

Motivated Contextualism
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I. Introduction

I here evaluate contextualism and invariantism in terms of what I think should be an uncontroversial point regarding the point of the concept of *knowledge*: it is used to certify epistemic agents as good sources (on a certain point or subject matter) for an understood audience.¹ Attributions of knowledge and denials of knowledge are used in a kind of epistemic gate keeping for (epistemic or practical) communities with which the attributor and interlocutors are associated. (In a general way, this point is also suggested by Craig [1990].) To say that *S* knows about some matter is to say that *S* is epistemically positioned with respect to this matter so as to be a good source or storehouse of beliefs on the matter. To say that *S* knows about guanaco physiology indicates that *S* is a good source of true beliefs about guanaco physiology. To say that *S* knows that a major earthquake is *n* times more likely to hit Memphis than Lincoln indicates that *S* is so positioned with respect to that proposition that one can take it from *S*, that a major earthquake is *n* times more likely to hit Memphis than Lincoln. This may not be the whole story regarding the point and purpose of the concept of *knowledge*, but it is central to the story. When combined with reflection on the epistemic gate keeping needs of situated groups or communities, this simple observation regarding the point and purpose of the concept of knowledge comes to have rich implications.²

One implication to be explored here is that this central gate keeping point to the concept of *knowledge* gives one reason to prefer contextualism over various forms of sensitive invariantism. Contextualists treat attributions of knowledge as understandable (in significant measure) in terms of the contextual concerns of attributor and interlocutors. In contrast, sensitive invariantists understand attributions of knowledge in terms of the interests and projects of the agent (to whom knowledge is ascribed). It makes a good deal of sense that gate keeping would be attuned to the interests of those of the community for whom the gate keeping is done (the attributor and interlocutors are then representative of, or responsive to, the community). It makes a good deal less sense that the gate keeping would be attuned to the interests of an epistemic agent who might have

interests and projects rather at odds with the community for whom gate keeping is managed in the talk of knowledge.

There is a second line of thought to be developed here—one that significantly limits the contextualist themes to be supported. To appreciate these limits, one must begin to develop an understanding of contextualism along lines suggested by the gate-keeping point of the concept of *knowledge*. To do this, one must reflect on a spectrum groups and their needs for information and sources. At one end of the spectrum are cases in which the attributor and interlocutors may be engaged in gate keeping for a group that is focused on some practical project. (The group may be designing a machine or system, trying to install a program, trying to repair an engine or restore an ecosystem, trying to determine criminal responsibility, or trying to reach a lasting political compromise on a matter of dispute.) The members of such a group are concerned with sources of actionable information on which to proceed in their project. Call this *gate keeping for an applied community*. At the other end of the spectrum, there are cases in which the attributor and interlocutors may be *gate keeping for a source community*—a community devoted to developing a body of results on which folk in various other communities might confidently draw. Gate keeping for such a community, one is including or excluding folk from a select community of experts or authorities, and doing so with a view to putting together a community up to producing actionable information for an indeterminate range of interested groups.

While contextualist themes seem most plausible when thinking of gate keeping for applied communities, limits on contextualist themes emerge most clearly in connection with source communities that are *not* closely associated with some delimited range of practical projects. Think of the vast range of practical projects that have recourse to the results of general molecular biology—or some other general discipline. Such disciplines provide a body of results on which people engaged in an indeterminate range of practical projects might draw. (Of course, such disciplines are focused on subject matters that may have been associated with certain practical interests, but the range of practical projects that may come to draw on a discipline (think of particle physics, for example, or molecular biology) is really quite diverse. Here the concern is with *general purpose actionable information*. Call this *gate keeping for a general source community*. In

contexts where the operative interests have to do with *general purpose information*, no concrete limited purposes are likely to provide a simple decisive understanding of just what counts as actionable information. Accordingly, while thinking about gate keeping for applied communities may encourage contextualist themes, thinking about gate keeping for general source communities mutes some of these tendencies. Here, one gets results that look rather like those with which insensitive invariantists such as Williamson (2000, 2005a) would be comfortable.

To repeat, I have two central points to make here: First, understanding the point and purpose of the concept of *knowledge* provides significant motivation for a form of contextualism in preference to a sensitive invariantist position. Second, with respect to general purpose source communities, fitting gate keeping would insist on conditions for S knowing that p that approximate closely the requirements on knowledge that insensitive invariantists envision.

I am convinced that something along the lines of what I here term gate-keeping contextualism is the most promising way in which to understand contextualism about knowledge. However, I do not have a settled view about just how to best combine the two lines of thought developed here. They might find happy development into a thorough-going gate-keeping contextualism in which certain insensitive invariantist judgments and themes find limited vindication while being contained within a generally contextualist picture. I am attracted to this possibility, and highlight it in this paper. Still, a plausible alternative idea is that gate keeping for general source communities somehow ultimately dominates and supplants the more volatile contextualist uses associated with practical communities. If this proves the better approach, contextualism would have proved an unstable position, containing the seeds of its own demise. I return to this alternative in the conclusion, but do not here seek to settle the question of which line of thought is correct.

II. *Stage Setting: the Contested Positions*³

a. *Contextualism*

Contextualists hold that the semantics or truth conditions of knowledge attributions are keyed to the context of the attributor, so that a given sentence attributing knowledge to a given agent at a time can have different truth-conditions in the different contexts.⁴

Holding fixed the agent, *S*, the proposition to be known, *p*, and the time, *t*, the attribution, “*S* knows that *p* at *t*,” can yet express different propositions when uttered in different attributor contexts. Aspects of the context of attribution—the conversational state of play (perhaps) or the interests that are there salient to the attributor and interlocutors—condition what it takes to qualify as knowing that *p*. To know that *p*, the agent needs to be epistemically well positioned enough to be able to discriminate that *p* in contrast to the contextually relevant alternatives. Sometimes, the point is put by saying that the agent needs to be able to “rule out” the contextually relevant alternatives to *p*.⁵

Contexts have been variously understood. Commonly they have been understood as conversational settings in which moves by participants would raise or lower the standards for knowing (see, Lewis [1979, 1996] and DeRose [1995].) Standards are raised as moves in the conversation make salient various alternative possibilities. Particularly in Lewis’s (1996) discussion, one could easily get the impression that contexts are strangely hostage to whatever “moves” are made by conversational participants in a “language game”—so that the mere mention of skeptical scenarios would raise standards, even when this would frustrate the practical interests of all participants. (Mentioning the epistemic possibility of an evil demon at a dissertation defense in molecular biology, or at a meeting of engineers working on a project, would be the cognitive equivalent of being a suicide bomber.) With their bank and plane cases, DeRose (1992) and Cohen (1999) make it clear that the practical interests of the attributor and interlocutors significantly condition the contextually relevant alternatives. This suggestion seems to me a step forward. Whatever exactly is a context of a knowledge attribution, it is associated with the attribution, the attributor and the attributor’s interlocutors—moreover, it is associated with their focus and with their concerns and interests. The agent who is attributed or denied knowledge may have different concerns and interests—and these will only affect the context and the contextually relevant alternatives only to the extent that awareness of them affects the concerns and interests salient to the attributor and interlocutors.

Consider DeRose’s bank cases. In the first, I and my wife are driving by the bank with paychecks in hand on Friday after work. We generally like to deposit our checks fairly quickly, but not much hangs on this. Seeing long lines, I suggest depositing the check Saturday. My wife notes that some banks are closed on Saturdays. I respond that I

know that our bank is open on Saturdays, having been there on a recent Saturday. (The bank is indeed open Saturdays.) Reasonably, she accepts my knowledge self-attribution. In the second, something significant hangs on getting our paychecks in the bank before Monday morning—perhaps a large and important payment will be posted against our account Monday. My wife then responds to my claim to know by mentioning a further possibility: that banks do change their hours, and our’s may have done so. (It has not.) I then reasonably retract my claim to know. It is natural to think that, in the first case, with the lower practical stakes there confronting my wife and I, fewer possibilities inconsistent with the bank being open Saturday are relevant. It is natural to think that in order to there count as knowing I would need to be in an epistemic position to “eliminate” only the most obvious and salient alternatives to the proposition in question. In contrast, it is natural to think that in the second case, with the higher practical stakes confronting my wife and I, the possibility raised by my wife is relevant—so that to know that the bank is open Saturday, I would need to be in a position to “rule out” that alternative. According to contextualists, the higher practical interests we face—here, I as attributor and my wife as interlocutor—makes a wider range of possibilities relevant, so that more is required in this conversational context to count as knowing that the bank will be open Saturday.

