Useful Knowledge Ascriptions

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Abstract: Plausibly, the stakes in a practical task at hand can affect how people ascribe knowledge. I propose a new psychological account of the effect. My hypothesis is motivated by empirical research on how people’s judgements are sensitive to their social context. Specifically, people’s evaluations are sensitive to their ‘psychological distance’ from the scenarios they are considering.

Experimental philosophy has found that what’s at stake for a fictional character in a fictional scenario has little effect on how participants ascribe knowledge to them. My hypothesis predicts this finding. The hypothesis also predicts that people do not ascribe knowledge in a way deemed correct by any of the standard philosophical views, namely classical invariantism, interest-relative invariantism, and contextualism. Our knowledge ascriptions shift around in the way that’s most useful for social beings like us, and this pattern in our judgements can only be endorsed by a genuinely relativist metaphysics for knowledge.

1. Introduction.

Plausibly, the stakes in a practical task at hand can affect how people ascribe knowledge. For example, if a lot hangs for Hannah on whether the bank will be open on Saturday morning, then she will apply a more stringent standard for whether someone counts as knowing the answer. So it has seemed to philosophers debating what to make of the alleged phenomenon. Does it show that what’s at stake for someone affects what it takes for them to know? Or does it show that what’s a stake affects what a speaker means by the
word “knows”? Or is some other diagnosis correct? But experimental philosophers claim that this debate is based on a false presupposition. What’s at stake doesn’t affect people’s knowledge ascriptions, they crow (loudly if not quite in unison), and so there’s no phenomenon that needs to be made sense of.

In my view, practical stakes sometimes affect people’s knowledge ascriptions. I will present a hypothesis about how and when. After introducing the philosophical debate (§2), I’ll describe work in psychology that motivates my hypothesis about how people ascribe knowledge (§§3 & 4). In particular, empirical research finds that people’s evaluations are sensitive to their ‘psychological distance’ from the scenarios they are considering. I formulate my psychological hypothesis in §5, and draw out its predictions in §§6–9. In particular, the hypothesis predicts that participants in experimental philosophy surveys won’t be swayed by what’s at stake for the fictional characters they read about. Roughly: participants are too psychologically distant from the fictional characters described in the vignettes. The hypothesis predicts the findings of experimental philosophy, and so is not refuted by them (§8). But traditionalists should not celebrate. The hypothesis predicts that people do not ascribe knowledge in a way deemed correct by any of the standard philosophical views, namely classical invariantism, interest-relative invariantism, and contextuali sm (§§6–8). The hypothesis also undermines the standard arguments for the latter two views (§9). Throughout, I emphasize that the knowledge ascriptions the hypothesis predicts are the practically useful evaluations for those judges to make.

In §10, I address what metaphysical and semantic conclusions we should draw. If my psychological hypothesis is correct, what philosophical view of knowledge should we take? My answer: not one of the standard ones. We should legitimize people’s shifting
knowledge ascriptions, and that requires a genuinely relativist metaphysics—maybe truth-relativism, maybe something else, but something bold.

2. **Philosophical background: the bank case.**

Let’s quickly review the ‘bank’ case and some standard philosophical views about it.¹

It’s Friday afternoon, and there’s a long line at the bank. Thus Bill decides to leave depositing his cheque till Saturday. It’s not important that he deposit it immediately. Bill is stopped in the street by Hannah, who asks him whether the bank will be open on Saturday. He answers, “The bank will be open on Saturday. I know because I was there on a Saturday a couple of months ago.” It is really important to Hannah and Sarah that they deposit their cheque before Monday—they have a big direct debit due. They also remember that the bank was open on a Saturday two months ago, but they want to be sure about this Saturday. Hannah reports back to Sarah, “No, that guy doesn’t know that the bank will be open on Saturday.”

Interest-Relative Invariantism (IRI) says that Bill knows that the bank will be open, but Hannah and Sarah can’t know it even though they have the same evidence as Bill. That’s so, according to IRI, because whether someone knows something depends partly on how bad it would be for them have a false belief on the matter. The stakes are a

lot higher for Hannah and Sarah than they are for Bill, and so the evidence is only strong
even for Bill to know that the bank will be open. On this view, Bill speaks the truth
when he says that he knows the bank will be open, and Hannah speaks falsely when she
denies that he knows. 2

Contextualism says that the reference of the word “knows” varies, depending on
the speaker’s context. Contextualists can say that Bill spoke the truth when he said he
“knows”, and Hannah speaks the truth when she says Bill doesn’t “know”, as the two
speakers are talking about different things. At a first pass, Bill semantically expresses that
he knows-by-lax-standards. Those are the standards it is relevant for him to be talking
about, given that it wouldn’t be a disaster for him to falsely believe that the bank will be
open on Saturday morning. But Hannah semantically expresses that Bill does not know-
by-stringent-standards. Those are the standards it is relevant for her to be talking about,
given that it would be a disaster for her to falsely believe that the bank will be open. Bill
knows-by-lax-standards that the bank will be open, but does not know-by-stringent-
standards; so Bill and Hannah both speak the truth. 3

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2 Interest-Relative Invariantism is defended by Hawthorne (2004 chapter 4—tentatively), Stanley

perspectives on contextualism. ‘WAM-ing invariantism’ is the view that while “knows” always
semantically expresses the same thing, people use the word to conversationally implicate a variety
of other epistemic states, with results similar to contextualism. Rysiew (2007) and Brown (2006)
defend WAM-ing invariantism, and DeRose (2009: chapter 3) and Blome-Tillmann (2013) attack
Classical Invariantism rejects both IRI and contextualism. According to classical invariantism, Bill asserts that he knows and Hannah denies it, contra contextualism. But the strength of evidence needed to know something is the same for all subjects, regardless of what’s at stake for them, contra IRI. Either Bill and Hannah are both in an epistemic position to know that the bank will be open, or neither is. According to classical invariantism, one of the characters is simply wrong about whether Bill knows.4

Those standard theories suffice to set the scene. Are any of them correct? As we’ll see, they are all problematic. For now, let’s just note that these theories agree about the theoretical challenge the bank case poses. They all try to state the objective epistemic facts, be they about knowledge or a family of knowledge-like relations of differing stringency. The theories then map people’s thought and talk onto the postulated objective facts. I will take a different tack—one that’s in the first instance purely psychological.

