in the original office case. Louise can only properly assert, in the secondary sense, that “Lena knows that John was in the office” if she reasonably takes herself to know this. Taking herself to know this involves, in part, her taking “Lena knows” to be settled. To take this as settled is also to take as settled that John is in the office (knowledge being factive). That being settled, she would tell the police that he was in the office, that she knows this, and that Lena knows this as well.

But if she does so and John was not in the office—so that Lena doesn’t know that he was—the cost will be high: it will impact significantly on the success of an important criminal investigation. Louise cannot therefore blithely assume that John didn’t leave his hat as she might have otherwise been inclined to assume. So she needs correspondingly more evidence before she can legitimately take herself to know that Lena knows that John was in the office, and so properly assert that she does. But Louise doesn’t have any other evidence. So she can’t properly assert that Lena knows that John was in the office.

For Thelma, however, it matters little whether John was in the office, and correspondingly little whether she takes “Lena knows that John was in the office” to be settled. So she can proceed on the assumption that John didn’t leave his hat, in light of which assumption Lena does know that John was in the office. She therefore can reasonably take herself to know that Lena knows this, and proceed to assert that she does.

This nowhere invokes a difference in truth-conditions for “Lena knows”; it is consistent with the entire explanation that Thelma is in fact correct and Louise not (or, for that matter, vice versa). So the explanation is consistent with invariantism.

12. Primary vs. Secondary Propriety

DeRose recognizes that, intuitively, the propriety of all assertions—not just knowledge attributions—seems to vary from one context of assertion to another. But, undoubtedly, not every assertion has contextually varying truth-conditions. So, one might argue, contextual variation in proper assertability with respect to knowledge attributions in particular is no evidence that their truth-conditions so vary.

DeRose responds to this “generality objection” by appealing to the conjunction of contextualism with the knowledge rule. Since the truth-conditions of knowledge-
attributions vary with context, and one can only properly assert what one knows, what one can properly assert will also vary with context. So contextualism and the knowledge rule together can explain the phenomenon to which the generality objection appeals.\textsuperscript{32}

That explanation appeals in particular to primary propriety. The invariantist interpretation above delivers an alternative explanation: our intuitions track variation in the secondary propriety of assertion. DeRose himself presents (and endorses) the distinction between primary and secondary propriety. So he should also presumably recognize that intuitions tracking secondary propriety are to be expected, appeal to which delivers this alternative explanation.

The primary propriety explanation is, moreover, inconsistent with the intuition-shifts highlighted above. On that explanation, when we intuit that Louise’s assertion that “Lena doesn’t know” is appropriate, we intuit that Louise knows “Lena doesn’t know”, which implies “Lena doesn’t know”. But in the video and only-Lena-looks variations, we intuit (with increasing strength) that “Lena knows” is appropriate instead. To be primarily appropriate, this would again have to be true. But on nobody’s view are both assertions correct. The standards set by Louise’s context certainly do not fall when these variations are introduced. And Lena’s evidence is precisely as it was in the original case.

Appeal to primary propriety is, moreover, incapable of handling the intuition that Thelma’s assertion that “Lena knows” is appropriate in the no-John variation. In that variation John wasn’t in the office; so Lena doesn’t know that he was; so Thelma doesn’t know that Lena knows that he was; so it is not primarily proper for Thelma to assert that Lena knows that he was. But Lena’s assertion does seem secondarily appropriate: it seems reasonable for her to take herself to know that John was in the office.

In general, one should surely favor an explanation that does not require invocation of a subtle variation in truth-conditions if possible. But the secondary propriety explanation of our intuitions “screens off” the primary propriety explanation: we don’t need both.\textsuperscript{33} The former, moreover, explains intuition-shifts that the latter cannot. So we should endorse the former, invariantist explanation.\textsuperscript{34}

13. “Lena doesn’t know” vs. “I can’t say that Lena knows”