In the above bank cases, my wife and I are parties to a conversation in which we share stakes (either high or low). Further, the agent to whom knowledge is attributed or denied is a party to that same conversation—me. An important kind of case, differentiating contextualism from sensitive invariantism, is that in which the agent who is a candidate for knowing faces different stakes from those conditioning the context. So, imagine that a friend, Violet, is trying to decide whether to stop at the bank to deposit her paycheck on her way home—and that Violet expects a large charge to be posted against her account sometime (perhaps early) Monday. Her partner, Scarlett, calls me and asks whether the bank is open Saturday. I again say that I know that it is, for the reasons indicated. Scarlett relates the information to Violet. In the conversation that then transpires, Violet mentions the possibility that the bank may have changed its business hours, and insists that I am in no position to know that the bank will be open—that I do not know that the bank is open Saturday. According to a plausible contextualist account, when speaking to my wife in the low stakes case, I was correct to say that I knew that the

bank would be open,⁶ and Violet was also correct when she denied that I knew that the bank would be open Saturday. In the first two bank cases discussed, both the attributor and agent faced the same stakes—either they were both in a low stakes case, or they were both in a high stakes case. But, in this third case, the agent (myself) faces low stakes while the attributor (Violet) and interlocutor (Scarlett) face high stakes. Most people judge that Violet is correct to say that I do not know that the bank will be open. Contextualism readily accommodates the judgments made in these cases, holding that Violet speaks the truth. Such cases pose more of a challenge to sensitive invariantists.⁷

b. Sensitive Invariantism

Invariantists hold that the semantics of knowledge attributions are not variable across attributor contexts. Holding fixed the agent, *S*, the proposition to be known, *p*, and the time, *t*, the attribution, “*S* knows that *p* at *t*,” expresses a single invariant proposition; the semantic conditions for its truth do not vary when uttered by different attributors in different conversational contexts. Still, sensitive invariantists (such as Hawthorne [2004], who writes of “agent sensitive invariantism,” and Stanley [2005] who writes of “interest relative invariantism”) hold that what is required for an agent to know a proposition can vary—as *facts about the agent, S*, at a time, *t*, may determine just how *S* must be situated with respect to *p* and various not-*p* alternatives in order to count as knowing that *p* at *t*. The central thing to notice is this: for the contextualist, knowledge attributions are keyed decisively to the attributor’s context (to features of the exchange between the attributor and the attributor’s interlocutors), while for the sensitive invariantist, knowledge attributions are keyed to facts about the agent at the time in question. The pivotal features of the agent are the agent’s interests—the stakes faced by the agent. Thus, the contrast with contextualism can be put in terms of whose interests condition what is required for knowledge: for the contextualist, knowledge attributions are keyed to the attributor’s and the audience’s interests, while for the sensitive invariantist, knowledge attributions are keyed to the agent’s interests.

Sensitive invariantists insist that knowing does not turn merely on epistemic matters—it does not turn merely on how well an agent is epistemically situated with respect to a proposition at a time. The agent’s own stakes in the matter in question supposedly determines just how epistemically well situated the agent must be at that time

to count as knowing. For any given agent, S , and proposition, p , that S entertains, if S 's stakes in connection with p vary across time, then sometimes S must be better situated with respect to p to count as knowing that p than S must be at other times to count as knowing that p .

Consider Stanley's (2005) agent-sensitive invariantism. (Hawthorne (2004) holds very much this view.) Knowing that p is a matter of being epistemically well placed enough to discriminate between p 's obtaining and one of a set of relevant alternatives to p obtaining. But, on this view, as the stakes faced by the agent become higher, the range of relevant alternative also expands. Thus, what is required to know that p increases with the stakes faced by the agent at the time in question. An agent in a relatively low stakes situation counts as knowing that p if the agent is epistemically situated so as to be able to discriminate p 's obtaining from the obtaining of any one of a narrow range of alternative possibilities that constitute the most obvious and likely or pressing alternatives to p . In contrast, to count as knowing that p , the agent in a high stakes situation must be epistemically situated so as to be able to discriminate p 's obtaining from a significantly wider set of alternatives.

When the agent and the attributer (at the relevant times) have highly similar stakes in the matter in question, when both are in a high stakes or both are in a low stakes situation, then sensitive invariantism and contextualism yields parallel verdicts regarding the truth of knowledge ascriptions or denials as does contextualism.⁸ However, verdicts regarding the truth of knowledge attributions diverge with respect to cases in which the agent and the attributor (and attributor's audience) face markedly different stakes in connection with the matter in question. This obtained in the third bank case. There, I (the agent) am in a low stakes situation with respect to whether the bank is open on Saturdays. For the sensitive invariantist, I know that the bank is open on Saturdays. At the same time, Violet and Scarlett are in a high stakes situation on that matter. For the sensitive invariantist, this may make a difference for whether *they* can know on the basis of my testimony that the bank is open (apparently they cannot). But, Violet speaks falsely when she says that I do not know that the bank is open. So the claim that David Henderson knows (on Friday afternoon) that the bank is open Saturdays is semantically invariant—

whether it is expressed by an attributor in a high stakes situation or one in a low stakes situation.

Again, what it takes to be epistemically well situated enough to discriminate one proposition's obtaining from certain alternative possibilities obtaining, can be understood in various ways. A reliabilist variant, for example, would require one to be situated so as to be able to reliably discriminate between the alternatives. An evidentialist variant would require one to be situated so as to have a telling evidential basis for discriminating between the relevant alternatives.

In any case, for the sensitive invariantist, what is required for knowing varies with the agent's practical interests and situation—a greater range of possibilities become practically relevant to knowing when the agent faces a higher stakes situations. Here, there is no attributor context effect. An attributor may be in a high stakes situation with respect to p , or in a low stakes proposition—it does not matter.

c. Insensitive Invariantism

Insensitive invariantism is the dominant traditional account of knowledge. As an *invariantist*, one holds that a knowledge attribution (to the effect that a given agent, S , at a set time, t , knows a given proposition, p) expresses an invariant claim—rather than expressing different claim in differing attributor contexts. Both sensitive and insensitive invariantists hold this much. The *insensitive* invariantists holds that not only is the claim that S knows that p at t (for a determinate S , p , and t) invariant across attributor contexts, but, additionally, what counts as being in a sufficiently good epistemic position to know some proposition does not vary with—is not sensitive to—facts about the agent's interests at the time in question. What is consistently required for satisfying the concept of *knowledge* might be understood as exceedingly demanding—in which case one holds a skeptical insensitive invariantism—or it might be understood in some moderate fashion satisfiable by flesh and blood humans—in which case one holds a nonskeptical invariantism. In either case, for any agent, whatever that agent's practical interests or concerns, and for any proposition, there is some good epistemic position in which an agent must stand with respect to a given proposition in order for that agent to count as knowing it.

III. The Central Misgiving Concerning Sensitive Invariantism

That practical interests condition what constitutes knowledge has become common coin between sensitive invariantists, and contextualists.⁹ The real issue separating them is *whose* practical interests play a role in determining the conditions for knowledge, and how. It is just here that we can make use of our understanding of the central point and purpose of the concept of *knowledge*—that it is used in a kind of epistemic gate keeping. In attributing knowledge to epistemic agents, one is certifying those agents as sources of information on the matter in question or in the domain indicated. This makes it natural to think that *the interests of those in the community for which sources or members are thus regulated* should condition what is required to know (insofar as any interests condition what is required). To certify an agent as a source on some matter is to certify the agent to an audience—in effect to a community. The community in question may be a community composed of just the attributor and one interlocutor (as in the simple bank cases) or it may be an extended practical or epistemic community with which the attributor and interlocutors are understood to be contextually related. The community may be wholly present at the attribution (again as in the simple bank cases) or contextually understood (as when one understands one’s discussion to be evaluating the agent’s work as a fitting contribution to the results of some wide source community of scientists in some general subject domain). In each case, in attributing knowledge to the agent, one certifies the agent’s belief or beliefs to an understood community with whom both the attributor and the immediate interlocutors are contextually related.¹⁰ In receiving such certification, members of the relevant community understandably are not concerned with whether the agent is epistemically positioned so as to render information that is fitting *to that agent’s own interests* in the matter—which may be minor. Rather, they are interested in whether the agent is epistemically positioned to render information that *is fitting to their understood community’s own interests*. The interests that they share as members of the relevant community may make for higher stakes than the agent’s. Similarly, in providing such certification, it seems fitting that the attributor be sensitive to the audience or community’s practical interests when certifying the source.

This general line of thought comes to be recognizable as a species of contextualism. That is the view I want to explore. In doing so, I will need to consider a range of gate keeping contexts associated with different epistemic or practical communities.

Before I sketch the gate keeping form of contextualism that seems indicated, I want to state in the most general fashion the misgiving concerning sensitive invariantism that derives from the recognition of the central gate keeping point or purpose of the concept of *knowledge*. The misgiving is this: while it makes a good deal of sense that gate keeping would be attuned to the interests of those of the community for whom the gate keeping is done, and while it thus makes much sense that the attributions of knowledge then be keyed to the interests of that community, it makes a good deal less sense that gate keeping, and the attributions of knowledge by which it is managed, would be keyed to the interests of the subject of the attribution.¹¹ It will be common for the epistemic agent in question to have interests and projects rather different from those of the community for whom gate keeping is managed in the attributions of knowledge. Thus, in identifying the interests pivotally conditioning attributions of knowledge as those of the knowing (or opining) agent, sensitive invariantists must think of the semantics of the concept of *knowledge* as turning on interests that are curiously disconnected from the interests that would seem significant given the central point and purpose of that concept. It is not plausible, that folk would have developed an evaluative concept so that its very semantics were so disassociated with its point and purpose.