3. Psychological background: occurrent full belief can vary with the stakes.

How much is at stake in the task at hand can affect whether someone will form an occurrent full belief in a proposition. That’s the premise this section articulates. For example, I’d typically judge that my car won’t be stolen if I leave it on Pine Street for two hours. However, if there were a million dollars in cash in the glove box, then I’d merely assign a high probability to the prediction that the car would not be stolen, and consider it. In footnote 20, I argue that my objection to contextualism applies equally to WAM-ing invariantism.

4 Classical Invariantism is defended by Williamson (2005), Nagel (2010), and Gerken (2013).
alternatives that would reduce the risk, such as parking in a garage or reducing the time
the car is left unattended.

An ‘occurrent’ mental state is an active mental state (Bartlett forthcoming). By holding
an occurrent full belief, one treats the matter as settled; one has achieved ‘cognitive
closure’ (Kruglanski & Webster 1996). Not so if one holds an occurrent partial belief.\(^5\) We
can think of full belief—or ‘outright’ belief—as the mental equivalent of assertion.
Ordinary talk about ‘belief’ often refers to tentative belief, a different mental state in
which one does not take it to be settled that p. This picture of occurrent full belief is

We need to form occurrent full beliefs, to make explicit reasoning computationally
tractable. If one assesses a possible course of action based on four full beliefs about what
will happen, one need only consider the single future in which those premises are all
true.\(^6\) For example: there will be a game of cricket played at Lord’s tomorrow, the trains
will run as advertised, it won’t rain, and nice lunches will be available; that prospect is
appealing. But if one has four occurrent partial beliefs in the relevant propositions
instead, then one has sixteen possible futures to consider. Only one future can be

\(^5\) Staffel (2013) defends the role of occurrent partial beliefs in reasoning. Occurrent partial belief is
very different from ‘credence’, a dispositional notion defined in terms of betting behavior
employed by decision theorists and formal epistemologists. (Recent reviews include Easwaran
(2011a, 2011b), and Weisberg (2011, 2015).) Nor should occurrent partial belief be tied to
‘epistemic’ or ‘evidential’ probabilities postulated by some philosophers (Williamson 2000:
chapters 9 & 10; Fantl & McGrath 2009: chapters 1 & 7).

\(^6\) Gilbert & Wilson (2007) and Kahneman (2003) summarize psychological work that places the
simulation of possible futures at the heart of decision-making.
simulated at a time, as it monopolizes working memory. Considering sixteen possible futures is prohibitively slow and computationally expensive. One must rely on occurrent full beliefs to make the decision tractable.

It is computationally easier to make a decision on the basis of an occurrent full belief, such as that my car won’t be stolen if I leave it on Pine Street for two hours, than on the basis of assigning the prediction a high probability. However, there are situations in which it is worth paying the computational cost so as to gain a more nuanced conception of the situation. If there is a million dollars in cash in the glove box, then it is better to assign a very high probability to the prediction that the car would not be stolen, and consider alternatives that would reduce the risk, such as parking in a garage or reducing the time the car is left unattended. When the practical stakes are high, it can be worth spending the time and mental energy to deal with a partial rather than full belief. This follows from the general principle that evidence-gathering effort, computational resources and time are allocated where they are needed most, and thus where accuracy is most important. Psychologists agree that we vary our occurrent full beliefs in this way, but disagree about the mechanisms by which we do so. Nagel (2010 §§1–2) reviews this work for a philosophical audience. Similarly, a variable speed–accuracy trade-off is assumed by neuroscientific work on decision-making (Gold & Shadlen 2007, Standage et al. 2014, Heitz 2014).

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8 Glöckner et al. (2014) and Söllner et al. (2014) argue for single-mechanism over multiple-strategy models.
Let me introduce some terminology. One employs different ‘implicit standards’ for occurrent full belief that \( p \) depending on what’s at stake in the task one ‘focuses’ on. One’s ‘implicit standard for belief that \( p \)’ just describes one’s regulative dispositions to form or withhold full belief in \( p \) given different evidence. One ‘focuses’ on a particular task iff one’s representation of the task causally sets one’s implicit standards for full belief; i.e., the task causes one to regulate the formation of occurrent full beliefs in a certain way.

This doesn’t mean that at any given time there is a uniform standard that one applies to all one’s occurrent beliefs. It just means that the perceived practical stakes can make a difference to whether the subject forms an occurrent full belief in a given proposition, or a merely partial belief. The standards are not explicitly represented by subjects; they are implicit in the subject’s dispositions to form occurrent full or partial beliefs. People’s standards shift when they ‘focus’ on a particular practical task, but there may well be a default, general purpose standard. Indeed, I will assume there is.

People’s standards for belief in a particular proposition will often shift when they consider different practical questions. Consider the claim that my car won’t get stolen from Pine Street if I park it there every weekday all year. I might affirm this claim when deciding whether it is worth parking on Pine Street and walking an extra three blocks to the office, which is on a dodgier road. Yet I might suspend judgement on the claim when deciding to pay a few dollars for anti-theft car insurance.\(^9\)

\(^9\) DeRose (2009: 270–3) raises a case in which the subject acts on two practical questions separately but at once, using incompatible attitudes. Jane’s employer offers her a year’s free life insurance. She walks over to the benefits office to sign up—after all, you never know what might happen. On the way, Jane answers her cell phone. It’s one of Jane’s friends, asking whether she’s
Our minds are adapted for cooperating and helping others.\textsuperscript{10} I claim that helping someone often involves ‘focusing’ on their task. That is, the helper will regulate their full beliefs in a manner appropriate to the task they are helping with. Let’s see how this works in a variant of the bank case. Suppose Adam is helping Hannah and Sarah gather information relevant to their task, namely paying in their crucial cheque before Monday while minimizing queuing at the bank. Adam gets evidence Hannah and Sarah don’t have: Bert tells him that since the bank was open on a Saturday two months ago, it will be open this Saturday too. Adam should continue investigation into whether the bank will be open this Saturday. That is, he shouldn’t form a full belief that the bank will be open. And he doesn’t form an inquiry-terminating full belief, because he ‘focuses’ on the practical question for Hannah and Sarah, and thus regulates his full beliefs in an appropriately stringent way.

