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## Principles of Interpretive Charity and the Semantics of Knowledge Attributions

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Abstract: Positions in the debate about the correct semantics of “S knows that p” are sometimes motivated in part by an appeal to interpretive charity. In particular, non-skeptical views hold that many utterances of the sentence “S knows that p” are true, and some of them think the fact that their views are able to respect this is a reason why their views are more charitable than skeptical invariantism. But little attention has been paid to why charity should be understood in this way and little effort spent justifying the notion that a charitable semantics is likely to be true. I distinguish two kinds of interpretive charity. One principle of charity is often appealed to in the literature. I introduce a second. I argue that while some positions better respect one principle of charity, the reverse is true of the other principle of charity. I conclude with some remarks about how to break this apparent tie.

### **I. Introduction: Interpretive Charity and Competing Semantics**

One occasionally finds claims of the form “X is a *charitable* interpretation of the data” in the literature about the semantics of knowledge attributions. In this paper, I inquire into what a charitable interpretation of an expression is. I do this by offering two different principles of charity and showing how competing views about the semantics of “S knows that p” fare with respect to these two principles.

It is assumed that being charitable in one’s interpretation of another’s words is a good thing. No one would accuse an opponent of offering a charitable interpretation with the intention

of maligning the opponent's claims. But what could be good about a theory that is charitable? One natural answer is that a charitable interpretation is, *ceteris paribus*, more likely to be true than an uncharitable interpretation. So understood, a principle of charity is a principle of theory selection. When considering alternative theories about the semantics of an expression, the charitable theory is preferable to its competitors because it is more likely to be true than its competitors. It is hard to imagine what other motivation there could be. Surely philosophers do not identify a thesis as charitable simply to say something nice about the thesis. So, we will assume that a principle of charity is a principle of theory selection because charitable theories are, *ceteris paribus*, more likely to be true.

Our topic is the semantics of knowledge attributions: sentences of the form "S knows that p." Since we are investigating the relevance of interpretive charity to selecting among competing theories of "S knows that p," we need to be clear on what those theories are. Though these positions are by now familiar to many, I will introduce them briefly. Epistemic contextualism claims sentences of the form "S knows that p" express different propositions in different contexts of utterance (Cohen 1986, 1988, 1998, DeRose 1992, 1995). The truth-value of a knowledge ascription in a context is determined in part by the context of the knowledge attribution. The relevant context is the context of the attributor, not the subject. So if S asserts "S knows that p," S's first-person knowledge attribution has its truth-value determined in part by S's context. If J asserts "S knows that p," the relevant context is J's.

Invariantism, in all its forms, is the denial of contextualism. Thus, according to invariantism, the proposition expressed by a knowledge attribution is fixed once 'S' and 'p' are fixed. A knowledge attribution expresses the same relation to a proposition in every context of

use. Different versions of invariantism emerge when accounts of “S knows that p” are offered. Under invariantism fall strict invariantism and impure invariantism (Fantl and McGrath 2009, Gerken 2011, Hawthorne 2004, Stanley 2005). Strict invariantism holds that the truth-value of a knowledge attribution depends only upon traditional epistemic factors like the subject believing the relevant proposition, having an adequate basis for belief in the proposition, and the proposition’s truth. Impure invariantism denies that only such traditional epistemic factors determine the truth-value of a knowledge attribution. Impure invariantists allow, most importantly, that how important it is to S that p is true can impact whether or not S knows that p while other factors are held fixed.

Moderate invariantists are those who hold a semantics for “S knows that p” which results in ordinary knowledge attributions often being true (Hawthorne, 2004).<sup>1</sup> Skeptical invariantists hold that “S knows that p” is very often false, perhaps even mostly or always. Since ‘moderate’ and ‘skeptical’ are labels describing how many knowledge attributions come out true on a given semantics for “S knows that p,” one could consistently hold to a moderate impure invariantism, or moderate strict invariantism, or skeptical impure invariantism, or skeptical strict invariantism, and so on.

These are not the only positions actively defended today. Others are epistemic relativism and epistemic contrastivism. According to Mark Richard, relativism grows out of contextualism (2004). Richard’s main argument is that one cannot make sense of how surface-contradictory

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<sup>1</sup> In this way of describing the view, what makes moderate invariantism ‘moderate’ is not its epistemic standards, but its result: lots of true knowledge attributions. (Hawthorne (2004) characterizes the position this way.) It is consistent with a view being ‘moderate’ invariantist that it accepts very high standards for knowledge, provided the standards are met regularly.

ascriptions of “X is F” can both be true unless the *property* of being an F is a relative property (cf. p. 232). For knowledge attributions, then, “S knows that p” and “S doesn’t know that p” can both be true only if *knowing that p*—that is, *knowledge*—is relative. Understood this way, epistemic relativism is disquoted epistemic contextualism. The world has to be a certain way for knowledge attributions to have the truth-values they have. Relativism says the world has to have relative epistemic properties for surface-contradictory knowledge attributions to both be true.