\textsuperscript{32} See DeRose 2009, Ch. 3.
\textsuperscript{33} In the vast majority of cases, they will presumably coincide: we typically do reasonably take ourselves to know that which we do in fact know, and vice versa.
\textsuperscript{34} Prima facie, however, the secondary-propriety explanation does not account for our intuitions of Louise’s assertion that “Lena doesn’t know” as appropriate (in addition to her reluctance to assert “Louise does know”). See DeRose 2009, 109-117. For a response, read on.
DeRose will undoubtedly point out that Louise’s case is more difficult to make sense of on this approach (assuming that he is correct that we intuit that her assertion that Lena doesn’t know is appropriate). On the present account, the higher stakes of Louise’s context bars her from secondarily properly asserting that Lena knows. However it is quite a different matter to say that it is secondarily proper for her to assert that Lena doesn’t know. That would seem to require that she reasonably take herself to know “Lena doesn’t know”. But it is hard to see why that would be reasonable.

It’s not as though Louise assumes that John did leave his hat overnight, or that John was not in the office, in the face of which her believing that Lena doesn’t know would be expectable. And even if she did assume these, her taking herself to know “Lena doesn’t know” would still intuitively be unreasonable even given the high stakes of her context. For those assumptions are themselves unreasonable; as she is presumably aware, after all, they are likely to be false.

The contextualist, however, seems better positioned to explain this. For on that account, the truth-conditions for “Lena knows” include some amount of evidence, where the amount required is a function of the context.\(^{35}\) Louise, aware of the evidence available to both Lena and herself, recognizes that it is insufficient for the satisfaction of that truth-condition given the standards imposed by her own context. She therefore positively asserts that she and Lena don’t know, both appropriately and correctly.

Recall, however, that when Louise learns that John did take his hat home with him (in the video and only-Lena-looks variations), we no longer intuit that it is appropriate for her to deny that Lena knows and, in fact, intuit that it is appropriate

\(^{35}\) It doesn’t matter here whether possession of the requisite evidence is construed as an intrinsic truth-condition—that knowledge inevitably requires possession of introspectively accessible evidence—or as allowing the agent’s belief to manifest a kind of “epistemic strength” characterized in other terms (such as the distance out into the space of possible worlds from the actual through which the agent’s beliefs match the truth). Regardless, the contextualist account requires that the strength of Lena’s epistemic position, however characterized, be inadequate for knowledge given the evidence available to her in the original case, and its inadequacies don’t change in virtue of Louise’s viewing of the surveillance video. That changes the strength of Louise’s epistemic position, but not Lena’s. (Note that DeRose could not suggest that what Louise learns from the video is that Lena’s epistemic position is in fact stronger, notwithstanding Lena’s having the same evidence as before. For then, before Louise sees that video, she did not know whether or not Lena’s position is strong enough (vs. knowing that it isn’t), and so should have reserved judgment rather than positively asserting that Lena doesn’t know. DeRose’s argument requires that what Louise originally knows about Lena and her evidence is enough to inform Louise that Lena does not satisfy the relevant truth-condition.)
for her to affirm that she does (which intuition is especially strong in the only-Lena-
looks variation). This is inconsistent with the contextualist account.

Nevertheless, the problem remains. If it isn’t reasonable for Louise to take herself to
know that Lena doesn’t know, then why do we intuit that her assertion is
appropriate?

Of course, if the only alternatives Lena takes to be available to her in responding to
the police are to either affirm or deny that Lena knows, then it’s no surprise that she
plumps for the latter. The stakes are too high for her to assert the former without
more evidence that Lena does know. Louise has, however, a third option: she could
have told the police that she is not in a position to assert either that Lena does know
or that she doesn’t. And yet, DeRose claims, we intuit that she is licensed to instead
positively assert that Lena doesn’t know.

In fact, I am not convinced that we do so intuit. As pointed out earlier, after all, the
possibility that worries her—that John left his hat overnight—seems to function, if
realized, as an obstacle to Lena’s knowing, the removal of which allows her to know.
Thanks to the stakes involved, Louise cannot legitimately assume that these
obstacles are removed, so that Lena knows; but she also has no reason to assume
that they are in place, so that Lena doesn’t know. If the option of reserving judgment
is one she clearly recognizes—because the police explicitly list it as an available
response, say—then it seems preferable for her to choose it.