When will someone focus on a practical task for someone else? We don’t do so whenever we become aware of a task someone is pursing, else it would be hard to gather going to look for a different job in the near future. Jane says she won’t—she’ll still be working at the same place this time next year. She carries on walking to the benefits office while occurrently judging that next year she will still be working at the same place. She is able to keep separate the two settings in which the question arises as to where she’ll be in a year’s time. If Jane is asked why she is walking to the benefits office, she’ll revert to suspending judgement on whether she’ll be alive and working there this time next year. Jane is able to switch back and forth between ‘focusing’ on one practical task or the other, and the appropriate attitudes to whether she’ll be working in the same place next year. This psychological ability is crucial to computationally efficient explicit reasoning.

\textsuperscript{10} §4 cites empirical work on our capacity to cooperate, such as Tomasello (2009).
testimony without shifting our focus away from the task that is motivating our search for information. No doubt there are many factors, but I will suggest one. I will suggest that people are more likely to focus on a task when it is ‘psychologically close’ to them. Tasks are psychologically close when they face someone socially close in the here-and-now; these are the tasks that are ripe for action. The next section explains psychological distance and its typical effects. Then I’ll formulate my hypothesis about how we ascribe knowledge.


In general, cognition is a means for dealing with one’s environment—“thinking is for doing” in Susan Fiske’s slogan (1992). If we are tackling a practical problem, we construct the mental representations that are relevant for dealing with it. For beings like us, the social environment is as important as anything. We construct mental representations that help us navigate the particular social environment we find ourselves in.

Does this mean our mental states will be stable over time, or variable? The contemporary answer is: it’s a bit of both (Ledgerwood 2014: 436–8). We’ve already seen that it is useful to vary one’s full beliefs depending on how much is at stake in the practical question one is addressing (§3). This section explains how varying our evaluations can be adaptive, by helping us to collaborate with others.11

Michael Tomasello (2009) presents compelling evidence that we have a suite of evolved skills and motivations for collaborating in groups. We are uniquely helpful

11 Other arguments that cognition is sensitive to the social context include: Smith & Semin (2007, 2004), Schwartz (2007), and Yeh & Barsalou (2006).
amongst primates, right from infancy. Pre-verbal children can’t help themselves but to inform others of what they want to know, by pointing at the object someone is looking for (Tomasello 2009: 14–21). According to Tomasello, the central aspect of human social life is that we can think of ourselves as members of a group working together, and are appropriately motivated to play our particular role (2009: 52–55).12

To be evolutionarily fit, humans must form groups in which they work together. Collaborating helps us achieve a better outcome now, and cements our membership of the group, setting us up for better outcomes later. Working together requires common beliefs and common goals—‘coordination’ on the relevant matters. So we should expect people to adapt their beliefs and evaluations to align with those of others with whom they might cooperate. And that is what psychologists find.

Let me give you the flavor of Alison Ledgerwood’s (2014) survey of some relevant empirical work. In a series of studies (pp. 439–441), participants were informed of a government policy, such as more vigorous deporting of undocumented immigrants, and were told either that the policy was to come into effect next week, or next year. Participants had a brief conversation with a stranger who expressed an opinion about the policy, and then were asked to evaluate the policy privately. If the policy was to be implemented the following week, then participants shifted their evaluations towards those of the strangers they happened to meet. If the policy was to be implemented next year, participants did not shift their evaluations towards those of random strangers. However,

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they did shift their evaluations towards those of society at large, or of some salient stable group they identified with.

This is as predicted by need to cooperate. If we are preparing to deal with an event happening soon, then we have to cooperate with whoever is close by, even a random stranger. Cooperation requires a measure of agreement, and so we shift our views towards those of whoever is close by. But if we are considering an event happening in the distant future, then it’s unlikely we’ll have to cooperate with this stranger then; more likely we’ll be cooperating in one of our stable groups.

These findings are part of a more general pattern. The above experiment manipulated participants’ temporal distance from the event they evaluated. But temporal distance is just one dimension of an event’s ‘psychological distance’ from a thinker. (Liberman & Trope (2014), Trope & Liberman (2010), Fiedler et al. (2012), Ledgerwood (2014), and the meta-analysis of Soderberg et al. (2015).) The standard dimensions of an event’s psychological distance are: (Liberman & Trope 2014: 365 box 1)

1. The event’s temporal distance from the thinker.
2. Its spatial distance from the thinker.
3. Hypotheticality: (i) real events are closer than hypothetical ones; (ii) probable events are closer than improbable ones.
4. The social distance of the people involved. Socially distant people are: not oneself; not similar to oneself; not familiar; not part of one’s ingroups (the groups with which one identifies).

Psychological distance is automatically computed. It exerts the following tendencies:
(a) When an event is psychologically close, people evaluate it in a way that’s tailored to their current situation, and hence variable.

(b) When an event is psychologically distant, people evaluate it in a way that’s general-purpose, and hence more stable.

These tendencies are adaptive. Psychologically close events call for action now, in the current situation, whereas psychologically distant events don’t call for action now, and so the particulars of the current situation are not relevant.

Knowledge ascriptions are evaluations—they are the most common epistemic evaluations. So we should expect a similar pattern of variability versus stability in our knowledge ascriptions. That is: when considering psychologically close scenarios, people ascribe knowledge in a way that’s tailored to their current situation. When considering psychologically distant scenarios, people ascribe knowledge using a general-purpose, stable standard. This pattern should be adaptive because it helps us cooperate with appropriate others. I will present an account with these features.

The psychologists cited above endorse ‘construal level theory’, which says that psychological distance affects our evaluations by affecting how we represent the relevant events. Psychologically close events are represented concretely with lots of specific detail, while psychologically distant events are represented more abstractly, and this explains why we evaluate close and distant events differently. However, there is evidence that psychological distance can affect evaluations more directly, functioning as a measure of

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13 Nagel (2010: 408) reports that ‘knows’ is one of the ten most used verbs in English.
the personal relevance of the event under consideration (Wessler & Hansen 2016). I don’t need to take a stand on whether psychological distance affects knowledge ascriptions solely by affecting the level of construal. Psychological distance helps us shift between situation-specific and general-purpose thinking, including whether we should see things through the lens of cooperation with a particular group. Psychological distance functions generally as a mark of whether to prime to cooperate, even if that effect is then achieved differently in different cases.14

5. The psychological hypothesis.

My hypothesis about how people ascribe knowledge consists of the following claims:

(1A) Sometimes, people ‘focus’ on a practical task (for themselves or for others), and thus govern their occurrent full beliefs by ‘implicit standards’ that are appropriate to that task. Other times, people don’t ‘focus’ on a task, but employ a general-purpose default standard.