Like Richard’s relativism, contrastivism is defended in part by attempting to capitalize on the motivation for contextualism. Jonathan Schaffer, a defender of contrastivism, says “Contrastivism treats ‘knows’ as denoting a ternary relation with a slot for a contrast proposition” (2004, p. 73). Thus, contrastivism allows for the context-sensitivity of the truth-values of knowledge attributions, but unlike contextualism, which holds that the context-sensitivity is due to features of the context of the knowledge attributor, contrastivism holds that “S knows that p” makes reference to a contrast proposition *q*. So, the truth-value of “S knows that p” depends upon whether S knows that p *rather than q*. As an example, Schaffer points to the disagreement between the skeptic and Moore as to whether Moore knows he has hands. A way to allow that the skeptic truly asserts “Moore doesn’t know he has hands” while Moore truly asserts “I know I have hands” is to point to different contrast propositions: the skeptic is right that Moore doesn’t know he has hands *rather than that he is a handless brain-in-a-vat*, and Moore is right that he knows he has hands *rather than elbow-length arm stumps* (2004, p. 80).

I introduce all of these views for the sake of completeness. In much of what follows I will say little about contrastivism, relativism, or impure invariantism. It should be clear where insights those views offer impact what can or has to be said about the matter of interpretive

charity. But for the sake of my main argument, I will focus on strict moderate invariantism and contextualism on one side, and skeptical invariantism on the other. This choice does not treat these other views unfairly, for if the defenders of contrastivism and relativism are right, whatever can be said in favor of contextualism counts in favor of their views. Similar concerns allow me to largely ignore impure moderate invariantism (Hawthorne 2004, p. 157). So, when I say, “the truth-maximization principle of charity favors contextualism here,” relativists, contrastivists, and impure invariantists, by their lights, accrue that benefit as well. They accrue the benefit because all of those views allow that surface-contradictory knowledge attributions can be true in some circumstances. The choice to limit the theories under consideration is driven by my interest in exploring the support that can be claimed for a non-skeptical rather interpretation of knowledge attributions over a skeptical one. So, to keep this manageable, the debate here will focus mostly on contextualism and strict moderate invariantism versus skeptical invariantism.

## **II. One Kind of Interpretive Charity: Truth Maximization**

Donald Davidson’s ‘principle of charity’ was invoked as a methodological constraint on the interpretation of other speakers’ utterances (1973). Davidson argued that we must regard other speakers’ utterances as true if we are to understand what their words mean. He thought that only by doing this could the interpreter correctly attribute beliefs to the speaker.

Davidson’s motivation for the principle of charity was his project of radical interpretation in which an interpreter attempts to understand a language without any previous knowledge of the language. So, while semanticists of epistemology do not have the same motivation behind their use of a principle of charity as Davidson did, one version of the principle is, for all important purposes, the same. We can state that version as follows: when constructing a semantics for

‘knows’ (and its cognates, and perhaps other important epistemic terms like ‘rational’ or ‘justified’), one ought *ceteris paribus* to offer a semantics that makes a very high percentage of knowledge attributions come out true.

Evidence for the reliance on this version of a principle of charity is largely inexplicit, though it has been clearly called upon as a motivation for some views. In the quotes below, DeRose and Montminy, both contextualists, claim charity favors their view. Brown, a strict moderate invariantist, claims charity favors contextualism, and Williamson, another strict moderate invariantist, gestures toward considerations of charity favoring contextualism and impure (“sensitive”) invariantism.

But I think the reason that helps in supporting the claim that what one’s imagined speaker is saying is true is that it engages the general presumption that where speakers are not basing their claims on some false beliefs they have about underlying matters of fact, *how they naturally and appropriately describe a situation, especially by means of very common words, will be a true description.*<sup>2</sup>  
DeRose, 2005

One major advantage of [contextualism] is that it respects the context-sensitivity of our *intuitions about the truth values* of such claims. The (moderate or radical) sceptic’s knowledge denial is plausible, since it *seems correct to deny knowledge* to a subject who cannot eliminate possibilities of error; yet, in everyday contexts, *we readily attribute knowledge* to subjects who have acquired their beliefs on the basis of fallible evidence.  
Montminy, 2009

Contextualists offer a *charitable* understanding of intuitions [about the correctness of knowledge attributions], interpreting them *as reflecting the truth*

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<sup>2</sup> DeRose includes as a condition on a principle of charity that the knowledge attributions whose truth is to be assumed not be based on false beliefs about “underlying matters of fact.” While some sort of qualification like this is indeed necessary, it’s tricky to figure out how to state the qualification. However it is put, the principle should be understood as not granting the truth of knowledge attributions which are based on inference from a false premise (as in the stopped clock ‘Gettier’ case), but how to precisely state the qualification while avoiding triviality remains a challenge: one false belief a subject has might be *that I (the subject) know the proposition*, but surely the DeRose qualification shouldn’t say, “presume knowledge attributions are true, except when the subject believes he knows that p but his belief is false because he doesn’t know that p.”

*value* of the knowledge attributions and the appropriateness of the relevant assertions and reasoning.