Consider a variant on the venerable question: why should one care about whether or not the agent knows?¹² One wonders why one should care about the agent knowing, if knowing is what the sensitive invariantist says that it is. To consider the question, imagine that one is a party to a discussion in which *S*, the potential source of information is truly said to know that *p*. According to the sensitive invariantist this is to say that *S* is epistemically so positioned as to be able to discriminate whether *p* obtained rather than any member of a contrast class of alternatives—where this contrast class is fitting in view of *S*'s own interests. Why care about this? Why care about whether $K_{si}[S,p,t]$?

Admittedly, one special case poses no problem. One can understand why, at *t*, one with one's practical interests would care about whether *oneself* satisfies $K_{si}[_{,}p,t]$ —since that involves being sufficiently epistemically well placed to discriminate between the alternatives that matter to one at that time, and to discriminate in the degree fitting to one's own interests. More generally, for any agent, *S**, time *t*, and proposition *p*, such that *S** at *t* faces the same stakes as does oneself, one should care whether $K_{si}[S^*,p,t]$ —

since this amounts to S^* being epistemically situated well enough at t to discriminate between the alternatives that are fitting given *one's own interests* at t . Doing so makes the other S^* a good source.

It is more tenuous why one should generally care about whether someone, S , other than oneself satisfies $K_{si}[_,p,t]$. Of course, one might be interested in S as a source of information about whether or not p , and p might have consequences for one's practical projects. Suppose that S has just testified at t that p . Does one then want $K_{si}[S,p,t]$? Intuitively, one should care whether or not S knows that p at t . But, should one care about $K_{si}[S,p,t]$? We have already determined that one should care, when S and oneself share the same interests in whether p . This leaves two classes of cases to consider: those in which S faces lesser stakes than oneself, and those in which S faces greater stakes.

Of course, because one cares about whether or not it is true that p , and because knowing that p is factive, one should care in some sense—one should care about whether some necessary condition for S knowing that p obtains. But, this does not entail that one cares about whether the quality of S 's epistemic situation with respect to p is as is required for knowing on the sensitive invariantist account. So let us focus on this. Why should one care about whether S is epistemically situated so as to be able discriminate between p 's obtaining versus the obtaining of those alternatives that are salient or relevant given S 's stakes.

If S at t is in a higher stakes situation with respect to p than is oneself, one need not really be concerned with whether $K_{si}[S,p,t]$. Plausibly, if $K_{si}[S,p,t]$ then you can rely on S here.¹³ Still, for low-stakes-you and high-stakes- S , it can reasonably be of little concern to you that $\sim K_{si}[S,p,t]$. What presumably is of concern to you is merely that S is epistemically situated to deal with the (narrower set of) alternatives to p that are of relevant to lower stakes you. Thus, it would seem reasonable for one not to much care whether $K_{si}[S,p,t]$, even when one care's about whether or not p , and even when one is interested in S as a potential source of information about p .

On the other hand, *if S is in a lower stakes situation regarding p , and one is in a higher stakes situation, then one does not really care whether $K_{si}[S,p,t]$.* That is not enough, given one's interests. Given S 's lower stakes, $K_{si}[S,p,t]$ merely means that S is in a position to distinguish p 's obtaining versus some relatively narrow range of

alternatives—a set of alternatives that are significantly narrower than the set of alternatives that are relevant for oneself, given one’s own higher stakes. What one needs, it then seems, is for *S* to “super-know” *p*—to go beyond what would constitute knowing that *p* on the sensitive invariantist account—otherwise *S* will not be in a position to say whether *p* obtains *versus one of the relatively wider set of alternatives that are relevant to oneself*, given one’s high stakes in the matter.¹⁴ That is, *given the sensitive invariantist account*, one should not so much care whether *S* knows that *p*, but rather *one should care whether an agent who is epistemically situated like S, but who faced higher stakes in connection with p than does S (stakes such as one’s own), would know that p.*

The bottom line: why would one, or a community, develop a concept devoted to standards that seem as ill-coordinated with the epistemic interests of the community members employing the concept at any given time as is the concept of *knowledge* as understood by the sensitive invariantist? It seems to me implausible that a community would, and thus implausible that the concept of *knowledge* works as the sensitive invariantist suggests.

Once I have said more about gate-keeping contextualism, it will turn out to be comparatively easy to understand why one would desire that oneself and others satisfied the concept of *knowledge*.¹⁵ In outline, the picture is this. The attributor of knowledge, along with the interlocutors in context, are, in effect, gate keeping for a community. They might be members of the community, or they might have been called on or put themselves forward as experts on the epistemic credentials of possible sources regarding some matter. In either case, they should be speaking with the practical/epistemic interests of the relevant community in view—let us say that they are *contextually invested* with the practical/epistemic interests of the relevant or understood community. Accordingly, they and the wider community care, and should care, whether or not the agent who is a possible source is epistemically situated well enough so as to be able to discriminate which of the relevant alternatives obtained. This is just what the gate keeping contextualist understands as the conditions on true knowledge ascription. So, any party to a knowledge ascription (the attributor, the interlocutors, and the wider community, if any, that is the intended contextual audience to whom the agent is certified) should care. The general idea that contexts are sensitive to some composite of attributor and interlocutor or

intended audience practical interests, much in the manner suggested by the bank and train cases. (The case of general source communities will require special developments to come.) To satisfy contextualist standards for knowing that *p* is then to be in a strong enough epistemic position to serve as a source to those to whom the certification is addressed, and this is to be qualified in a manner that suites one's stakes in the matter. It is understandable why one would then care about whether one could then truly say of a given agent that that agent knows something.

IV. Contextualist Gate Keeping

If a good part of the point and purpose of the concept of *knowledge* has to do with certifying sources, or withholding certification, and thereby keeping gate for an epistemic and practical community, then a form of contextualism gets a kind of principled motivation: one in which the contexts themselves come to have a kind of principled rationality, being keyed to the practical and epistemic concerns of attributor and interlocutors. The concerns of attributor and interlocutor, and thus the contextual demands on knowledge will not swing freely with moves made in language games, or with contests of will between the partisans of higher and lower standards.¹⁶ Instead, contextual demands on knowing will be rationally conditioned by the stakes within the communities for which the attributor and interlocutor are gate keeping. This may strike the reader as promising. To begin to make good on the promise, it helps to survey the kinds interests an attributor and interlocutors would have in common forms of epistemic gate keeping—the kind of interests with which they might be contextually invested.

Sometimes the attributor and interlocutors will be member a special purpose applied community. The attributor and interlocutors might jointly constitute this community (as when a working group devoted to some project meets as a whole and discusses sources on which to draw, or to gauge what they jointly know). They might instead be a proper part of the applied community (as when some of a working group's members evaluate a source for the group). Or the attributor might be an expert from outside the group or community who has been approached for advice regarding sources on a matter of concern. In all these cases, the attributor is engaged in gate keeping for a group that happens to be focused on some practical project. The members of such a group are concerned with sources of actionable information on which to proceed with their project.

In such cases of *gate keeping for an applied community*, one who certifies sources of knowledge to or for such a group should be concerned with sources of actionable information in view of the practical interests of the applied community.¹⁷ One who attributes knowledge when engaged with a special purpose applied community should be contextually invested with such interests.

There are also cases in which the attributor and interlocutors may be *gate keeping for a general source community*. Then, by certifying (or not) an epistemic agent or agents as a source with respect to a claim or subject matter, one is including (or excluding) those agents from a select community of experts, and excluding or including the claims they there advance from an associated body of accepted results on which others might draw. The attributor here may be acting as a member of the source community speaking to other members of that group. (Think of settings in which, together with one's colleagues, one evaluates the information on offer in a graduate student's comprehensive exam, or the results in their scientific dissertation.) Or the attributor may be speaking to members outside the source community—to vouch safe an agent as a qualified member of the source community to that other community.¹⁸ The most straightforward and revealing cases for my purposes here, are those in which epistemic agents (with their associated information) are certified to members of a source community itself dealing with such matters. Suppose, for example, you read an article. As you do so, you evaluate the author's methods and results. Then, in conversation with others working on the same general subject matter, you might attest that the author knows certain of the claims made in the article (and perhaps not others). Here, your interlocutors are members of a source community with community interests that are not closely associated with some kind of practical project. Paradigmatic here would be a contemporary general scientific discipline which provides a body of results on which people with an indeterminate range of practical projects might draw while the discipline itself is not be associated with any one project in a defining or limiting way.¹⁹ Think of the indeterminate range of practical projects that have and can have recourse to the results of some contemporary general scientific discipline. Insofar as it is helpful to think of practical interests being connected with such a discipline, it seems that the relevant concerns revolve around providing *general-purpose actionable information*. Thus, when *keeping epistemic gate for a*

general source community, it would seem that the operative concern is with general-purpose information, and that no concrete limited purposes are likely to provide a simple decisive understanding of just what counts as actionable information. *One who certifies sources of knowledge to or for such a group should be concerned with sources of actionable information for an indeterminate range of applied communities and their various practical interests and high or low stakes.* One should be contextually invested with the general role of the source community.