(1B) The more psychologically distant the contemplated practical situation, the more likely the judge is to stick with the default implicit standard for full belief. The

14 Plausibly, the role of psychological distance is part of our evolved capacity for cooperation. The selective pressures responsible for the effects Ledgerwood reports also applied to our ancestors’ epistemic evaluations. Shea et al. (2014) suggest that the ability to form communicable metacognitive representations—like knowledge ascriptions—evolved because it improves complex cooperation.
psychologically closer the contemplated practical situation, the more likely the judge is to ‘focus’ on it.

(2) One ascribes knowledge partly by assessing the subject’s evidence using one’s own current implicit standard for full belief.

(3) People typically use and interpret the word “knows” to mean: knows.

Claims (1A) and (1B) summarize the claims and suggestions of §§3–4. (3) just means that there’s no systematic semantic or pragmatic funny business going on. But let me say a few words about (2).

Claim (2) ties knowledge ascriptions to what (1A) and (1B) say about people’s implicit standards for full belief. Roughly: if one would not form a full belief on the basis of certain evidence, then one will judge that such a belief does not constitute knowledge. On the other hand, if one’s implicit standard licenses a full belief, then (other things being equal) one will judge that such a belief does constitute knowledge. Of course a belief must meet other conditions to be assessed as knowledge. If one judges that \( p \) is false, then one won’t judge that the subject knows that \( p \), no matter how strong their evidence that \( p \). Gettier cases must also be accounted for. But those features of knowledge ascriptions are plausibly accounted for separately (as they are according to Powell et al. 2015). So let’s set those other features aside for this paper, and concentrate on explaining how and when knowledge ascriptions are sensitive to practical stakes.\(^{15}\)

\(^{15}\)There’s some precedent for the idea that the mechanisms regulating one’s beliefs are central to evaluating the beliefs of others. Plausibly, the mechanisms regulating how we act play a role in evaluating the actions of others. According to Miller & Cushman (2013), we sometimes evaluate
I will illustrate the hypothesis by considering how three kinds of people ascribe knowledge in the bank case: Hannah, friends of either Hannah or Bill, and participants in an experimental philosophy survey (§§6–8 respectively). I will explain why the predicted knowledge-ascriptions are the useful ones for those judges to make. That is, the hypothesis sits well with the axiom that thinking is for doing. It is not enough to pay lip-service to the general idea that we form occurrent representations that are useful, and do so in computationally frugal ways. The idea should be taken seriously in the case of judgements ascribing knowledge, and when saying how people interpret what others mean by “knows”. Thinking is for doing, even when it’s thinking about what someone knows, and what they meant.

6. How Bill and Hannah ascribe knowledge.

others morally by simulating acting in the relevant ways ourselves, and seeing how that would make us feel.

16 Philosophical work on the social function of knowledge ascriptions includes Craig (1990), Henderson (2009, 2011), Kappel (2010), Kelp (2011), and the papers in Henderson & Greco (2015).

17 Nagel (2010) takes the “thinking is for doing” perspective on how we form or withhold full belief (discussed in §2 above, and which influenced my thinking deeply). But this perspective is absent when she considers judgements ascribing knowledge. Instead of investigating how it would be socially useful to ascribe knowledge, she only considers the view that shifts in knowledge ascriptions are caused by cognitive biases.
Here’s the bank case again.\textsuperscript{18}

It’s Friday afternoon, and there’s a long line at the bank. Thus Bill decides to leave depositing his cheque till Saturday. It’s not important that he deposit it immediately. Bill is stopped in the street by Hannah, who asks him whether the bank will be open on Saturday. He answers, “The bank will be open on Saturday. I know because I was there on a Saturday a couple of months ago.” It is really important to Hannah and Sarah that they deposit their cheque before Monday—they have a big direct debit due. They also remember that the bank was open on a Saturday two months ago, but they want to be sure about this Saturday. Hannah reports back to Sarah, “No, that guy doesn’t know that the bank will be open on Saturday.”

Our hypothesis predicts that Bill will judge that the bank will be open. When questioned by Hannah, Bill is unaware of the particular use his information will be put to. So he employs the default implicit standard for full belief—or maybe one appropriate to most tasks performed at the bank, for which it won’t be terribly important that they be completed before Monday. Either way, Bill’s evidence meets this threshold.

\textsuperscript{18}We are concerned with how people’s occurrent ascriptions of knowledge shift. The relevant ascriptions can concern knowing in a dispositional sense, such as whether Lucy, who is not thinking about the issue, knows that Paris is in France. However, it will be simpler to focus on occurrent ascriptions of occurrent knowledge, to subjects who give voice to full beliefs.
Our hypothesis predicts that Hannah will not judge that the bank will be open, given Bill’s testimony. She focuses on a particular practical task, namely paying in her cheque before Monday. It’s entirely natural for Hannah to focus on that task, partly because it is psychologically close. The task is one for her and Sarah, not someone socially distant. It concerns a choice she will really make, not a merely hypothetical one. And the choice is to be made here and now. So it is in line with (1B) that Hannah focuses on the task of paying in her cheque on time, and so employs an appropriate implicit standard for judging. There’s a lot at stake for Hannah, so she employs a high implicit standard for judging that the bank will be open on Saturday. Thus she does not form a full belief on the basis of Bill’s testimony. Bill reports his evidence, and it falls short of Hannah’s threshold for full belief.

People’s implicit standards governing full belief also govern their knowledge ascriptions (says 2). So Bill judges that he knows the bank will be open: his evidence is enough for a full belief. But Hannah won’t form a full belief on the evidence that the bank was open on a Saturday two months ago. Thus she judges that’s not enough evidence to know. In particular, Bill doesn’t know. According to (3), Bill and Hannah will take each other to mean the same thing by “know”, namely knowing. Hannah has no reason to think Bill is lying; she takes him to an expressing something he really believes, namely that he knows. But he doesn’t know. So the hypothesis predicts that Hannah interprets Bill as wrongly thinking that he knows. According to Hannah, Bill only thinks he knows because he’s being sloppy.

The psychological hypothesis seems to give the right predictions about what Bill and Hannah will think. Moreover, that’s the only relevant and useful way for Hannah to assess whether Bill knows. Given Hannah and Sarah’s task, Bill’s testimony doesn’t allow
them to settle that the bank will be open. So they should judge that Bill’s belief falls short epistemically—he doesn’t know the bank will be open. Any other evaluation would be at best a useless distraction. Given that ‘thinking is for doing’, we should expect Hannah to judge that Bill doesn’t know.