Brown, 2005

The common basis of contextualism and sensitive invariantism comprises pairs of claims...which in effect endorse the dispositions of speakers in various contexts to assert or deny 'know' of various cases. Presumably, the endorsement rests on a methodological principle of charity, by which, very roughly, we should prefer to *interpret speakers as speaking and thinking truly* rather than falsely (*ceteris paribus*).

Williamson, 2005<sup>3</sup>

Identifying interpretive charity with preserving the truth-value of a high percentage of both positive and negative knowledge attributions are not usually stated as clearly as these. For the sake of argument I will suppose considerations of interpretive charity are a motivating factor behind defenses of contextualism and strict moderate invariantism, rather than the only one, or the most important one, or some such stronger claim.

Contextualism probably fares the best with respect to the principle of charity in its truth-maximization version. (Similar remarks apply to impure invariantism, contrastivism, and relativism.) It is easy to see why. Contextualism allows that all three of the following sentences are true, just not at the same time:

1. "I know I have hands."

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<sup>3</sup> Note that DeRose and Williamson identify charity with interpreting speakers as *speaking* truly while Brown and Montminy identify charity with regarding as true speakers' *intuitions* about the truth-values of knowledge attributions. Although they present the assumption of charity slightly differently, all four are pointing to the same principle. The familiar thought experiments in this debate feature both knowledge attributors and subjects of knowledge attributions—sometimes, as in the Bank Case, an individual is both attributor and subject. The truth-maximization principle of charity is assumed whether what we are asked to regard as true is what the attributor says (or thinks)—"I know that the bank will be open"—or the intuition that it is true that the attributor spoke (or thought) truly when he said "I know that the bank will be open." Stating the principle in terms of intuitions about cases is, I think, simply a less direct way of putting it. I thank an anonymous referee for prompting me to clarify how these quotations assume a single principle of charity.

2. "I do not know I am not a handless brain in a vat."
3. "I know I have hands only if I know I am not a handless brain in a vat."<sup>4</sup>

One way of offering a contextualist solution of the apparent inconsistency of these sentences is this: contextual shifts make (1) and (2) true in some contexts and false in others. Individually, each of (1) and (2), combined with (3), entails the falsity of the other. Speakers can say things like what the skeptical paradox says. So, that contextualism can make all three sentences true is a mark in its favor as far as this principle of charity is concerned.

Contextualism is in the nice position of not needing to maximize the truth of positive knowledge attributions over the truth of negative knowledge attributions, or vice versa. Contextualism can allow that surface-contradictory positive and negative knowledge ascriptions are *both* true most of the time. That is because positive and negative knowledge ascriptions are often compatible with each other.

Strict moderate invariantism fares worse than contextualism on this score. Many moderate invariantists hold that a positive knowledge attribution does not require for its truth that the subject of the attribution be in a position to eliminate all skeptical threats.<sup>5</sup> But speakers who satisfy moderate invariantist conditions for knowledge often deny knowing when doubts are raised, even though the elimination of the error possibilities raised in the doubts is not necessary for knowledge. The speaker in this position who denies knowing that p thus speaks falsely.

The currently-considered version of the principle of charity would regard that version of

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<sup>4</sup> This way of presenting the problem is due to Cohen (2005). I have added quotation marks to make it clear that the intuitive truth values of *sentences* are what generate the paradox, since by Cohen's own account there is no conflict at the level of *propositions*.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Rysiew (2001), Williamson (2005), Bach (2005), Black (2005), Brown (2006).

moderate invariantism as less charitable than contextualism because while contextualism allows that both positive and negative knowledge attributions are very often true, this kind of moderate invariantism holds that negative knowledge ascriptions are often false: speakers deny knowledge because they are, in a way, confused.<sup>6</sup> This version of moderate invariantism accepts that a smaller percentage of knowledge attributions are true than contextualism does, and is consequently less charitable by the truth-maximization principle.

No view fares worse with respect to the truth-maximization principle of charity than skeptical invariantism. What gives skeptical invariantism its name is that, according to it, ordinary knowledge ascriptions are generally false. So, it is *necessarily* the case that skeptical invariantism will be uncharitable in the truth-maximization sense: if charity requires making many knowledge ascriptions come out true, and skeptical invariantism makes them generally false, then skeptical invariantism is uncharitable.

The truth-maximization principle of charity claims that speakers should be interpreted in such a way as to make a high percentage of their claims come out true. It is unclear just how high is high enough to be charitable full-stop, but it should be clear that if one proposed semantics for a term in a language yields a higher ratio of true claims to false ones than an alternative semantics for the same term in the same language, then the former semantics is more truth-maximizingly charitable with respect to utterances using that term in that language. That is what it is for a proposed semantics for a term in a language to be comparatively more charitable than another.

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<sup>6</sup> Rysiew basically accepts the conclusion that knowledge-deniers in the sort of situation described above are confused (2001). The explanation of why they are confused is the focus of Rysiew's influential paper.

The scoreboard at the moment puts on top contextualism and the other views that allow for the contextual variability of the truth-values of knowledge attributions, followed by strict moderate invariantism, with skepticism necessarily far behind the others.

