MUCH RECENT EPistemology investigates knowledge through the semantics of the word ‘know’. Contextualists, relativists, and various kinds of invariantist posit different kinds of rules for the truth of sentences containing the word ‘know’; and much of the dispute among these three parties concerns which rules best capture our actual use of the word ‘know’.

These parties share the presupposition that our use of the word ‘know’ will be best captured by some consistent semantics. I will argue that this presupposition is false. Our use of the word ‘know’ is best captured by a set of inference rules that I will call collectively the Knowledge Principles, and the Knowledge Principles are inconsistent.

This is a radical thesis; it will require an elaborate argument to show that it is better to admit that ‘know’ lacks consistent semantics than to reject one of the Knowledge Principles. However, the thesis is radical only at the theoretical level; it does not call for a radical revision of our practice of knowledge ascription. In particular, even if knowledge-talk is inconsistent, we need not and should not abandon it. The cases in which the inconsistency might lead to actual confusion are rare enough that knowledge-talk is an efficient way of communicating. In cases of actual confusion, consistent constructions are available to clarify what is meant, but it would be inefficient to abandon the word ‘know’ wholesale in favor of these constructions. The inconsistency of ‘know’ is mostly harmless.


2. My theory is to be contrasted with the eliminativism that MacFarlane describes as an alternative to contextualism, invariantism, and relativism: ‘We can argue that our practice in using ‘know’ is so confused and incoherent that knowledge-attributing sentences cannot be assigned definite truth conditions. Instead of doing semantics, we can advocate reform, perhaps through the introduction of new, unconfused terms of epistemic assessment’ (MacFarlane 2005, p. 204). I argue that our practice is confused, but not so confused that we need to abandon it.

MacFarlane (2005, p. 216) holds that eliminativism is a radical view that should not be adopted if there is a viable alternative, but my analysis is not radical at the level of ordinary practice. As I discuss in Section 7, it may in-
Furthermore, its harmlessness is no accident. The cases in which inconsistency comes to the fore will arise only when a knowledge ascription that was made in a conversation with one purpose is applied in a conversation with another sort of purpose. It is not mere accident that those cases are rare; their rarity is bound up with the role of knowledge ascriptions in our lives. Indeed, it is possible to assign effective truth conditions to most assertions involving ‘know’, depending on the kind of conversation in which the assertion is made. (As we will see, this assignment of truth conditions to individual assertions is different from the way a contextualist theory assigns truth conditions to assertions.) When it is natural to apply the Knowledge Principles in inconsistent ways, we are running up against the limits of the usefulness of our knowledge discourse. My inconsistency theory predicts that in these cases we will need to stop talking of knowledge tout court and clarify what is going on. This actually gives my theory an advantage over consistent semantics for knowledge, which declare that some tout court knowledge ascription is true in these circumstances; they are left with the problem of explaining why asserting the truth is unsatisfactory.

Still, to argue that ‘know’ is inconsistent, I will have to argue that it behaves as we would expect an inconsistent term to behave. The first step, in Section 1, is to enumerate the Knowledge Principles and argue that semantic competence with ‘know’ requires a disposition to accept inferences that conform to them. In Section 2, I provide a theory of inconsistent discourses adapted from Gupta (1999) and discuss how utterances in inconsistent discourses can have effective contents.

Given this general theory of inconsistent discourses, the next step is to establish that knowledge-talk behaves like an inconsistent discourse. Since English contains no uncontroversially inconsistent discourse, I will discuss a situation in which we would expect an inconsistent discourse to develop, and I will argue that our knowledge-talk is like the discourse that would develop in this situation. Accordingly, Section 3 presents a science fiction tale in which people naturally develop an inconsistent discourse about time. Section 4 cashes out the analogy with this discourse: I argue that, given the purposes of knowledge-talk, conditions are ripe for it to be inconsistent in the same way as the time-talk is in the science fiction scenario; I explain the effective contents of our knowledge ascriptions; and I explain why the inconsistency of the resulting theory is mostly harmless. Sections 5 and 6 contrast the inconsistency theory with its consistent rivals. I conclude in Section 7 with some broader methodological remarks.

1. The Knowledge Principles

The Knowledge Principles, I will argue, are deep if not constitutive principles about the way we use ‘know’. A speaker who is competent to use the word ‘know’ will be disposed to accept inferences in accordance with the Principles. These dispositions can be overridden, but insofar as you completely lack them, you are not using ‘know’ the way it is used in English.