At the very least, it does not strike me as intuitively more appropriate for her to
refrain from choosing it in favor of positively asserting that Lena doesn’t know. It
seems to me that she could just as reasonably have responded: “well, I can’t say that
Lena does know that John was there. She would know that if he took his hat last
night, since it would then only have been there today if he was there as well. But I
can’t be sure that he did take his hat, and if he left it overnight then Lena obviously
doesn’t know that he was there by seeing it.”

14. “It is settled that Lena doesn’t know” vs. “It is not settled that Lena knows”

DeRose might nevertheless insist that an explanation be provided for why we would
allow Louise to assert that Lena doesn’t know. After all, she could have chosen the
more cautious assertion. Why should we license her making an assertion—“Lena
doesn’t know”—that she, Louise, doesn’t know? That violates the knowledge rule!36

In response, recall first that when Louise considers the question whether to affirm
that Lena knows, she is simultaneously considering the question whether to affirm
that she herself knows, since one cannot coherently take someone else to know P

36 Indeed it violates both primary and secondary propriety derived from that rule.
without taking oneself to know P as well. To assure the police that Lena knows is, therefore, tantamount to Louise’s assuring them that she herself knows, and so that John was indeed in the office.

I suggest that Louise is using the more easily expressible phrase “I (and Lena) don’t know” in order to simply indicate that she cannot provide them with that assurance. This indeed strikes me as a common phenomenon. It seems to me that we often use “I don’t know P” to indicate that we are not in a position to claim that we know P, rather than that we are in a position to claim that we don’t know P. We are, after all, very typically primarily interested in the question whether we can treat P as settled, and so mobilize it in subsequent thought and action (including the action of assuring the police). If I either take myself to not know P or take myself to be in a position such that I can’t affirm either that I do or don’t know P, I will in either case treat P as unsettled. I suspect we often use “I don’t know P” to indicate, not that it is settled for one that one does not know P, but rather that it is not settled for one that one does know P.

Of course, we often do have reason to take ourselves to know that we don’t know P—because we reasonably take ourselves to know that P is false, for example—and so are in a position to treat our not knowing P as settled. But this is, prima facie, not how it is in the examples to which DeRose and other contextualists appeal.

In those examples, there is a condition C of the subject’s acquiring knowledge in the particular way that the subject might hope to acquire it. In the office case, C is “John did not leave his hat overnight”.37 The person in the “high-standards” context decides that, given the stakes involved in her circumstances, she should not assume that C—for which she has no direct evidence—is realized. To decide not to assume C is not, prima facie, to believe something that implies that the subject does not know (as would be believing that C is false).38 It is instead to find oneself with a body of information that, without C, does not determine either that the subject knows or that she doesn’t know.

This suggests that Louise is also utilizing “Lena doesn’t know” to indicate that it is, for her, unsettled whether Lena does know. It suggests further that our intuiting that her assertion is appropriate amounts to our intuiting that it is, given her circumstances, reasonable for her to treat “Lena knows” as unsettled. This is because it is appropriate, in light of the stakes, for her to excise the assumption that John didn’t leave his hat from her deliberations concerning what Lena knows. It

37 In the bank case, it is “the bank did not change their hours”; and in Cohen’s airport case, it is “the itinerary does not contain a misprint”.

38 Louise doesn’t believe that John did leave his hat; that’s not why she asserts “Lena doesn’t know”.

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seems to me revealing that all of the cases that contextualists have constructed (to my knowledge) conform to this pattern.\textsuperscript{39}

15. WAMming

The invariantist interpretation offered here is, to some extent, a “warranted assertibility maneuver” ("WAM"), in that Louise’s assertion—“Lena doesn’t know”—is warranted even though Louise does not know it to be true (nor can she reasonably take herself to know it to be true). But this is a long way from the sort of WAMs DeRose has in mind as offered by his invariantist opponents. According to those WAMS we do intuit that Louise’s assertion that “Lena doesn’t know” is false—Lena does know—and, moreover, that Louise is herself well aware that it is. We nevertheless intuit what Louise says to be appropriate because we believe that she is warranted in asserting something that we—and she—believe to be false. Such WAMmers then owe an explanation as to why she is so warranted.\textsuperscript{40}