But is there cause for concern with the truth-maximization principle of charity? The most serious concern with the principle is its easy misapplication. The principle says *ceteris paribus*, one's semantic theory should be constructed so as to make a high percentage of knowledge attributions true. The principle offers only defeasible guidance. There are some defeating conditions. The use of exaggeration offers an example. In English, use of the expression 'a million' is more often than not exaggeration: "The drive here was a million miles," "I dropped a box of toothpicks and had to pick them all up. I swear there were a million of them!" and so on. If it really is the case that most uses of 'a million' are for the purpose of exaggeration, then applying the truth-maximization principle of charity to assertions involving that expression will lead us astray. The principle would have us presume that the correct semantics of 'a million' is the one that makes most assertions using 'a million' true. Were we do to so, say, by defending contextualism about 'a million', then we would understand the expression to *literally* mean, in some ordinary contexts, "an indeterminately or annoyingly large quantity," and in more precise contexts, "the number identical to 1,000 x 1,000."<sup>7</sup> That is clearly unacceptable. 'A million' means *1,000,000* in any use, which is what makes exaggerated speech *non-literal* speech.

Loose talk offers another example. Unger (1975) argued that we often make knowledge claims in a loose way. We make claims of the form "X is F" when it is merely the case that X is

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<sup>7</sup> Another option is to have the number expressed by 'a million' vary in accordance with the strictness of standards in a context of attribution, but it should be clear that this is just as problematic as the idea stated above.

close enough to being F for present purposes. The assertion is therefore false, but not problematically so, because it does not interfere with our practical or communicative purposes.

Davis (2006) offers a nice example of loose talk:

When the scoop comes up empty in the coffee jar, I yell to my wife, “The coffee is all gone.” When my son comes down for breakfast a few minutes later, he announces that he needs a few coffee grounds for his science project, and then asks, “Is the coffee really all gone?” I say with no embarrassment, “No, there may be enough for you.”

The speaker was trying to express that there was not enough coffee *to make a pot of coffee*.

What he literally and falsely asserted, however, was that there was no coffee *at all*. The claim that the coffee was *all* gone was loose speech. Applying the truth-maximizing principle of charity to loose uses of terms would result in semantic trouble. No one should want to defend the semantic theory that says “there is *no* coffee” is *literally* true when there is still *some* coffee.

That a principle of theory selection includes a *ceteris paribus* clause is surely insufficient to abandon the principle. The same holds here: the truth-maximization principle of charity has known defeating conditions, but that is insufficient to discard the principle. But the presence of such conditions does mean the principle must be applied with care. When it is possible that an expression is being used in a way that speakers of the language would recognize as false speech, independent arguments are needed to show that common use of a particular expression is not an instance of deliberate false speech. When such uncertainties are present, one cannot lean on the truth-maximizing principle of charity to select the true semantics.

This is particularly important in the case of knowledge attributions because skeptical epistemologists have argued that positive knowledge attributions are false and recognized as such by ordinary speakers—or at least, speakers are capable of becoming aware that positive

knowledge attributions are always or nearly always false. According to these skeptics, positive knowledge attributions are often exaggerations or loose ways of speaking (BonJour 2010, Butchvarov 1970, Unger 1975)<sup>8</sup>. So, the fact that a non-skeptical semantics makes more knowledge attributions true is therefore not decisively a mark in its favor: it may be that knowledge attributions are regularly used to express false propositions. As interpreters trying to figure out what “S knows that p” means, we have to take seriously the possibility that knowledge attributions are often false but used in a meaningful way.

The need to eliminate such possibilities means semanticists who succeed in showing that a proposed semantics for an expression is more charitable in the truth-maximization sense have not thereby shown that the more charitable semantics is more likely to be true than the less charitable one. A principle of charity is a methodological tool for theory selection. It helps the interpreter figure out how to approach a given expression in order to figure out what that expression means. The truth-maximization principle of charity says to take for granted that uses of the expression are true, all things being equal. Sometimes things are not equal. The truth-maximization principle of charity is useful for assigning initial plausibility to opposing theories only in the absence of information about how a particular expression might be used to make false claims. Once we reach the stage where we are considering data regarding how the expression in question is used to make false claims, the work of the principle of charity is done. Since the interpreter has to take into account how the expression is actually used, data concerning false

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<sup>8</sup> Some have discussed the availability of an exaggeration or loose talk error theory without endorsing it (Fumerton 2006, Hawthorne 2004). Davis defends a loose talk theory for some classes of knowledge attributions, but it is unclear whether he is an outright skeptical invariantist (2006).

uses is vitally important for deciding what the expression means.

Non-skeptical proposals for the semantics of “S knows that p” undoubtedly make more knowledge attributions true than skeptical invariantism, and therefore they are, in the truth-maximizing way, more charitable than skeptical invariantism. But are the former therefore more likely to be true than the latter? That depends on whether non-skeptical semanticists can successfully refute the skeptic’s arguments that knowledge attributions are often a kind of deliberate false speech and on how the different views fare with respect to the second version of the principle of charity. I will argue that skeptical invariantism has the upper hand when it comes to this other kind of charity.