The foregoing suggests two prominent genera of attributor/interlocutor settings that would make for significantly different ways in which practical interests might condition attributor/interlocutor contexts.

First, the attributor and interlocutors are concerned with a more or less concrete practical project. For them, there will be high, low, or intermediate stakes associated with the project and the proposition, *p*, (given how courses of action and ensuing degrees of success may depend on *p*'s truth). As the bank and plane cases suggest, these stakes may condition what is required of an agent in knowing that *p*.

Second, in context, the attributor and interlocutors may be little concerned with any concrete practical project, but focused instead with something like quality control in a source discipline with which they are associated. This discipline need not be a contemporary academic discipline. It might be a stock of folk belief to which various folk make contributions of more or less quality. In any case, the attributor and interlocutors are then engaged in distinguishing worthy contributions—one's that are fitting to serve as actionable information for a more or less indeterminate range of practical projects. To judge that *S* knows that *p* is to certify *S*'s contribution here. *This kind of general certification*, which I believe is common in the connection with expert knowledge in domains such as the sciences, would then seem to *divorce such attributor/interlocutor contexts from the concrete and particular extant concerns of the attributor and a narrow set of interlocutors.* *If anything, their concern is with a very high quality of epistemic position on the part of the epistemic agent's to be certified.* How high a quality is demanded? It seems it should be *sufficient to allow the belief as produced and held by the epistemic agent to be such as is fitting serve as a resource on which folk within other groups or communities can draw in their practical or epistemic projects.* *This sets the bar*

high: to qualify as knowing that p in relation to a general purpose source community, an agent must be situated with respect to p so as to be able to distinguish p's obtaining from all the alternatives that would be relevant across all the communities that might draw on it, including those for which the stakes are high. We will soon need to explore this sort of context further, for it points to a way in which the contextualist line of thought can naturally come to resemble a kind of insensitive invariantism. That said, the connection with practical interests has not totally disappeared, and I doubt that it should.

V. More on Communities, Projects, and Relevant Alternatives

The above results are at best a beginning. They have employed an overly stylized, dichotomous, understanding of the kinds of communities for which one might be engaged in gate keeping. Even if interests condition epistemic gate keeping, and what counts as knowledge, in something like the way sketched above, this crude understanding of communities yields an overly dichotomous understanding of the contexts of knowledge attribution. Between the paradigmatic general purpose source communities and the applied communities or groups devoted to a particular concrete problem or project, there would seem to be spectrum of communities for which one might be gate keeping in attributing or withholding attributions of knowledge.

The general-purpose source communities that fully conform to the characterization given above are one extreme in the spectrum. The clearest cases of these are found within contemporary scientific disciplines. Within various general subject matter disciplines such as physics, biology, and chemistry one finds communities of researchers engaged in “pure,” nonapplied, investigation. Arguably, theoretical and non-applied work in ethology, linguistics, economics, and the like also qualify.

One can also find standing source communities that, while largely source communities intent of generating a body of beliefs on which more applied communities can draw, nevertheless take as their domain a subject matter that constitutes an acknowledged practical problem or class of problems—for example, within medical science, one might find a community of researchers working on the general biology of cancer (or classes of cancers) and related problems. At least some general researchers on the more theoretical side of oncology may then constitute a source community seeking to understand the phenomena as a set of naturally occurring processes, and leaving applied

problem solutions to others who may draw on their results. While the paradigmatic general source communities such as physics, chemistry, and biology, take as their subject matter a domain that is not constitutively tied to a delimited phenomena of practical concern, these *problem area source communities* are oriented around a problem or phenomena that is practically salient; they are interested in phenomena giving rise to this class of problems, and this constitutes their subject matter, and thus helps to constitute the community in question. In this, oncology (even theoretical oncology) differs from biology as a general discipline in a way that cell biology does not.²⁰ Characteristic of these problem area source communities is the kind of general work done in the medical science disciplines that both draw on and contribute to the nonapplied general source domains of biology, while yet being largely focused on understanding processes that make for some kind of practical problem. The “more fundamental” work done in such communities then develops a knowledge base that may be highly suggestive or enabling of interventions, but the development of these interventions might be left to a somewhat different community. (Of course, many of the same researchers might be members of the more applied community as well—and there are certainly financial reasons for this involvement.) Thus, within medical science, one finds a sprawling community of researchers who strive to understand the processes responsible for certain general classes of cancers and who are thought to be doing fundamental work in oncology, then there are those similarly engaged with general kinds of cancers, particular variants of such cancers, and so on. What is notable here is that with each step into the more narrowly focused applied domain, one *tends* to get a more limited range of applied groups that might be expected to draw on the products of the source community’s work—one gets a more determinate range of consumers. (There is, however, also a countervailing tendency to be found particularly within source communities with problem area foci: their results are readily incorporated into what is thought of as the received knowledge possessed by general source communities.)

As just noted source communities may range over differing general purpose subject domains and can also focus on wider or narrower problem area domains. Applied groups or communities can also range over wider or narrower problem domains. As a part of a source community focused on a relatively broad problem domain, faculty and researchers

at a university teaching hospital might seek to add to a general body of results in a problem domain such as oncology. Many of these researchers (along with cadres of engineers, technicians, and so on) may also organize into different (but overlapping) working groups seeking to devise (and patent) effective treatments for the same general health problem. One might then talk of *general applied communities* that correspond in problem area focus to the general practical domain source communities. These are the consumers of much of the work of the general practical domain source communities—although they are not limited to such sources. (Again, commonly some agents will be members of both groups.) Such an applied working group might be an enduring standing institute or center, or a separate incorporated and capitalized legal entity, or it might be a more transient product of a critical mass in faculty interests or grants. (I here illustrate the possibilities using common institutional situations within contemporary academia. But the sort of variation across communities in source and practical foci should have parallels in other social settings.)

A little reflection will reveal many examples of such differences in foci and in applied versus nonapplied tendencies. Here is another example. Falling within the general domain of biology is the yet pretty general subject domain of ecology, and there is a source community concerned with this subject domain. A look at a textbook in the field,²¹ would exhibit the ways in which work in this source community draws on the results in wider source domains, and the ways in which fundamental work in this domain contributes its own results to the wider stock of biological knowledge.²² There is also a community of investigators focusing on a subject domain termed “restoration ecology.” The greater applied thrust—and more delimited focus—of work in this domain is reflected in the name. As a sociological matter, in connection with any subject matter, it is common that some groups or communities of investigators will undertake work with a more applied thrust, while others will undertake work that is less applied, more theoretical, thrust. This will be true of groups with a less immediately applied subject matter, such as ecology and its subdomains such as terrestrial ecology, tundra ecology, or boreal ecology. It is also true of work in domains with a clear practical or problem area character, such as restoration ecology. That is, even within a community devoted to work

in this applied or problem area domain, there will be subcommunities with more highly applied interests, and those with less applied interests.

The common talk of higher and lower contextual demands is itself an oversimplification. One encounters such formulations as a convenience in both sensitive invariantism and contextualism. What is intended is that some contexts or settings make alternatives to p salient and relevant so that whether an agent there counts as knowing that p depends on that agent being epistemically situated so that the agent can discriminate whether p versus such alternatives obtain. If the relevant alternatives to p in one context or setting, A, include all the alternatives relevant in another, B, and if the relevant alternatives in B are a proper subset of those for A, then it makes clear sense to say that the standards for knowing that p in A are higher than those in B. But, particularly in contexts or settings that are conditioned significantly by concrete practical interests and projects, it seems that the sets of relevant alternatives associated with two different contexts or settings can be each contain alternatives that are not in the other. Thus, in order to know that a given street intersection is safe, different possibilities P might serve as relevant to the traffic engineer, a traffic cop, the school crossing attendant, or a military commander occupying the surrounding countryside. While the incidence of speeding motorists might be relevant alternatives to the first three, they would not seem particularly relevant to the military commander (whose armored division deflects mere autos like mosquitoes). The possibility that explosive devices are present may be a relevant alternative to the commander, and not a relevant alternative to the others. The obtaining of a given alternative to p might frustrate one's practical interests in context A, while not frustrating one's interests in B. Insofar as practical interests condition what are the relevant alternatives in a context, it seems that, to know that p , one in a moderate stakes situation may need to be able to "rule out" alternatives that someone in a higher stakes situation might yet not need to be in a position to rule out.