If the psychological predictions and task-analysis are right, then Classical and Interest-Relative Invariantism place perverse burdens on Hannah. She assesses whether Bill knows against the high standard that’s relevant to her practical situation. It would be irrelevant for Hannah to assess whether Bill knows against any other standard. Classical Invariantism demands that she assess Bill against the one true and universal standard for knowing. Interest-Relative Invariantism demands that she assess Bill against the low standard that’s relevant to his practical situation. So Classical and Interest-Relative Invariantism demand that Hannah give up the useful way to assess Bill in favour of a useless one. Officially we’ll consider the metaphysical upshot of these observations in §10, but it’s not looking good for those views.

Interest-Relative Invariantists might try to weasel out of this indictment as follows. IRI says that it’s the standard relevant to Bill’s practical situation that determines whether he knows. Could IRI say that talking to Hannah puts Bill in a high-stakes situation without him realizing? On this view, Bill doesn’t know. (Stanley 2005: 118–9 considers this manoeuvre.) This weaseling is to no avail. Suppose Bill addresses Amy, for whom not much is at stake, and Hannah eavesdrops. Surely Hannah’s overhearing him does not affect Bill’s practical situation, yet Hannah should still think he doesn’t know. So the proposal does not solve the problem for IRI. Moreover, the weaseling makes no progress with the challenge presented by the next section, namely accommodating the useful knowledge ascriptions of both Hannah’s friends and Bill’s friends.
7. How Hannah’s friends and Bill’s friends ascribe knowledge.

It is human nature to help people, especially by sharing information (Tomasello 2009: 6–21). We are especially eager to help our friends. Suppose Hannah and Sarah inform their friend Adam of their predicament. Adam wants to help by establishing—to the standard relevant to his friends’ practical task—whether the bank will be open. It is in keeping with (1B) that Adam adopts the stringent implicit standard for full belief that’s appropriate to Hannah and Sarah’s practical question. His friends are socially close to him, and the choice they face is real and in the near future. Thus their practical question is psychologically close to Adam. Given that he adopts the same implicit standard for full belief as Hannah and Sarah, Adam will also ascribe knowledge in the same way (says 2). If informed of Bill’s testimony, Adam will think that Bill doesn’t know that the bank will be open. And like Hannah, Adam will interpret Bill’s utterance as indicating that Bill believes he knows (says 3); but Bill only thinks that because he’s being sloppy.

This is the only relevant and useful way for Adam to ascribe knowledge. To help Hannah and Sarah, Adam must adopt the implicit standard for full belief that’s appropriate to his friends’ situation. He’d be useless to them if he formed a full belief that the bank will be open on the basis of Bill’s testimony—he’d take the matter to be settled, rather than needing further investigation he can help with. It wouldn’t be helpful to have a laxer standard for full belief than is appropriate to Hannah and Sarah’s task, for then Adam would close investigation too soon. Nor would it be helpful to have a more stringent standard, for then he would continue investigation too long. To be useful, Adam’s knowledge-ascriptions must be driven by the task-appropriate implicit standard
for full belief. And that’s what the psychological hypothesis predicts Adam does. So again, the hypothesis comports with the axiom that thinking is for doing.

Now consider Bill’s friend Katie. They are going to hang out together on Friday evening. But should Bill first spend the first hour of his weekend in line at the bank, paying in his cheque? There’s no need, Katie will think; Bill knows the bank will be open tomorrow. Hannah said that Bill doesn’t know?—Well then she’s being excessively cautious. The psychological hypothesis predicts Katie’s responses in the same way it predicts Adam’s. Again, this is the useful way for Katie to ascribe knowledge, given her social situation, namely her focus on Bill and how he should start his Friday night.

In sum: Adam sets himself to cooperate with Hannah and Sarah, while Katie sets herself to cooperate with Bill. Thus they adopt implicit standards for full belief relevant to their respective friends, and ascribe knowledge accordingly. Moreover, that’s the useful way to think and talk about knowing. Suppose that’s all correct. What are the consequences for the orthodox philosophical theories about whether the standards for knowing shift?

Classical and Interest-Relativism Invariantism are embarrassed again. It is useful for Adam to assess whether Bill knows by one standard, and for Katie to assess it by another. But at least one of those assessments is prohibited, according to either of those philosophical views. For those two views agree that there can only be one correct standard by which to assess whether Bill knows.

Contextualism is also in the mire. It allows Adam and Katie to say whether Bill “knows” by the standard that relevant to them. However, it demands that they evaluate Bill’s utterance of “I know” by a different standard. Contextualism demands that everyone evaluates the truth-value of Bill’s utterance of “I know” using the epistemic
standard determined by Bill’s conversational context. Assessing Bill’s utterance in that way will often be irrelevant to the task at hand, an unhelpful distraction and a waste of cognitive resources. Adam focuses on helping Hannah and Sarah, and so the *only* relevant evaluation for him of Bill’s belief is that it falls short—Bill thinks he knows but that’s not true. The only evaluation of Bill’s belief that’s relevant for Katie is that he meets the standard—Bill said he knows the bank will be open, and he’s right. For both Adam and Katie, it would be an unhelpful distraction to also figure out what standard was appropriate to Bill’s conversational context and assess Bill’s belief against it, to judge whether Bill’s utterance was true. So contextualism demands that people give up the task-relevant and useful way of evaluating the truth-value of utterances ascribing knowledge, and replace it with a task-irrelevant and useless way.19

It doesn’t help the contextualist to say that the standard relevant to assessing Bill’s utterance is determined by all the participants in his conversation. For example, DeRose (2009 chapter 4) says that when interlocutors have differing standards, then their conflicting knowledge-ascriptions are neither true nor false. But that’s not a helpful way to assess Bill’s utterance, either for Adam or for Katie. People need both ways of

19 Regier, Kemp & Kay (2015) argue that natural languages employ categories that enable efficient communication. “Good systems of categories are simple, which minimizes cognitive load, and informative, which maximizes communicative effectiveness. These two constraints compete against each other, and we propose that semantic systems in the world’s languages tend to achieve a near optimal tradeoff between these two constraints.” (2015: 237) Regier et al. illustrate using colour categories, kinship terms, and domains where the objects are characterized by a certain number of features they either have or lack. So we can expect our knowledge-talk to minimize cognitive load and yet communicate the important point well enough.
assessing Bill’s utterance to be available, depending on who they want to help; no contextualist view gets this result.