### **III. Another Kind of Interpretive Charity: Linguistic Sensitivity**

Here is another principle of interpretive charity: one ought *ceteris parabus* to construct a semantics for ‘knows’ (and its cognates, and perhaps other important epistemic terms) that interprets speakers’ knowledge-attributing behavior in such a way that it regards speakers as sensitive to the contribution ‘knows’ (etc.) makes to the truth-conditions of a proposition using the term when the speaker understands all of the other terms in the sentence. Basically, but less precisely, the principle says we ought to try to interpret others’ verbal behavior so as to regard them as understanding the words they use.

Let us call this the linguistic sensitivity principle of charity. No one defends a position in the debate about knowledge attributions by explicit appeal to this principle of charity. But the principle is helpful for assessing these positions, so let’s introduce it. We sometimes apply a methodological principle of linguistic sensitivity and think of it as a kind of charity. There is a clear sense of ‘charity’ speakers use when they want to comment on how an expression should

be understood. To anticipate an example used later, consider the excited teenager’s exclamation, “Everyone will be at my birthday party!” A sarcastic friend responds, “You must not know what ‘everyone’ means, because there isn’t nearly enough room for seven billion people in your parents’ back yard!” Our excited teenager might very naturally say, “That wasn’t very *charitable*—you know I just meant I’m looking forward to all of my friends being in the same place.” Such a reply indicates that the speaker thinks a charitable hearer would understand that the original sentence was hyperbolic rather than attributing to the speaker ignorance of what ‘everyone’ means. This sense of ‘charity’ suggests the linguistic sensitivity principle of charity.

The burden of this section of the paper is to demonstrate the plausibility of this new principle of charity and show how it adjudicates between competing positions in the debate over the semantics of knowledge attributions. The motivation for this principle of charity should be clear enough. The basic idea is that it is charitable in the current sense to regard speakers as ‘knowing’ what their words mean, including the word ‘knows’ (etc.). We presuppose that speakers competent with a language are sensitive to the semantics and pragmatics of familiar terms in their language.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, I’m inclined to think competence with a language *just is* sensitivity to the semantics and pragmatics of familiar terms in that language. Putnam argued long ago that a group of language-users counts one of its members as semantically competent only if that speaker accepts as true certain sentences and rejects as false certain others (1975, p. 250).<sup>10</sup> Someone counts as “knowing the meaning” of ‘tiger’ only if that person accepts that

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<sup>9</sup> This should not be taken to imply that ordinary speakers can *explain* the difference between semantic and pragmatic content of utterances, just that they are sensitive to the difference.

<sup>10</sup> I have received the objection that semantic externalism is incompatible with the presumption of linguistic sensitivity. That is what motivates my use of Putnam here. Putnam defended the externalist thesis “meaning is

stereotypical tigers are striped (or accepts that “tigers are striped” is true). Someone would count as not “knowing the meaning” of ‘tiger’ if that person were to say, “That’s a tiger!” and be inclined to retract that claim if someone responded, “There are ants nearby.” That is because a speaker competent with ‘tiger’ is sensitive to what is and is not relevant to the correct use of ‘tiger,’ and “there are ants” is irrelevant to whether or not there are tigers.<sup>11</sup> The point is that we take for granted that competent speakers accept certain claims and reject certain others, and their tendencies in that regard reliably indicate semantic competence. Since ‘knows’ and “S knows that p” are familiar expressions in a language with which many speakers are generally semantically competent, the linguistic sensitivity principle of charity would have us interpret their uses of those expressions in such a way as to regard them as semantically competent with those expressions.

The linguistic sensitivity principle of charity easily handles false speech in the form of exaggeration and loose talk. The speaker who exaggerates, using ‘a million’ to convey “some indeterminately large quantity,” is open to challenge by an interlocutor asking, “You don’t really mean ‘a million’, right?” The speaker who understands ‘a million’ is in a position to recognize that the initial claim was false, and can readily respond with, “There were a lot of them,” or

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reference” and still required semantic competence in the form of what I am calling linguistic sensitivity. It is hard to imagine how communication would be possible if speakers were not sensitive to the correct behavior of terms familiar to them in the way described here.

As a general thesis, Putnam’s condition is not strictly necessary for semantic competence. It is possible for a person to be perfectly competent with a language but have bizarre beliefs about the world that are widely rejected by the speaker’s linguistic community. Some people think Elvis is still alive. They are semantically competent with all of the words used to express that belief even though their language community widely rejects “Elvis is alive.” Thanks to Richard Fumerton for discussion on this point.

<sup>11</sup> Semantically irrelevant, that is. It is a contingent fact that tigers live where there are ants. If this were not so, then ‘There are ants!’ could be taken to challenge ‘That’s a tiger.’ But that possible world is not ours.

“You know what I mean,” or a more precise specification of how many there were. That is because the speaker is sensitive to the fact that the expression ‘a million’ does *not* mean “some indeterminately large quantity”: the speaker was sensitive to that fact about ‘a million’ *prior* to making the false utterance, and that is why the speaker so quickly recognized that the interlocutor’s challenge was relevant to the initial claim (“There were a million,” or whatever). That the speaker is sensitive to the contribution ‘a million’ makes to the truth-conditions of a proposition of which it is a part explains this behavior: in other words, the hypothesis that the speaker is sensitive to the meaning of ‘a million’ predicts this behavior.