Attributor and interlocutors who are gate keeping for a subject matter discipline such as biology, biochemistry, pharmacology, oncology, or the like, would seem rightly to do so in a way that is largely (or more of less) disengaged from practical projects. It is natural to think of this as a matter of maintaining a stock of knowledge and knowledgeable experts for the wider range of communities. In attributing knowledge to

various practitioners of the discipline, one both designates one's colleagues as sources for the wider community, and says of the relevant results that one can take "these points" from "us" as actionable information for one's various practical processes. This is to say that what one then counts as knowledge should provide actionable information for an indeterminate range of practical projects, such as might reasonably be expected to arise within the community. Thus, co-practitioners of the discipline should count as knowing that p only to the extent that they are individually or as a group epistemically so well positioned with respect to p that p fittingly can serve as "actionable information" for an indeterminate range of pressing practical endeavors that might be undertaken on its basis by members of the general epistemic community over time. Insofar as practical interests rightly condition what is aptly counted as knowledge, this would be a matter of beliefs arising from agents who are sufficiently epistemically well placed to provide information to the highest stake projects for which this information might readily be made to serve. Here, the interests that seem salient are the interests of information consumers, or indeterminate informational consumers. The attributor and interlocutors—insofar as they are not themselves engaged in practical projects employing the putative information—seem indirectly to reflect these practical interests. What seems less relevant to the correctness of knowledge attribution is the practical interests of the subjects producing these beliefs. The technician at the lab may simply be trying to get money together to party with his or her friends—and may have little concern with possible cures to which the laboratory results may indirectly contribute or frustrate. Little may be at stake but continued employment and cash flow that comes from competently performing duties. This does not lead one to think that they count as knowing cheaply that a certain reaction was observed. They are held to the demands of medical science, or of fundamental biological science—and these disciplines have standards that reflect indirectly the indeterminate but reasonably high stakes of the projects that may ultimately come to depend on their results.

VI. General Purpose Knowledge, Gate Keeping Contextualism, and Something Like Insensitive Invariantism

I do not mean to be paradoxical, but simply to reflect on the logic of gate keeping for a general source community. Further, what is intended need be no criticism of

contextualism, but instead can be thought to provide a marked improvement of contextualism at a point on which many have thought it problematic. It has seemed in some writings as though the contextual standards for knowledge are wildly variable—ranging from lax to skeptical—and subject to the whims of parties to a conversation who might simply choose to focus on some alternatives or not. In Lewis’s (1979, 1996) influential discussion, and to an extent, in DeRose’s (1995), merely raising a possible alternative (“You could be an envatted brain, don’t you know?”) made it relevant, thus raising contextual demands and destroying all knowledge of contingent claims). It was also suggested that parties to the conversation might resist this, but it was never made clear on what basis, beyond a contest of wills, they would do so. To key relevant alternatives to practical interests seemed not only to make sense of some prominent thought experiments, but also promised to advance our understanding of contexts by affording them some principled anchor. In the gate keeping contextualism sketched here, I have sought to realize some of the promise, while also drawing on an understanding of the point and purpose of the concept of *knowledge*. Still, I also feel the pull of that some of the evaluative sensibility represented in insensitive invariantism. Within the framework of a gate keeping contextualism, these sensibilities can be given a better hearing and more satisfying response when focusing on contexts in which one is gate keeping for a general source community. In fact, as we will see, something remarkably like what the insensitive invariantist would envision seems in the cards.

The suggestions that I have been entertaining are these: The concept of *knowledge* is rooted in a kind of epistemological gate keeping—so that to attribute knowledge is to signal a source of information, one that is epistemically well placed enough to discriminate between what are the relevant alternatives facing agents in the community to which the source is certified. Where one is gate keeping for applied communities, there can be significant variability in what is required for knowledge across contexts. In contrast, there is markedly less variability when one is engaged in gate keeping for general source communities. Here, what is required for knowledge are not conditioned by the interests or needs of now one, now another, practical or applied community. Instead, the requirements of knowing are contextually conditioned by the epistemic project of

providing actionable information for an indeterminate range of applied communities that might want to draw on results in the area of specialization of the source community.

If this much is right, then source communities will be associated with high standards for knowing, and standards that are not volatile or significantly variable. To see why, consider a parallel. Consider the difference between designing a system to work in some delimited environment in contrast to designing one to work in an indeterminate range of environments. If one designs a system to work in a delimited environment, more or less may be required of the system, depending on the challenges faced in the intended environment. In some benign environments, relatively little will be called for. In others, the more demanding environments, much. This is analogous to the variable requirements on knowledge associated with the differing contextual needs of differing applied communities. Then, consider designing a system to work in a wide, even somewhat indeterminate, range of environments. To work across a wide range of environments, the system would need to be up to working in the most demanding of them. This finds a parallel in the less variable, more demanding, requirements for knowledge that seem fitting to a source community. The information provided must be from sources that are up to providing actionable information in the most demanding of the applied communities that might draw on their work.

With this in mind, I can venture a first attempt to express what is required for an agent to know something when one is attributing knowledge in connection with a source community:

(In connection with a general source community) S knows that p at t in w IFF S is sufficiently epistemically well positioned with respect to p that S can discriminate p 's obtaining in w from the obtaining of any member of the set of relevant alternatives that is the union of all sets of relevant alternatives that are fitting to the various applied or source communities that might draw on S 's result.

That is, S knows that p at t in w if and only if S is sufficiently epistemically well positioned with respect to p that S can "rule out" all alternatives that would be relevant to any applied or source communities that might draw on S 's result. One might formulate this requirement in terms of a notion of the superset of relevant alternatives to p . Begin with the gate keeping contextualist idea that for any given community, at a time, and any

entertained proposition, p , there will be a set of relevant alternatives to p . Let the superset of relevant alternatives be the union of all sets of relevant alternatives for all communities and contexts in which they entertain p . Then, formulating the requirements for knowing that p for purposes of a general source community, one can say simply that one knows that p just in case one is epistemically positioned so as to be able to discriminate p 's obtaining from the obtaining of any member of the superset of relevant alternatives.

This seems a good start. However, much clarification is needed. How, for example, should we understand the quantified phrase, 'all the applied or source communities that might draw on S 's result'? Should the quantifier take as its domain only extant communities? Or should it take as its domain both present and future communities? Or possible communities?²³

Suppose that investigators working in some contemporary source community, A , have settled on a result, that p . They happily say things like, "We now know that p ." Then suppose that another community, B , entertains the implications of that result for their projects or inquiries. But, suppose also that when the B -folk entertain drawing on the A -folks' result they find relevant certain alternatives that source community A is not positioned to deal with.²⁴ That an applied or source community would find certain alternatives to p relevant, while the supporting work in source community A does not position them to "rule out" that alternative, shows that the A -folk did not know after all. One can imagine an exchange on this order:

A-ologist: We know that p .

B-ologist: Wow. If p , then we could make real headway on this project. But, it would be important that p is not false because of something on the order of q . Does your data really allow you to discriminate between p and q .

A-ologist: Hum, ... I guess not. So, I guess that we really do not know that p .

B-ologist: Yep, that was my worry. But, when you get further results that more finely discriminate between such alternatives, please do let me know.

This case illustrates the main idea, and does so using two (supposedly) actual communities and the alternatives that they find relevant on reflection. If an alternative is relevant to a community entertaining drawing on the results of a general source

community, then it is relevant for purposes of gauging whether or not the source community knows.

Two communities need not be contemporaries in order for alternatives relevant to the one to undermine knowledge attributions concerning the other (considered as a potential source community). Suppose that the *A*-folk claiming to know were cutting edge researchers at some earlier time, and that the *B*-folk are our contemporaries. The *B*-folk may look back at the work in *A* that had been thought to yield knowledge that *p*. Realizing that there is an alternative that is relevant to them that *A*-folk were in no epistemic position to “rule out,” *B*-folk would be right to insist:

B-ologist: If *p*, then we could make real headway on our project. But, it would be important that *p* is not false because of something on the order of *q*. The data that those old *A*-ologists generated really does not allow one to discriminate between *p* and *q*. They really did not know that *p*. I wonder whether some of our contemporary *A*-ologists would find this an interesting problem.

Contemporary *A*-ologists: Yes, one needs more data before one can know that *p*.

Apparently what we know is merely that either *p* or *q*.

This allows us to say that the superset of alternatives (the set of alternatives relevant for knowing in the context of a general source community) is the union of all sets of relevant alternatives that are fitting to all *present and future* applied or source communities that might draw on *S*'s result.

This leaves the question of whether nonactual but possible communities that might seek to use the source community's result contribute to the set of alternatives relevant in connection with a source community knowing. Do the sets of alternatives that would be fittingly relevant to possible but nonactual communities contribute to the superset of relevant alternatives? The crude answer seems to be affirmative. It seems that *some* nonactual possible communities should be included among those communities whose relevant alternatives constitute the superset. One reason for this is that there may be epistemic communities that could and ought to exist but never do. For example, perhaps for reasons of a lack of imagination or industry, an actual community does not pursue a promising lead. Suppose also that, had they done so, a new discipline (*B*-ology) would have developed. This possible discipline constitutes an epistemic community that

is regrettably never actualized, but should be. Suppose further that there is some result, p , of an actual community, the A-ologists, such that, were B-ology to have become actual, it would have then found the A-ological result that p significant, and would have entertained drawing on that result. There would be relevant alternatives to p fitting to B-ologists. My sense is that these should be included in the superset of relevant alternatives that would be pivotal in whether or not the A-ologist's result that p counted as knowledge on their part. What the possible community of B-ologists would find relevant as alternatives seems significant. This seems important for the appropriate modal depth of the phrase, "all applied or source communities that might draw on S 's result."