According to the proposal here, however, we don’t intuit that “Lena doesn’t know” is false. Given the information in the story as originally presented, neither we, nor Thelma, nor Louise, have been provided with enough information to determine that the truth-conditions for “Lena knows” are realized. They, and we, would have to assume that John hadn’t left his hat. Whether Thelma or Louise should so assume depends on the stakes. They both have some reason to do so: they are aware of the track-record evidence. But for Louise to assume that he didn’t leave his hat, and consequently treat it as settled that she and Lena know that John was there, has serious consequences. Caution therefore dictates that she not assume that John took his hat, and so not take herself to know that she and Lena know that John was there, nor suggest so to the police.

She expresses this by saying that she and Lena don’t know that he was there. Taken literally, this isn’t quite what she is in a position to claim. But it’s close. It is, indeed, practically equivalent to what she is in a position to say: the police will respond in

\textsuperscript{39} This seems to me to “cancel out” DeRose’s point that, as standards for assertion rise, we would not license a shift from “John is in the office” to “John is not in the office” and yet seem to license a shift from “I know John is in the office” to “I don’t know that John is in the office”. The interchangeability between “I don’t know that I know that P” and “I don’t know that P”, explicable if the latter conveys “P is not settled for me”, explains this without resort to contextualism. See DeRose 2009, 109-112.

\textsuperscript{40} DeRose argues against such WAMmers in chapter 3 of DeRose 2009.
the same way whether she says that she and Lena don’t know or indicates that she
can’t say that she and Lena do know.41

Thelma, meanwhile, need not be so cautious. She can go ahead and assume that John
didn’t leave his hat, reasonably take herself to know that she and Lena both know
that he was there, and so properly assert that she and Lena do know.

Do Thelma, Louise, and Lena know that John was in the office? That depends on
whether John left his hat. If he didn’t, then they do. And if he did, then they don’t.42

So this WAM does not involve excusing Louise (or Thelma) for asserting what we,
and she, recognize to be a falsehood. It only requires that we excuse her from
indicating that “Lena knows” is not settled for her by asserting that “Lena doesn’t
know”. The latter—that Lena doesn’t know—might be true. And we can easily
understand why she says this: it’s easier to express, the police find out what they
need to find out—that they can’t rely on either Louise or Lena to verify John’s
presence—and the consequences are the same.

16. Infelicity

It is, in fact, prima facie infelicitous to say “I don’t know whether I know that P”. It
seems tantamount, moreover, to conceding that one doesn’t know that P. Unless the
“KK” rule is correct—according to which one cannot know that P unless one also
knows that one knows that P—it is coherent in general for S to know that P without
knowing that S knows that P.43 And yet it is at least odd to say “I don’t know that I
know that P”, especially if one is unwilling to say more simply that one doesn’t know
that P.

Why is this? Perhaps when we consider whether we know that P we are really
typically concerned only with the question whether we can treat P as settled, so that
we use the expression “I don’t know that P” to just convey the fact that we do not
take P to be settled. If so, then to claim that I don’t know whether I know that P
really does just amount to asserting that I don’t know that P in this broader sense.

41 DeRose tells us that “the police subsequently verify that [John was in the office]
with Frank and with a couple of other workers…”, which they presumably would do
whichever response Louise provided, so long as it wasn’t “Lena and I know he was
in the office” (DeRose 2009, 5).
42 Perhaps it also depends on the satisfaction of other, perhaps modal, conditions.
But, if so, that won’t undermine the argument here. Quite the contrary; see note 37
above.
43 The KK rule is unpopular nowadays. DeRose himself thinks that it is false; see
DeRose 2009, 104-106.
For taking myself not to know whether I know that P also amounts to not being settled with respect to P.

This is only a sketch of an explanation, and leaves a number of issues open. Is this a claim about the semantics of the expression “I don’t know that P”, at least on many occasions of use, so that it literally means “P is not settled” on those occasions? Or does the explanation require mobilization of the distinction between what one says and what one implies, so that often when one says “I don’t know” one is asserting something that one is not really in a position to assert, but the assertion of which implies a closely related truth?