Similar remarks apply to loose talk. That the speaker in the coffee example understands what it would take for there to literally be no coffee predicts that, were he to falsely assert that there is no coffee while being simultaneously aware that, in fact, there is some coffee, he would retract or qualify his previous claim under certain conditions.

Neither of these explanations requires a speaker who understands an expression to have an exhaustive list of truth-conditions for the expression consciously before their minds while speaking. But when a speaker is sensitive to the meaning of an expression or term, the speaker will respond in certain predictable ways when the speaker understands all of the other terms in the utterance and is at least disposed to become aware that the utterance made is false because of the use of the term or expression in question.

Notice what happens when a person sensitive to the meaning of a term encounters an argument which challenges the person’s accepted definition of the term. Suppose D is an incorrect definition of X. A person might consciously believe that D is the correct definition of X. The person is often sensitive to the meaning of X in some way, even if, when asked, the

speaker would offer D. Sometimes, a convincing argument will lead a person who is sensitive to the meaning of a term to reject as incorrect a definition the person previously accepted. The ability to understand and sometimes admit counterexamples and counterarguments relevant to the definition of a term presupposes some kind of grasp of the meaning of the term. For example, there has been a little controversy over how widely philosophers prior to Gettier (1963) accepted the fallibly justified true belief analysis of knowledge. But it is uncontroversial that upon receipt of Gettier's paper, hardly anyone wanted to defend that account of knowledge. The fact that philosophers were so quick to reject the account suggests that they were primed to become aware that the fallibly justified true belief account is not the correct account of 'knowledge.' They were sensitive to the semantics of 'knowledge' beforehand.<sup>12</sup>

When a subject understands a term in a language, a set of subjunctive conditionals are true. These antecedents of these conditionals relate the subject, the term, and a scenario wherein the subject considers some state of affairs and whether it would be correctly described as an instance of that term. The conditionals describe the behavior of the subject under those conditions. They have the form, "If S were to consider whether x is F, then S would y." For example, "If Chisholm were to consider whether Smith truly-but-luckily believing 'the man with 10 coins in his pocket gets the job' is an instance of knowledge, then Chisholm would deny it." What makes these subjunctives true is that the subject has a disposition to accept as correct certain descriptions of hypothetical states of affairs, and to reject as incorrect certain descriptions

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<sup>12</sup> I have tried to state this in a way that is not overly cognitive. One need not presuppose that speakers have dispositional beliefs about definitions to accept this account. It is consistent with this account that one's understanding of a term amounts to no more than dispositions to say certain things in response to various stimuli (prior thoughts, others' remarks, etc.)

of others.<sup>13</sup> On the proposed account, these dispositions are what understanding the meanings of the terms in one's language consists.

If that, or something approximately like it, is correct, then a proposed semantics for 'knows' is charitable in the current sense to the degree that it accurately predicts that speakers will discourse as though they have the relevant dispositions: which, as suggested, will be manifested through verbal behavior in accordance with the subjunctive conditionals made true by the speaker's dispositions. When a semantic theory says 'skyscraper' excludes 'tree,' and a particular speaker is familiar with both trees and skyscrapers, then the semantic theory is charitable to the speaker when it anticipates that were the speaker to consider whether a skyscraper is correctly (literally) described by 'tree,' the speaker would deny it. The theory in question is charitable because it predicts that the speaker's verbal behavior will be that of someone who *understands* some important semantic boundaries of 'tree.'

When a term or expression is being used to assert something false, the speaker who makes the false assertion and understands the term will be open to correction: that speaker will have a disposition making true subjunctive conditionals describing the circumstances under which the speaker would deny that the term or expression is a correct description of the state of affairs in question. If a speaker who uses 'a million' to exaggerate understands what 'a million' means, then it will be true that if the speaker were challenged on that exaggerated use of 'a

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<sup>13</sup> It is a stretch to say that having a dispositional property is *sufficient* to make true subjunctive conditionals describing the behavior of some entity. A background condition could always fail to cooperate with the disposition. In that case, the entity would possess the dispositional property but that fact would fail to make true the subjunctive conditional(s) in question. I want to set that issue aside here. For discussion, see (Chisholm 1955, Lewis 1997). I am committed, though, to the idea that some analysis of these subjunctives in terms of dispositions is part of the correct analysis.

million’, the speaker would understand that the challenge is relevant to the truth of the proposition the utterance expressed, and then would retract the claim, or offer a concession of some sort.