Still, thinking in terms of an unrestricted class of possible communities might have very strange results. There is a vast range of possible epistemically injudicious or undesirable communities, and surely some of these cannot be allowed to condition the superset of relevant alternatives without disastrous results. For that matter, there are arguably *actual* injudicious epistemic communities that should not be allowed to contribute to the superset.²⁵ There is for example, the community of skeptical epistemologists who imagine that deceiving demons and envatted brains are relevant alternatives to each and every contingent proposition. These cannot be allowed to contribute such alternatives the superset of relevant alternatives relevant to general purpose source community knowledge. Obviously, these considerations point to qualifications in general formulations made earlier. The superset of relevant alternatives must be the union of the relevant alternatives of *judicious* communities. The set of alternatives relevant to source community knowing must be the union of the sets of relevant alternatives *fitting* or *appropriate* to applied and source communities that might come to draw on the result in question—and there is some *normative* account to be given of what possible communities are relevant here. However, a more articulate formulation of the restricted class of possible communities contributing to the superset is beyond what I can supply here.

In any case, it is clear that the results of source communities *are* commonly taken up by a very wide range of other communities (both applied and source communities). It is clear that the yet wider range of communities that *might* draw on the results of a given general source community means that (a) some of these using communities could well

face high stakes, and would then make for correspondingly wide ranging relevant alternatives, thus suggesting high demands on source community knowing, and (b) in any case, the union of the sets of relevant alternatives for these consuming communities will commonly make for high demands on source community knowledge. This is as it should be.²⁶

It plausible, in light of the above, that the demands on knowledge on the part of source communities is effectively invariant—these demands are high, and there is a fact of the matter to just how high. The point is already illustrated by the stylize discussion imagined above between A-folk and B-folk regarding the earlier purported results of the community of A-folk. There, a source community knowledge attribution that may have seemed in order turned out not to be as the later community finds relevant an alternative with which the earlier community was not positioned to deal. In that case, one judges that the earlier community or agent did not know the proposition in question—although we might readily grant that they were justified in holding the belief. Such judgments indicate that the concept of *knowledge* is not pegged to the agent's or the community's extant understanding of relevant alternatives. Nor is it pegged to some composite of extant communities' relevant alternatives, or to the then extant standards for knowledge. An agent in a source community can fully conform to the community's best sensibility of what it takes to know and yet fail to know. An agent in a source community can be so epistemically positioned as to be able to discriminate between what would count as relevant alternatives on the best then extant sensibility and yet fail to know. For example, earlier source communities devoted to medical treatments may not have understood certain possibilities to be relevant alternatives, but they were. The possibility that observed effects might be placebo effects was always relevant, even though some earlier communities of wonderful inquirers did not appreciate the point. Interestingly, that this alternative is highly relevant was *a discovery*. We discovered it as we (our applied and source communities) discovered something about related phenomena and the resulting possibilities for getting matters wrong on the matter in question.

This idea that there is an invariant requirement for knowing, and that it is not sensitive to, or indexed to, the situation of the knower is the central claim of insensitive invariantism. I have not championed it for all contexts of inquiry, but I have suggested

that it holds true of those most exemplary of knowing contexts—those of the source disciplines.

Exemplary source disciplines such as physics, biology, chemistry, even psychology and economics, including their numerous special branches, each develop standards or methods. Their methods can be understood as evolving and correctible ways of guarding against pressing ways of going wrong (considering too few cases, considering too similar a set of cases, not shielding the study from processes that would produce spurious effects, ...). Each discipline has benefited from learning about what processes could produce spurious results, and what kinds of results might result from statistical accidents. Each is informed by substantive understandings of what are the plausible alternative explanations of the data one might get, and each requires that investigators structure their inquiry so as to allow them to discern whether such alternatives remain plausible in light of their results. In all this, disciplines have evolved correctible understandings of what are the relevant alternatives to the claims that they advance—and have evolved ways of structuring their inquiry so as to allow them to discriminate which of these alternatives is likely to obtain.²⁷ But, to say that these are correctible understandings is to say that there can be relevant alternatives that they do not appreciate now—even if they have done an excellent job given what they now have to go on. This should be as much insensitive invariatism as anyone could want.

VII. Inconclusive Conclusion

A simple idea informs what has been done here: that a central point and purpose for the concept of *knowledge* is to certify agents as so well epistemically positioned with respect to the matter in question that one can take it from them. The concept serves in a kind of epistemic gate keeping. This suggested a way of developing contextualism—a way that allowed one to accommodate thought experiments showing that talk of knowledge are sensitive to the salient practical interests in context. These ideas were then developed by giving some attention to the kinds of communities for which one might be doing epistemic gate keeping. I think that the results are encouraging. First, the general idea affords a principled argument for favoring contextualism over insensitive invariantism. Second, it affords a principled understanding of contexts and a sense for why certain alternatives might be relevant to one, others to another. Finally, attention to what would

follow for gate keeping with respect to general purpose source communities allows one to appreciate why the concept of knowledge might work in ways approximating what is envisioned by insensitive invariantists. This strikes me as potentially a very significant advance for contextualism—as it would allow one to accommodate within its contextualist framework many of the intuitions and attractions of its most traditional, and likely most popular, competitor.

This said, there remains a question whether the pieces—gate-keeping contextualism and the contextual approximation of insensitive invariantism—can happily coexist. Will the insensitive invariantist themes just accommodated remain comfortably contained within the gate-keeping contextualist framework? Let me close by mentioning two reasons for thinking that tensions will reemerge.

The first takes its departure from a general misgiving regarding contextualism: the problem of cross-contextual intuitive conflicts. It seems that attributions of knowledge to an agent made in one context can conflict with, and be corrected by, subsequent denials of knowledge to the same agent in a different context. Some of these intuitive conflicts and corrections would be inappropriate, given contextualism. For an example, recast the exchange between A-ologists and B-ologists. Let A-folk be an applied community with moderate stakes. Let the B-ologists be gate-keeping members of a source community:

A-folk (in a discussion, among A-folk): We know that p .

B-ologist (after encountering a transcript of the earlier discussion): The result that p could be important. But, for variously situated groups to fittingly rely on this “result,” in would be important that p is not false because of something on the order of q , or r , or s . Did the A-folks’ epistemic situation really allow them to discriminate between p and this range of alternatives?

A-folk (when prompted by the B-ologists’ concerns): Hum, ... Guess we were wrong—we really did not know that p .

A-folk’s concession is intuitively well formulated using past tense. It *corrects* the earlier assertion.

Gate-keeping contextualists can hold that the A-folk in the later context would rightly say that they do not know that p —and that the earlier A-folk *did not know that* p . But, contextualists also would insist that earlier A-folk spoke the truth in their claim to

know that p . They insist that the initial attribution of knowledge and the subsequent denial of knowledge are compatible because the conditions on knowing have shifted across the gate-keeping contexts. However, they must acknowledge that much talk of knowledge does not reflect such “fine points” or distinctions—that the more demanding contexts prompt what seem to be the repudiation of judgments made in the less demanding contexts.

The contextualist must say that the correction envisioned in the intuitive response is itself illusory. There are some considerations that can help to make this attribution of error plausible. If the point of the concept of *knowledge* is a kind of gate keeping (the certification or decertification of potential sources), then it is easy to see that keeping attention fixed on interests at hand and the fitting standards for that community, rather than acknowledging a range of other standards or sets of relevant alternatives, would be pragmatically useful. So, at least the error that the gate-keeping contextualist would need to attribute to those using the concept of *knowledge* in cases such as those just imagined is a plausible kind of error, given their general understanding of the point and working of the concept. So, perhaps the damage done to the contextualist view by cross contextual corrections can be contained. Contextualist, and sensitive and insensitive invariantists all need to brand some intuitive judgments as errors (Williamson 2005a). So, the crucial question concerns the ultimate plausibility of their accounts taken together with their respective attributions of error. Gate-keeping contextualism may yet fare well on this score.

Second, and going more to the heart of the matter, is the reasonable suspicion that there is something about the project of gate keeping for variously situated, but significantly cross-cutting and interacting groups, that makes the kinds of concerns and ranges of relevant alternatives associated with source community knowledge more pervasive and invasive than is suggested above. To say that considerations fitting to source communities may be invasive is to say that these concerns (together with the associated wide range of relevant alternatives) may come to condition the contexts in which one keeps epistemic gate for a community with a special purpose applied focus. To the extent that this obtains, such contexts come to take on more of the epistemic sensibility of source communities—and the kind of standards and alternatives fitting

there become pervasive. To the extent this obtains, then, gate-keeping contextualism ultimately comes to take on yet more of the form of insensitive invariantism—at least in its bottom line. There are several reasons for thinking that the concerns associated with source communities might be invasive and pervasive.