One might object that hearers must evaluate Bill’s claim to “know” by the lax epistemic standard he employs, so as to draw the appropriate conclusion from his assertion. Suppose Bill hadn’t told Hannah what evidence he possesses that the bank will be open. Then for Hannah to avoid relying on Bill’s testimony, she would have to understand that Bill is using a lower epistemic standard. So, goes the worry, it isn’t an unnecessary distraction to employ Bill’s lower standard, as I have alleged. But this objection is mistaken. Sensitivity to Bill’s use of a laxer epistemic standard does not entail representing that standard, let alone employing it oneself. Hannah can think: Bill thinks he knows the bank will be open because he is being sloppy, too lax. This explanation represents Bill as falling short, not as satisfying some laxer standard. Hannah and her helpers evaluate Bill’s utterance in only one way, namely by employing their stringent standard.

Admittedly, Hannah or Adam could search for a more sympathetic understanding of Bill, and thus think that he accurately evaluated his belief against a lower epistemic standard. But to search for a more sympathetic understanding of Bill is to shift one’s focus away from the practical task facing Hannah and Sarah. My point concerns what’s relevant when one is focused on helping those two. Hannah can stay focused on her practical task while assessing whether Bill knows; the same goes when Hannah or Adam assesses the truth of Bill’s claim to “know”.

My argument against contextualism fits a wider trend. Contextualist-style views are wrong for evaluative utterances more generally, not just epistemic evaluations of whether someone “knows”. Ledgerwood (2014) reports shifts in participants’ evaluation of
government policies, such as deporting more undocumented immigrants (§4 above). We should not explain those shifts by saying that participants changed what they meant by a “good” policy. Again, we should not build speakers’ moral standards into the contents of their moral judgements and utterances. For example: the Romans thought that slavery is morally permissible, but they were wrong. We don’t ascribe true contents to their ‘moral’ thought and talk. Why is this the useful way to interpret and assess evaluative utterances? What’s important is our evaluation of slavery, knowing the Romans’ evaluation, and that those evaluations clash. So it’s useful to think that they were wrong about slavery. There’s nothing useful about thinking their ‘moral’ judgements and utterances were right, by evaluating them in a way alienated from our moral standards. This is the same complaint I raise against contextualism about knowledge ascriptions. The point about knowledge ascriptions gains force because it is an instance of an attractive general claim about how we interpret evaluative utterances.

Of course this style of argument had better not prove too much—some words are context-dependent. Let’s consider how it’s useful to interpret the agreement we made in the conservatory to meet “here” at 3pm. The important thing is to turn up at the right place for our rendezvous. It would not be useful for me to stay in the study, tetchily remarking, “It’s 3 o’clock and only I’m here.” So I must take “here” to be a context-dependent term, which we used to mean the conservatory. So the type of argument against contextualism about “knows” does not generalize objectionably to clearly context-dependent terms.20

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20 The argument against contextualism also counts against ‘WAM-ing invariantism’ (e.g. Rysiew 2007, Brown 2006). On this view, “knows” always semantically expresses knowing, which requires
8. How participants in X-phi surveys ascribe knowledge.

Let’s consider another social situation in which someone might evaluate whether Bill knows—a strange social situation, but one that has been the focus of recent debate. In many experimental philosophy studies, professors ask their students in a large introductory class to answer a survey about some fictional cases. Other studies are conducted online (say using Amazon Mechanical Turk), paying volunteers to answer the survey. In both kinds of studies, participants read a story, and rate on a Likert scale the degree to which they agree the main character knows. Some participants read a story about someone for whom not much is at stake; others read a story about someone who has the same evidence, but for whom a lot is at stake.²¹

a moderate strength of evidence. But in many conversations, it would be irrelevant to talk about that epistemic standard—only a higher one will do. Speakers can then use “knows” to mean the more relevant epistemic standard, trusting that hearers will interpret them charitably. The communicated meaning is conversationally implicated, in the normal way explained by Grice’s conversational maxims (Grice 1989: chapter 2), it is alleged. This view demands that everyone assesses Bill’s conversationally implicated claim using the default standard he had in mind. This would clog Hannah and Adam’s minds unhelpfully.

²¹ Buckwalter & Schaffer (2015: 211–215) conducted a different kind of survey. They asked high- and low-stakes variants of the following questions about knowing, guessing, or hoping:

How many times do you think Peter has to proofread his paper before he [knows/guesses/hopes] that there are no typos? ____ times.

They claim the results show that there’s no special stakes effect on knowledge ascriptions. They got the same patterns of response for “knows”, “guesses”, and “hopes”. I say there is a common
These surveys manipulated what’s at stake for the fictional character in the vignette. They found little or no effect on whether participants judge that the character knows. (Buckwalter & Schaffer 2015, Rose et al. forthcoming, but compare Pinillos 2016.) But according to Interest-Relative Invariantism, a big difference in what’s at stake for the character has a big effect on what the character knows. So participants do not ascribe knowledge as IRI demands.

There’s bad news for contextualism too (specifically, views according to which what’s at stake for the people in a conversation affects the content of “knows” in their mouths). Some studies had the character in the vignette utter, “I know”. What was at stake for the character had little or no effect on whether participants judged that their claim to “know” was true. So participants did not assess the characters’ utterances of “I know” as contextualism demands (specifically, versions where stakes affect the content).

I won’t dwell on whether these findings undermine arguments from ordinary language for interest-relative invariantism or contextualism, nor on how much they count against those views directly. I will argue that my psychological hypothesis predicts these findings from experimental philosophy. If that’s right, then the standard surveys conducted by experimental philosophers are no evidence against my proposal. The moral typically drawn from the findings is that stakes generally don’t affect people’s knowledge ascriptions; that inference is mistaken. My psychological hypothesis explains the lack of a stakes effect in the strange social situation studied by experimental philosophers, just as well as the hypothesis that there are never stakes effects.

cause to the common pattern: people interpreted the three stimuli as asking the same question.