Hopefully the concept of linguistic sensitivity is by now clear enough to apply the linguistic sensitivity principle of charity to the competing accounts of ‘knows.’ How does contextualism fare? The literature on the debate between contextualism and invariantism includes some discussion of ‘semantic blindness’. The phrase is due to John Hawthorne (2004), and basically suggests that if contextualism is true, speakers are mistaken in at least a few ways about the meaning of ‘knows.’<sup>14</sup> One important form of the charge, due to Schiffer (1996), is that if contextualism is true, speakers are often unaware that surface-contradictory knowledge attributions are not genuinely contradictory. The issue is motivated by a contextualist resolution of the skeptical paradox. The problem is that, if skepticism is true, speakers generally don’t recognize that skeptical claims denying knowledge are literally compatible with ordinary affirmations of knowledge, because they are made in different contexts, and so do not literally express contradictory propositions.

Whether or not Schiffer’s way of putting the objection is successful, or if DeRose is right

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<sup>14</sup> The issue of “semantic blindness” seems to me to cover a host of issues about which, if contextualism is true, speakers are severely mistaken. Too often, the different forms of ignorance required by contextualism are not kept apart, which might have something to do with why some philosophers think semantic blindness is so damning to contextualism (e.g. Schiffer 1996) and some think it isn’t problematic at all (DeRose 2006). I am trying to be more precise in this paper, which is why I am limiting the discussion above to a technical notion of linguistic sensitivity.

Abath (2012) has argued that whether or not semantic blindness is a problem for contextualism, what Abath calls “content unawareness” is. In short, if contextualism is true, people don’t know what contents their sentences convey. On my way of categorizing things, his content unawareness is a kind of semantic blindness.

that semantic blindness is shared by every proposal on the semantics of ‘knows,’<sup>15</sup> it should be clear enough that if contextualism is true, the fact that speakers do not generally respond in a way that contextualism predicts they should respond is a mark against contextualism as far as the linguistic sensitivity version of the principle of charity is concerned. If speakers understand ‘knows’ the contextualist way, then they *should* be disposed to respond to the raising of an error possibility by an interlocutor, whether an ordinary possibility or challenge (“Are you *sure* you parked the car in the North part of the lot and not the South?”), or a skeptical one (“Are you *sure* you’re not a car-less brain-in-a-vat?”), by pointing out that those challenges are generally not relevant to whether or not the original claim to knowledge was true. Of course, that is not how people respond.

In this paper, I do not want to enter the fray on which version of the semantic blindness objection to contextualism is the most likely to stick. Others have made such arguments, some of which have been conceded by contextualists as ways in which speakers are indeed ignorant of language.<sup>16</sup> Instead, I just want to indicate that if contextualism is true and anything like the foregoing account of language understanding is correct, speakers ought to reply to challenges to knowledge claims differently than they in fact do. Contextualism is uncharitable on this score because the contextualist explanation of a number of cases requires that speakers are unaware of

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<sup>15</sup> DeRose (2006) offers many arguments for the acceptability of contextualism in the light of Schiffer’s (1996), Hawthorne’s (2004), and Stanley’s (2005) objections. Responding to them all is outside the scope of this paper. But I will address the main theme of his paper: his argument seems to be that because “well-constructed” cases often elicit the intuition that speakers are not contradicting each other when they utter surface-contradictory knowledge attributions suggests that contextualism doesn’t uniquely have a problem of semantic blindness. That may be, but it leaves untouched that other explanations of the intuition are possible, and that contextualism is far less intuitively acceptable to most people than an contextualist interpretation of less controversially context-sensitive terms like ‘flat,’ as Cohen has noted (2004).

<sup>16</sup> See especially (Cohen 2004, DeRose 2006, Neta 2003).

the propositions their knowledge attributions express. By the current definition, that's linguistic insensitivity, and consequently uncharitable.

What about moderate invariantism? As with contextualism, moderate invariantism comes in many forms. Strict moderate invariantists argue that many knowledge denials made after the raising of error possibilities are false: that is, the subject in question often still knows the proposition that subject originally claimed to know, even when an error possibility has been raised which the subject cannot eliminate.<sup>17</sup> Insofar as that is the case, those views are as equally uncharitable as contextualism. Subjects generally retract or somehow qualify knowledge attributions when an error possibility has been raised that the subject cannot eliminate. Contextualists account for that in a counterintuitive way: by rendering the knowledge denial true, but compatible with the truth of the original claim. Moderate invariantists who claim the subject still knows the original proposition have to account for it by claiming that the subject is confused about what is and is not relevant to whether the original proposition is known. This kind of moderate invariantism predicts that subjects will have a disposition to respond to challenges to knowledge attributions by pointing out that the challenge is irrelevant to whether the proposition is known: *unless*, that is, the view holds that speakers are insensitive to the contribution 'knows' makes to the content of the knowledge attribution. It is because the speaker regards 'knows' as a correct description of the speaker's relation to the proposition *only if* the error possibility that has been raised can be ruled out by the subject that the speaker says the subject doesn't know. So, strict moderate invariantism predicts that speakers will have a disposition to respond to

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Rysiew (2001, 2007), Williamson (2005), Bach (2005), Black (2005), Brown (2006), Nagel (2008, 2010), Gerken (2011, 2012).

challenges in a way *contrary* to how people actually respond. That is uncharitable according to the linguistic sensitivity version of the principle of charity.