First, there is the matter of overlapping membership and trained sensitivities. Consider a representative epistemic agent, A, who is a member of various epistemic communities, and who moves freely between them. Perhaps A is a wetlands ecologist, a member of several conservationist organizations where A regularly discusses projects and causes with people of diverse educational and professional backgrounds, a home buyer who is remodeling his or her kitchen, and the owner of a dodgy auto. As A moves between the relevant groups—colleagues, funding agencies, editors, discussion groups, political organizing committees, decision makers in connection with land and water use, home contractors and material suppliers, and, to some extent, auto parts houses or mechanics, A is likely to confront his or her epistemic landscape with a (only moderately flexible) sensibility regarding what is acceptable epistemic positions with respect to claims. Thus, A is likely to feel the need for care in formulating what is and is not known. A brings some significant measure of his or her trained sensibility to the table, not only when presenting to colleagues, but also in discussion groups including engaged lay people. A's sensibility will color his or her evaluation of the claims of suppliers and mechanics. A will doubtless encounter knowledge claims that A believes should best be taken with a grain of salt—as well informed working hypotheses, at best—even when sourcing materials for the new kitchen. In formulating talking points for political action in cooperation with A's fellow conservationists, A will commonly favor qualified or hedged statements of what is known about threats and what can be done.²⁸ A will be concerned that the group not overstate its position. In all this, A will likely present a developed epistemic sensibility, with moderate variations—A will likely then insure that the knowledge claims of the applied communities not be too facile, from the point of view of one engaged with a source community. Parallel imaginative examples are easy: B is an engineer. This will likely color B's evaluation of B's in-law's diagnosis of a problem with a car (even when little turns on it for either, and even when B's automotive

knowledge is no more developed than the in-laws). “Now we don’t really know that the problem is there, Hank, but that a good place to start looking. . . . No, I do not care to bet.”

Thus, to the extent that an agent’s epistemic sensibility is significantly a matter of training, the overlapping membership of many groups will result in standards associated with source communities coloring what transpires in applied communities—it will do so first because it will color what representatives of the source community will attest to in testimony to the applied community, and it will do so insofar as those with source-community-like epistemic sensibilities are members of the applied community.

Second, there is the matter of *the bilateral or multilateral exchange of information*. Treatment teams at research and other hospitals collect data for, and collaborate with, research groups—applied groups dealing with concrete problem cases provide information to (and commonly overlap in membership with) source communities focused on a related problem area domain). The research groups then produce results that are taken up and inform “more fundamental” work in yet more general source communities—researchers in a problem-area domain provide information to general-purpose source communities. Work in the general-purpose source community can then yield results informing the both the work of the problem area domain source community and various applied groups—including the treatment team’s practices. (This quick gloss is doubtless overly schematic and hierarchical in its portrayal of information exchange.) Similar flows of information can be found between system engineers (a group with intermediate focus) with more theoretical engineers and material scientists (source communities) and with system operators (relatively applied communities). When one looks, some multilateral informational exchange is the norm.²⁹

To the extent that there are such multilateral information flows, the standards on the production of results within the more applied groups cannot be too out of step with the demands characteristic of general purpose source communities. If it were, then the members of the practical community, P, risk hearing back from the source communities, G, on which they rely that a matter of concern to them (to P) is not known because the data that they (P) had a hand in producing it was too untrustworthy—as it was produced in a manner that did not (for G) rule out importantly relevant alternatives. On the other hand, as we have already seen, the standards of the source community cannot themselves

allow one to claim knowledge without being in an epistemic position to deal with alternatives relevant to practical or other communities that might draw on those results. Of course, these relationships between communities reinforce the common phenomena of overlapping memberships. Both would seem to restrict the space for contextualist variation from the standards appropriate to general source communities—and these, as we have seen, mimic what is commonly envisioned by nonskeptical insensitive invariantists.

I am not saying that the distinctions drawn earlier between various communities and the ways in which their practical concerns may condition what are the saliently relevant alternatives in context are illusory. They are not. What I am saying is that one can question whether these differences can ultimately support the differences earlier envisioned between contexts. I am questioning whether the differences in *salient* alternatives make for durable differences in *relevant* alternatives. I am seeking to make the point within the framework of the gate-keeping contextualism that I sketched—and which I believe is the most promising form for contextualism to take. The point can be put this way. If the flow of information across groups—from most practical communities to most source communities—is significantly multilateral in character, then the kinds of gate-keeping fitting to even applied communities typically cannot be conditioned solely by some immediately entertained application of some source’s putative information. Even applied communities do not merely use information; they also pool or store it, produce new information using old, *and pass information along*. To the extent that this is in the cards, then the considerations associated with source communities should be pervasive—and the conditions on what it takes to know become significantly less variable or sensitive to interests distinctive of a narrow contextual moment.

What I find most intriguing about the general kind of gate-keeping contextualism I have entertained here is the way in which it promises to draw on a point about the point of the concept of *knowledge*, thereby making principled sense out of contexts, and to allow one to then accommodate some of the apparent interest-keyed variation in judgments discussed in the literature on contextualism as well as the kind of themes that attract insensitive invariantist. Whether the resulting picture should ultimately vindicate significant contextual variation then depends on the question of how much of our

epistemic life can be understood as exemplified by the kind of narrow practical moment featured in the bank case where what is said in the car is used and stays in the car, and how much is instead to be understood as exemplified by the source community production of a pool of information for others. If gate-keeping contextualism is on the right track, knowledge attribution is pivotally the certification of a source on a matter. One can think of the certification as analogous to the certification of a financial instrument—a currency, something that is also passed around. The question then becomes whether attribution of knowledge in the context of many applied communities is aptly understood as like the certification of the old Slovene tollar (which would not be tendered beyond very narrow borders) or instead like the certification of a Euro note—intended reasonably for wider currency. To the extent that the former sometimes obtains, then gate-keeping contextualism with significant variability in connection with applied groups is descriptive. To the extent that the latter typically obtains, even gate-keeping connectionism comes to approximate insensitive invariantism.

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¹ Judgments about scenarios, thought experiments, provide important data for philosophical reflection. For one who has achieved a competence with a concept, such judgments take fallible soundings of the workings and extension of the relevant concept by deploying it just where conceptual competence typically is the most surefooted. But, this is not all that one has do go on in philosophical reflection. One typically has some sense for the point and purpose of the concept—why one would have developed and deployed the relevant concept, the kind of sociolinguistic work the concept does for its users. (See Henderson and Horgan [2001] for a discussion of various sources important in philosophical reflection.) The philosophical literature on knowledge is certainly rich with judgment regarding scenarios. However, with the notable exception of Craig (1990), few discussions of *knowledge* have drawn significantly on a general sense for the sociolinguistic point and purpose of the concept.

² One plausible observation regarding the point or purpose of the concept is not developed here: that in addition to the gate-keeping purpose focused on here, there is a kind of crediting purpose. Suppose that one is comfortable in thinking that one knows that p. For example, suppose one is a member of a research community for which p is a matter of well-established doctrine. Perhaps p has to do with the effectiveness of aspirin in relieving certain forms of minor discomfort—that is certainly well established. Here, one

appreciates that one is so well placed on this matter that folk should be able to take it from you that p—even when being so well placed is gauged using the demanding standards fitting to source communities (see the discussion in the text to follow). Still, one may want to say of historical communities, that they had knowledge of propositions closely related to p—for example, that indigenous communities knew that willow bark was effective in relieving certain forms of minor discomfort. Here, one is not recommending that these communities be included as sources (be treated as fully contributing members of one’s contemporary source community). Rather, one is crediting them as having gotten to the much the same result, and in a way that made them fitting sources for *their* respective communities. Were we to fold this observation about a crediting point to the concept of *knowledge* into the points made in the course of the present paper, we would certainly complicate the picture emerging here. Perhaps we would need to recognize distinct gate-keeping and crediting uses of the concept. In any case, I here set this second point aside in order to explore what is suggested by the gate-keeping purpose taken alone.

³ Williams (2005) provides a formally elegant exposition of the competing positions.

⁴ It is sometimes said that contextualists hold that the term ‘knows’ is indexical. I resist saddling coherentists with this commitment—although *some* presentations may encourage it. My reservation reflects the caution exhibited in formulations such as Cohen’s: “Now, according to contextualism, ‘knows’ (along with ‘flat’, ‘tall’, etc.) is context-sensitive in ways analogous to indexical terms” (Cohen 2005, p. 202). The idea that contextualism flatly or without qualification model ‘knows’ on indexical terms has led some to contrast contextualism with closely related positions such as Schaffer’s contrastivism (Schaffer 2004). It is said that contrastivism thinks in terms of implicit argument places, while contextualism think in terms of fewer argument places. But, this contrast, were it robust across contextualist (which I suspect it is not) would also seem not crucial to the heart of the contextualist position (Stalnacker 2005).

⁵ The misgivings one might have with the “rules out” locution is that it seems to suggest a kind of epistemic certitude. If one thinks of the matter in terms of the agent’s evidence, for example, it suggests that the evidence must leave no possibility of the alternatives—rather than just providing significant differential support. If one thinks in terms of reliable processes, it can seem to suggest that the probability of the alternatives obtaining must be zero. I want no such suggestion. So, while the “rules out” locution makes for a pithy formulation, I prefer to write of being well positions to discriminate which of these obtains (if any).

⁶ A more delicate question is whether I was correct when I, in conversation with Scarlett, attributed knowledge to myself. Here, much hangs on whether Scarlett and Violet’s high stakes should condition the conditions on knowledge. My own thinking is that they should. In attributing to myself knowledge here, I am certifying myself as a source of actionable information *for the practical community comprised of Scarlett and Violet*.