I offer this explanation only tentatively, and won’t attempt to answer these questions here. For present purposes I rely only on the bare intuition that it is infelicitous to assert “I don’t know whether I know that P”. Assuming, therefore, that Louise will avoid doing so, she really is confronted with only two options: assert that she knows or that she doesn’t. For reasons already given, she shouldn’t select the former, and so must select the latter. She is also constrained to make the same choice with respect to what Lena knows. So our intuition that her assertion that “Lena doesn’t know” is appropriate is explicable without recourse to contextualism.

“[T]he case for contextualism,” DeRose says, “would be at least considerably weaker if the evident facts about HIGH were only that we are reluctant to positively ascribe ‘knowledge’ there and/or that if a misguided speaker were to positively ascribe ‘knowledge’ in such a case, the ascriptions would seem false and/or inappropriate. That the actual situation is such that, beyond the above, speakers go so far as to deny ‘knowledge’ in HIGH cases, and do so truthfully and appropriately, to all appearances certainly seems to considerably strengthen the case for contextualism” (DeRose 2009, 53).

However, the fact that speakers “go so far” is explicable by appeal only to the intuition that “I don’t know whether I know that P” is infelicitous. We can, moreover, discern the outline of an explanation of this infelicity by appeal to the suggestion that, in saying “I don’t know P”, we are very often concerned to convey only that P is not settled for us.

Even if this explanation is off the mark, it does at least seem obvious that the correct explanation, whatever it is, won’t be available only to the contextualist. “I can’t say that John is in the office” and “John isn’t in the office” are obviously different claims. And yet, “I can’t say that I know that John is in the office” and “I don’t know that John is in the office” seem at least often interchangeable. Nothing in contextualism that I can see explains that difference. Perhaps, then, DeRose is making mountains out of molehills.

17. Conclusion
Invariantists have conceded too much to contextualists. While the former disagree with the latter with respect to whether “Lena knows” is true (or false) in Thelma’s (or Louise’s) mouth, they have agreed, at least implicitly, that the description of the original case suffices to settle the matter one way or the other and, moreover, that Thelma and Louise themselves know which it is (and yet one of them proceeds to assert the negation of what she knows).

On the present interpretation, however, the information provided in the original case does not determine whether Lena knows, nor does it indicate that Thelma and Louise know which it is. As a result, to explicitly introduce the requisite information—either as backstory or as part of what Louise knows when deciding what to assert—is to alter the story. The alteration doesn’t involve replacement of a fictional truth in the original version with a falsehood. But it does involve introducing as fictional truth a proposition that was, originally, neither fictionally true nor false.

Our intuitions—both with respect to whether Louise’s assertion that “Lena doesn’t know” is true and whether it is appropriate—correspondingly shift. They do so, moreover, in a manner that is inconsistent with the contextualist hypothesis that those intuitions concern the truth-conditions of “Lena knows”. That shift is, however, consistent with the hypothesis that those intuitions concern the reasonability of Thelma’s and Louise’s taking themselves to know that Lena knows, so long as the reasonability of their doing so is a function, in part, of the practical significance of their being right.

DeRose and other contextualists rightly emphasize the importance of taking the third-person standpoint in view when theorizing about knowledge attributions. The distinction between what one knows and what one can reasonably take oneself to know is a distinction that is itself only easily discernable from the third-person standpoint: if you ask me what I know vs. what I can reasonably take myself to know, you will get the same answer; but those answers might well be different if I’m asked about what someone else knows. And yet it is only by conflating this distinction with respect to the original office and similar cases that the intuitions they generate seem to support contextualism.44

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44 The invariantist reading of the variations above emphasizes the effect of stakes on the secondary propriety of assertion. But contextualists very often suggest that the salience of an error-possibility, as well as stakes, can shift context. DeRose intentionally constructed the office case so as to include variation in both. However, Louise only contemplates the error possibility—that John left his hat—as a result of having recognized the stakes involved. The same is true in the bank and airport cases. It would be odd, then, to suggest that variation in salience is driving the variation in willingness to attribute knowledge, at least with respect to these cases. At any rate, an account of the effect of salience on knowledge attributions congenial to the invariantist interpretation offered here will have to await another occasion.
References


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