How about skeptical invariantism? If skeptical invariantism is correct and people are implicitly aware of the meaning of ‘knows,’ then we should expect just the behavior we in fact see when a knowledge claim is met by a challenge. The skeptic’s proposed explanation is that the concept of knowledge speakers possess requires eliminating any-and-all error possibilities that might be raised. If that is the standard of knowledge people accept, and speakers understand ‘knows’ to require that standard to be met, then the skeptical account predicts speakers will have a disposition to retract or somehow modify knowledge claims made when error possibilities are raised. And that *is* what we generally see. So, skeptical invariantism is more charitable in the linguistic sensitivity way than the other accounts considered here.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

It is taken for granted that any proposed analysis of knowledge—or, as we like to put it these days, proposed ‘semantics of “knows”’—will answer to the notion of knowledge that normal people actually have. The goal is not to replace the ordinary concept of knowledge with some alternative concept called by the same name, or to suggest or command that people speak in some novel way. It should be assumed, then, that a proposed account of ‘knows’ will predict that people use ‘knows’ in a way harmonious with what that account says ‘knows’ means.

Compare: it would be a struggle to defend an account of ‘cup’ wherein only tables are correctly described as ‘cups,’ and speakers are massively ignorant of that fact and therefore very resistant to accept tableism about ‘cup.’ What is defective about that account of ‘cup’ is that it clearly does not answer to how ‘cup’ is ordinarily used.

Given the way people actually speak, our two principles of charity impose contrary obligations upon us. On the truth-maximization principle of charity, the non-skeptical views predict that people use ‘knows’ in a way friendly to their accounts, and skepticism does not. But on the linguistic sensitivity principle, the non-skeptical views make predictions unfriendly to their own accounts, and skepticism comes out ahead.

It is at least a little tempting at this point to call a draw, and say that whichever way of being charitable you prefer will have its pros and cons, and that the choice is arbitrary: if you prefer having people be ‘knowledgeable’ about their own language, pick skepticism; if you prefer having people make true claims more often than not, pick one of the other views.

There is some reason to think respecting the linguistic sensitivity principle of charity should be preferred to respecting the truth-maximization one. We have already seen that expressions which are widely used to make false claims when the speaker is at least implicitly aware that the claim is false cause difficulty for applying the truth-maximization principle of charity. We encountered no similar problem for the linguistic sensitivity version of the principle.

On the other hand, one might think there is something defective about a principle of charity that favors a skeptical invariantist semantics. There are two things to say here. First, if that objection amounts to claiming that the linguistic sensitivity principle of charity is somehow defective because it is not the truth-maximization principle of charity, that is beside the point. We have already seen that the linguistic sensitivity principle of charity deserves the name ‘charity.’ Second, the prospect of a skeptical invariantist semantics respecting the linguistic sensitivity principle of charity rests upon an account of language understanding with the result I argued for above: that speakers are in a position to become aware of the falsity of their

knowledge attributions. If that is not the case—if speakers are semantically blind to the falsity of most knowledge attributions—then skeptical invariantism *does not* respect the linguistic sensitivity principle of charity better than other positions in the debate.

While some philosophers seem to regard semantic blindness as simply inevitable and therefore more-or-less acceptable, I think too much semantic blindness undermines the possibility of armchair philosophy. If semantic blindness is widespread and uncorrectable, most epistemologists are in very bad shape when it comes to analyzing ‘knows.’ Most of us have no lexicographical training in the empirical study of word use. *We* are the ordinary speakers who are confused about ‘knows’. How, then, can we accept that speakers are regularly confused about knowledge-talk and then go on to provide an account of it ourselves?

A traditional conception of philosophical analysis understands it to consist in entertaining hypothetical states of affairs and introspecting on whether one is inclined to predicate some term of philosophical interest to that state of affairs.<sup>18</sup> On this view, if I want to analyze knowledge, I run through some thought experiments, see where I am and am not inclined to say the cases are instances of ‘knowledge,’ and attempt to figure out what the cases of ‘knowledge’ have in common with each other that is not shared with the cases of non-‘knowledge.’ But all of that presupposes that I am competent with ‘knows.’ If I am not—if I am semantically blind with respect to ‘knows’—then I cannot use the traditional method.

One philosopher’s modus ponens is another’s modus tollens, as they say. One might accept pervasive semantic blindness, reject armchair philosophy, and reject the linguistic

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<sup>18</sup> I say more about this conception of analysis and use it to defend another sort of skeptical view in (Stoutenburg 2015).

sensitivity principle of charity. Or, one might reject pervasive semantic blindness, accept armchair philosophy, and accept the linguistic sensitivity principle of charity. But whichever way one goes, it is clear that armchair philosophers who accept widespread semantic blindness about terms of philosophical interest are in a metaphilosophically unstable position.

It should also be clear that there are no easy choices to make with respect to what we ought to consider a charitable semantics. There are complicated issues that have to be worked out whichever way one goes. As a result, one cannot simply claim to have a charitable semantics and just leave it at that. One must also clarify what one means by ‘charitable’ and be ready to own up to the additional commitments that follow from a choice of semantics.<sup>19</sup>

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