⁷ It is just at such places that the sensitive invariant will tend to invoke pragmatics instead of semantics to account for our judgments—distinguishing between what is correct to say and what is true.

⁸ Here I am thinking of contextualist verdicts in those cases where knowledge attribution would be keyed closely to interests in practical projects.

⁹ It is also common coin that only some practical interests condition what counts as knowledge. The interests of knowledge consumers—those who put information to work in their projects are relevant. Other practical interests surely condition knowledge attributions—but illicitly. For example, Dawes () calls into question the epistemic pretension of clinical psychologists and clinical social workers. Now clearly, they have a practical interest in being recognized as authorities by courts and agencies with resources to distribute. But is far from clear that they possess the discriminative capacities to which they lay claim.

¹⁰ An attributor and interlocutors may be variously associated with an epistemic community in context, and in each case are aptly understood as gate keeping. They may be members of the community for which (it is contextually understood) they gate keep. They, or the attributor, in particular, may serve as expert outside advisor to that community. A friend who is a biologist may attest to me, as a member of a concerned lay group, that some other biologist knows about a matter of practical concern to us.

¹¹ Concepts such as that of *rationality*, and of *subjective justification*, would seem more attuned to the subjects interests—and whether the subject is epistemically situated to distinguish between the alternatives that salient and relevant to the subject

¹² The problem I point to here is closely associated with problems that sensitive invariantists have dealt with concerning the treatment of high attributor stakes/low subject stakes cases. As noted, intuitions in response to such cases tend not to conform with the verdicts one would project on a straight sensitive

invariantist semantics—attributions of knowledge seem to follow attributor stakes (tend to be demanding) rather than being keyed to subject stakes (and being permissive). At this point, sensitive invariantists have tended to invoke conversational pragmatics to explain why one would find it incorrect to attribute knowledge to the low stakes subject when talking with high stakes interlocutors, even though (they insist) it is strictly true that the low stakes subject has knowledge. There is no simple decisive argument to be given against this maneuver, and one must ultimately weigh the overall plausibility of the two accounts. (But, compare DeRose [2004].) The contextualist semantics and the sensitive invariantist semantics combined with conversational implicature may each accommodate the judgments elicited by these cases. My present point may be put this way: it is implausible that the semantics of the concept should be so out of step with its apparent point and purpose as the sensitive invariantist would have it.

¹³ Although even this may depend on how the alternatives that *S*'s high stakes situation with respect to *p* make relevant line up with those that your lower stakes situation make relevant. If your relevant alternatives are a subset of *S*'s, then you can rely on *S*. We need not delve into such complications here.

¹⁴ These awkward and complicated implications of the interest-relative sensitive invariantist position are related to a matter that has gotten more attention in the literature: the verdicts rendered regarding cases of low subject stakes and high attributor stakes cases. (Stanley, 2005; DeRose ...) These are cases that the contextualist manages very naturally, while the sensitive invariantist must struggle with apparent epicycles.

¹⁵ At least this is true as long as one sets aside the early contextualist accounts with their susceptibility to skeptical contexts. I take this as a compelling reason for abandoning this understanding of contexts. Indeed I have long thought that the susceptibility to skeptical moves, and the failure to give an account of contexts that ties them to real concerns and stakes for real epistemic agent constitutes the biggest reason for holding back from contextualism.

¹⁶ A common misgiving regarding contextualism is that the most common treatments of contexts on offer, harkening to Lewis (1996), put one at the mercy of any conversational partner who, on a whim, might mention a wild possible alternative—a demonic infestation, for instance—thereby raising the standards. One finds it said that one can resist moves that would raise contextual demands, but one is left wondering whether this resistance is merely a matter of contesting wills within the conversation. Without some better account of contexts, one can level a “why care” challenge against contextualist accounts of knowledge. If that is what it is to know, why care about whether someone knows. Such concerns are expressed in Barke (2005).

¹⁷ One from a source community discipline might resist using these practically indexed standards to the extent that doing so compromises one's gate keeping for the general purpose source community which they represent. At the very least, this sort of case should qualify and complicate the picture sketched here.

¹⁸ When the other community is an applied source community, the case may be understood in context in one of two significantly different ways. First, as just suggested, the attributor may be certifying to those in the other community that the agent in question counts as knowing within the source community—with its high, general purpose, standards—discussed in the text to follow. Alternatively, the attributor may understand his or her role as that of translating the source community epistemic situation with respect to various propositions into knowledge claims that would be fitting given the epistemic gate keeping demands for the applied community audience. In the first sort of case, the attributor may resist claiming to know that *p*, or to have established that *p*, while volunteering that the extant evidence favors *p* in contrast to the alternatives of expressed concern to the applied community. In the second, the attributor may say something along the lines of, “For practical purposes, we know that *p*,” or “You can say that we know that *p*.”

¹⁹ The present point can be overstated. Certain classes of practical projects may have motivated work in a general subject discipline, and at historical junctures may have motivated much of the discipline. Consider how economic and agricultural needs for a calendar are said to have motivated early astronomy. Or consider how military applications may have pushed work on projectile motion in early modern physics. Still, the general discipline transcended these practical interests. Were wars to cease, physics, I think, would survive (perhaps with somewhat reduced funding) and be drawn on for other applications (as it already is).

²⁰ See the previous note.

²¹ For example, Chapin, Matson, and Mooney (2002) *Principles of Terrestrial Ecosystems*. This text focuses on a slightly more specialized subject matter than does the general discipline of ecology.

²² See also Frank Golley's (1993)

²³ Some of the formal questions here raise issues that are beyond my intuitions, inclinations, or sensitivity. I find it hard to say how exactly one should individuate communities across possible worlds, for example. Without this settled, it can be difficult to know exactly what to make of the modal requirement regarding communities that “might” draw on some result. Even so, it seems to me to make very good sense to say that a working group or a community might make more or better use of results in some other domain—for example, that archeologists might make some, more, or better use of extant anthropological work on supposedly parallel peoples and their social organization, or that they might use certain recent results in basic chemistry to construct a new measure of the age of certain artifacts. They might. This is to talk of the possible epistemic action of an actual community—in this case a source community.

²⁴ The first group may be entomologists and p might be a projection about the size of certain moth populations in the United States. The second group may be biologists charged with gauging the stability of Grizzly populations in the greater Yellowstone ecosystem. The possible effects of a certain coincidence of factors might have not seemed relevant to entomologists—who would think it clear that the general population trend among moths would be ultimately maintained. But, the other biologists might see the possibility of an event that would make for a short term food shortage, limiting fertility for several years and thereby jeopardize the stability of the bear population. This possibility might then be relevant to the bear biologists.

²⁵ Obviously, this requires qualification in general formulations made earlier. The superset of relevant alternatives must be the union of the relevant alternatives of judicious communities.

²⁶ I am indebted to Andrew Newman who has urged care just here. He worries that this set the standards for source community knowing too high. One way of pressing the point, one that Newman used, is to worry that the present formulation may cause problems for the autonomy of the various sciences—for the kinds of sensible standards that disciplines individually develop. This is a legitimate concern. My own sense is that these standards have themselves been informed by what are the likely relevant alternatives for consuming communities. Part of the pride of the source communities has to do with understanding materials or processes in ways that commonly outstrip the demands of those who might draw on those results.

²⁷ Disciplines have evolving understandings of live possibilities—and of methods for treating these. To date, none of these involve BIV or demonic infestation as live possibilities. They involve competing hypotheses, including the null hypothesis and hypotheses regarding alternative causes. The disciplines have developed various reasonable ways of discriminating between an hypothesis that is vindicated and the contextually live alternatives—these employ devices such as shielding from known or plausible alternative causal agents, control treatment groups, longitudinal scope of study, diversity of samples, size of data set and sensitivity to statistical properties, and so on. Becoming a certified practitioner of a discipline (earning a PhD in a branch of physics, chemistry, biology, for example) involves learning about these threats to one’s coming to know—and learning how to structure one’s inquiry to deal with them. What one learns is not final, and is subject to ongoing refinement. This sort of thing is reflected in Kitcher (1993). Kitcher portrays the informed evolution of such standards in the discussion of stylized cycles of training and work within a discipline. Conformity with such standards, when the discipline is on its game, is closely associated with objective epistemic justification (see also Henderson and Horgan [] on suitable modulational control). It is related to, but less perfectly tied to, knowing.

²⁸ Here, rather than pumping for a supposedly easy solution, or wishful thinking about the problem, A may insist on a harder look at the problem and what is needed. Compare the tone of the discussion found in the *Scientific American* special issue devoted to carbon policy (*Scientific American* 2006) with the tone of much political discussion

²⁹ The present concern is closely related to those Williamson (2005b) raises regarding the demands contextualism would seem to make in connection with belief acquired by testimony. It seems that one would need to keep track in memory of the context in which you acquired a testimonial belief, otherwise it would be employed and passed along in contexts where different standards would be appropriate. This puts a awkward demand on memory.