And that’s because there’s only one coherent question in the ballpark—the one about knowing.
Participants in the experimental philosophy surveys are in a strange social situation, answering questions about fictional characters in fictional scenarios. As I will explain, my hypothesis predicts that participants will *not* typically focus on the fictional characters’ practical questions. The surveys ask about events that are psychologically distant to participants, and so participants will ascribe knowledge by a general-purpose, default standard (says 1B). Participants given the low-stakes story and the high-stakes story both employ the default standard, and thus ascribe knowledge is the same way. And that’s what experimental philosophers found.

Let’s run through the dimensions of psychological distance to confirm that the surveys ask participants about very distant events. Firstly, the stories are fictional, not real, and involve characters that are fictional and not real. Thus the events are distant along the dimension of hypotheticality. That’s enough to make the events psychologically distant; but let’s continue to ram the point home. The events are even more distant if the story is improbable, as they tend to be.

Secondly, the characters are socially distant. They are not the participants themselves, nor are they friends or family members. The characters are not familiar to participants (unlike Sherlock Holmes). Depending on the story, the characters might be dissimilar to the participants, and be putative outgroup members. For example, someone depositing a physical cheque is dissimilar from the average undergraduate participant. Kids these days upload photos of their cheques from their phones. Participants with a typical implicit bias against homosexuals will be psychologically distant from a lesbian couple, such as Hannah and Sarah in Stanley’s version of the bank case. Angel Pinillos (2012) uses a vignette involving a student who turns in a paper containing no typos. Such
a student is dissimilar to the average undergraduate survey participant, and sounds like a nerd—an outgroup member.

Finally, there’s nothing in the story to make participants think of the events as happening now or in the immediate future. If anything, not specifying when the events take place makes them feel even more remote and abstract than saying they take place next year. The spatial location is also unspecified, with similar consequences.

In sum, the events described in the surveys are psychologically very distant to participants. Thus the hypothesis predicts that participants will ascribe knowledge to the characters by a default standard for knowing. And the X-phi results show that’s what people do.

A puzzle remains. Unlike typical survey participants, philosophers’ intuitions are often stakes-sensitive. For example, they are often tempted, after reading about Hannah and Sarah’s predicament, to judge that Bill doesn’t know the bank will be open. (That’s why there’s a philosophical debate for the experimental philosophers to try to debunk.) How do philosophers differ from normal people? And are their responses compatible with my hypothesis? My initial explanation of the X-phi results appealed only to features of the vignettes. But other features of participants’ social situations are causally relevant too, and they are different from the situations of philosophers conducting thought experiments. Let me suggest two social differences that partly explain philosophers’ atypical responses.

Firstly, survey participants have immediate pressing concerns, and so won’t focus on something else, such as the character’s practical task. People answering questions on Amazon Mechanical Turk have a practical task in mind, namely earning money. Student participants taking a strange survey from a scary professor before a class on an unfamiliar subject also have immediate practical goals. They are trying not to seem stupid to the
professor or weird to their classmates. If participants focus on any practical situation, it is their own. But philosophers considering thought experiments from their armchairs are not so strongly tethered to some immediate task. They feel unthreatened by their surroundings, and so are free to focus on some other situation. Thus philosophers are more likely to focus on the predicament of the character in the vignette.

Secondly, philosophers imagine thought-experiments more vividly than typical survey participants. Imagining the events represents them quasi-perceptually rather than in words, and thus more concretely (Liberman & Trope 2014: 366). Philosophers project themselves into the fictional scenario, putting themselves in the shoes of the characters or imagining themselves close by. They are trained to approach thought experiments in this way, making them as real as possible. Moreover, they are freer to imagine the scenario vividly because they are less tethered to immediate concerns than typical participants (the first point above). Thus philosophers vividly imagine themselves as psychologically close to the vignette scenarios. I suggest this makes philosophers more likely to respond as if they were actually psychologically close to the vignette scenarios. Analogously, if one imagines the events described in book of fiction more vividly, then one’s emotional response will be closer to that experienced in response to real events.

Let’s zoom out for a moment. Standard X-phi surveys put participants in a very unusual social situation, and ask them about scenarios of no personal relevance. To extrapolate from those results to a claim about how people judge in the wild, we need a substantive further premise. We’d need to assume that people’s practical and social situations do not affect how they make the relevant judgements. As we saw in §4, that’s not generally true. I suspect that situational effects on our judgements are widespread. Unless we are given a good argument that there are no situational effects in the case at
hand, we cannot take X-phi surveys to show how people think in the wild. This is a deep challenge for X-phi as currently practised (compare Smith & Semin 2004: 61–2 & 67; Schilbach et al. 2013). It may be necessary to change methods, and conduct experiments that approximate real life situations.\textsuperscript{22}

9. \textbf{Split focus pairs and standard arguments for IRI and contextualism.}

On my hypothesis, we \textit{employ} the standards relevant to the task we focus on, rather than representing them in a way detached from how we govern our own occurrent full beliefs. This predicts that we won’t be able to assess a pair of knowledge-ascriptions by different standards in the same breath, for that would require us to be regulating our own occurrent beliefs by two different standards at once. For example, we cannot (in the same breath) judge that Bill’s visit to the bank two months ago allows Bill but not Hannah to know that it will be open this Saturday.\textsuperscript{23} However, one might juxtapose judgements made before and after a shift in the task focused on. For example, one might first focus on Bill’s practical situation and say that Bill knows, and then shift to focus on Hannah and

\textsuperscript{22} I hope to address the challenge for X-phi in more detail elsewhere. The challenge for philosophers who rely on their own intuitions is slightly different. Why rely on the intuitions they have in the seminar room, rather than in other practical and social contexts?

\textsuperscript{23} What about cases of multi-tasking? Consider DeRose’s example, discussed in footnote 9 above. Isn’t one deploying two standards for occurrent full belief at once, if one walks to sign up for free life insurance, while asserting over the phone that one will be around next year? No. One addresses the practical questions one at a time in consciously available thought. When one switches between practical questions, one’s implicit standards for occurrent full belief automatically switch too.
Sarah and say that Bill does not know. The judgements will seem incompatible, for there is no way to set our standards such that both judgements will seem true. If one now focuses on one agent, then one will revise the other judgement. For example, one might stay focused on Hannah and Sarah, and revise one’s earlier verdict that Bill knows. But what if one emphasizes Bill’s practical situation when assessing his utterance, and emphasizes Hannah’s practical situation when assessing hers? Call this way of assessing the two utterances a ‘split focus pair’ of judgements.

My account predicts that we will be confused by split focus pairs. We sense that we are swinging back and forth on the question of whether Bill knows. This confusion is unpleasant. Most people will respond by ignoring the matter, and thinking about something else or nothing at all. A few people will try to resolve their confusion by giving a least-bad assessment of the truth of the relevant utterances. In particular, some philosophers will try to give a principled account of which of the utterances are true, by proposing interest-relative invariantism or contextualism.

As we’ve seen, adopting IRI or contextualism damages our normal way of ascribing knowledge (§§6–7). I think it is particularly misguided to argue for such a reform on the basis of split focus pairs. We ascribe knowledge in a way that is typically useful and unproblematic. While it can be useful to focus on Bill’s practical situation, and it can be useful to focus on Hannah and Sarah’s, it won’t usually be socially useful to juxtapose those two different approaches to the question of whether Bill knows. Split focus pairs are thus removed from the practical utility of the concept KNOWS. To throw out a generally useful way of ascribing knowledge so as to resolve confusion about fringe examples is misguided. To my mind, it doesn’t matter what (if anything) we say about split focus pairs, as long as we carry on ascribing knowledge in the normal way in real-life situations.
The present point is important, as arguments for IRI often trade on split focus pairs. This is so even when the argument is presented as appealing to principles, not intuitions about a case such as that of Hannah, Sarah, and Bill. I’ll examine Brian Weatherson’s argument (2012: 82–6); similar remarks apply to Jeremy Fantl & Matthew McGrath (2009: chapters 3 & 7; 2012).

Weatherson’s first premise is that we know some things—skepticism is false. But for just about any such item of knowledge, if a genie were to offer a bet paying $1 if the relevant belief is true and inflicting 1000 years of torture if not, one would be rationally required to decline the bet. That means one cannot leave off one’s decision-table the possibility that the belief is false (otherwise the bet would appear as a free $1). But agents can leave off decision-tables those possibilities they know not to obtain. So if a genie were to offer such a bet, one must lose the knowledge under consideration. So whether one knows something depends on one’s practical situation, such as whether a genie is offering a high-stakes bet. So argues Weatherson.

This argument juxtaposes our anti-skeptical knowledge-ascription, made when we are not focusing on the genie’s bet, with the skeptical judgement made when we are focused on the genie’s bet. That is, Weatherson forces us to consider a split focus pair of judgements. If my psychological story is right, he tries to make us to combine judgements made under psychologically incompatible standards. No good can come of this.

Contextualists also try to force us to consider examples in a split focus way. First we judge Bill’s utterance true, focusing on his practical situation, then we judge Hannah’s utterance true, focusing on her practical situation, and contextualists want to combine those two verdicts. On my story, it is not possible to combine the two verdicts, as that would require employing two different standards for full belief at once. My account
predicts that people will be confused (if they keep shifting their focus). It’s not surprising that some people react by saying: Bill knows by the low standards that are relevant to his practical situation, but he doesn’t know by the high standards relative to Hannah and Sarah’s practical situation. A philosopher of our era will naturally put the idea linguistically: Bill semantically expressed that he knows by low standards, and Hannah semantically expressed that Bill does not know by high standards. So contextualism about “knows” is an understandable reaction to being confused by the split focus verdicts. However, contextualism is uncomfortable even in this case: it still seems that Bill and Hannah take incompatible attitudes to the question of whether Bill knows. The sense that Bill and Hannah disagree becomes compelling the moment we focus on one agent’s practical situation, as is usual and typically useful. For example, if we decide to help Hannah, then we’ll think Bill spoke falsely—he doesn’t know the bank will be open on Saturday.

10. Metaphysics that endorses our useful judgements.

Suppose that the psychological hypothesis is correct. Suppose, moreover, that the knowledge-ascribing judgements thus described are the most useful mental representations for people to construct. Shall we stick to one of the standard philosophical views, and demand people stop thinking and talking in the useful ways? Uncynical philosophers of such a persuasion would come out onto the streets or the New York Times blog, declaring, “You can’t ascribe knowledge like that! Admittedly, it is the most practical way to think and talk, but I can’t make sense of it within my approach to metaphysics and philosophy of language!” Such proselytizing would be met with dismissive laughter, and rightly so. Rather than fitting our knowledge-ascriptions to some
Procrustean bed, we should look for an approach to metaphysics or semantics that legitimizes them. Our philosophy should endorse the useful ways to think and talk.

Some readers have objected that while generally reliable heuristics are the most useful way to think, it does not follow that their outputs are all correct. This objection misunderstands my argument. I’ve been assessing how well individual mental representations help thinkers deal with their circumstances. In the cases we’ve examined, the knowledge-ascriptions my account predicts are also the only useful epistemic evaluations for those people to make. Thus I want to say those judgements are legitimate. Alternatively, one could posit a realm of objective facts about knowledge, only to find that many useful knowledge-ascriptions fall short by this metaphysical standard. That theoretical choice is optional, unmotivated, and shows a finger-wagging disdain for humanity that I don’t like. In the case of knowledge ascriptions, “thinking is for doing” conflicts with “thinking is for representing objective facts”; I conclude that the latter is not generally true.24

One might think that truth-relativism is flexible enough to legitimize all the useful ways we attribute knowledge. On this approach, all uses of the word “knows” have the same content. A particular knowledge-ascription can be true relative to one judge but false relative to another. An utterance or judgement is legitimate (in a crucial sense) iff it is

24 Pascal Boyer (2015) illustrates a similar psychology-first approach to metaphysics using the concept of ownership. Boyer argues that the concept evolved biologically (189–190). However, some efficient concepts result from linguistic and cultural evolution, such as the colour categories that vary between peoples (Regier, Kemp & Kay 2015, esp. 259). Useful but messy concepts need not have evolved biologically to be endorsed in our metaphysics.
true relative to the judge who makes it. I am not a truth-relativist. I prefer the view that all discourse about non-fundamental matters is ‘non-factual’ in a sense inspired by Kit Fine (2001). I develop this proposal elsewhere: my (2016) focuses on relativism, and my (MS) on benefits for making sense of vagueness. This is not the place to adjudicate between truth-relativism and other similarly bold frameworks. My point is that legitimizing our useful knowledge ascriptions directs us to these bold metaphysical options.

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25 My (2016: 972–3) argues that the point of contemporary truth-relativism is to ground claims about when assertions and retractions are ‘correct’ or ‘acceptable’ in such a sense. (One example is MacFarlane 2014: 103–111 & chapter 8.)

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