Before I enumerate the Principles, I will say something more about their nature and how I will argue for them. About their nature, what do I mean when I say that semantic competence with ‘know’ requires a disposition to accept inferences in accordance with them? For not everyone actually will always accept these inferences, and not just because they lack semantic competence. So I will need to discuss when these dispositions may be overridden. About how to argue for them, I will need to show not only that there is a disposition to accept these inferences, but also that this disposition arises from semantic competence. So I will need to show that, in the absence of some factor overriding the disposition, failure to accept the inferences seems wrong semantically. This means looking at the things people might say if they

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3. This is a slight modification of Eklund’s test for whether a paradox exerts ‘pull’ (Eklund 2002): that one’s semantic competence disposes one to accept all the steps of the argument, even the untrue premises and invalid steps. As discussed above, I am committed to neither the truth nor the falsity of the Knowledge Principles tout court, and I focus on accepting the inferences made in accord with the Principles rather than the Principles themselves.
didn’t accept the inferences and showing that they sound faulty in the way that contradictions sound faulty, not just in the way that obvious falsehoods sound faulty.

That competent speakers will be disposed to accept inferences in accordance with the Knowledge Principles does not mean that they always will accept those inferences, even when they are urged to do so. For one thing, since the Principles are inconsistent, inferences in accordance with them can lead to contradictions. Yet a competent speaker will not accede to a contradiction even when pressed to infer it in accordance with the Principles.4 Philosophers who hold some particular theory of the semantics of ‘know’ will also reject one Principle or another, and will presumably demur from inferences in accord with that Principle; yet they are still semantically competent.5 For instance, one of the Principles is the Disquotational Principle, that an utterance of “S knows that p” is true iff S does know that p. Contextualists reject this, and an alert contextualist will refuse to infer in accordance with the Disquotational Principle without additional assurance that the disquotation works. However, these refusals to infer in accordance with a Principle do not mean that there is no disposition to infer in accordance with the Principle. The disposition may be overridden.

Just as a force can be counteracted by a greater force, a general disposition to accept an inference can be blocked by some factor that works against the conclusion or against the inference itself. This is clearest when the inference would lead to a contradiction with something previously inferred. The disposition to accept an inference can be blocked by a preexisting belief that the inference’s conclusion is false. (The conflict with the preexisting belief might also lead to a reevaluation of the old inferences.) As Eklund says, “Upon noting that your semantic intuitions lead you to accept an inconsistent corpus of statements, you can refuse to take these intuitions at face value, rejecting one or more of them as non-veridical, without thereby manifesting lack of semantic competence” (2002, pp. 233–4).

A theoretical commitment can also override a disposition to assent to an inference. Eklund discusses a diagnosis of the liar paradox on which the faulty premise is an assumption that disquotation holds for the liar sentences, and remarks that “even someone who accepts this diagnosis of the liar reasoning would have to agree it is extremely natural to take the disquotation schema to be valid” (2002, p. 259). It is not that those who accept this diagnosis lack the disposition to infer from “p is true” to p and vice versa; rather, the inference is blocked by their considered view that disquotation does not hold in the liar case. If disquotation simply had no appeal for someone who had not considered the liar paradox, that would be an indication that that person didn’t fully understand the meaning of ‘true.’ I will argue that something similar holds for the Knowledge Principles: though, for example, contextualists will reject disquotational inferences concerning ‘know’, that does not mean that they lack semantic competence or that their semantic competence does not dispose them to accept these inferences.6 It merely means that their considered view of the semantics of ‘know’ overrides that disposition. Someone who had no urge at all to disquote knowledge ascriptions would seem not to use ‘know’ the way we do.

If these dispositions arising from semantic competence can be overridden, how can we know that they are there at all? If semantic competence does dispose a speaker to accept inferences in accordance with a principle, then rejecting that principle should lead to deviant

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4. Here I differ from Sorensen, who argues (concerning vague terms) that “contradictions are inescapable because they issue from linguistic competence itself” (Sorensen 2001, p. 57). Sorensen holds that we are obliged to believe instances of sorites premises such as “If 500 seconds after noon is noonish, then 501 seconds after noon is noonish,” even though one such premise is false; I hold only that we must be disposed to accept inferences conforming to the Knowledge Principles, not that we must actually accept them.

5. Thanks to an anonymous referee for making this point.

6. Compare the arguments in Williamson (2007) that acceptance of modus ponens cannot be constitutive of understanding ‘if’, because some experts on the conditional reject modus ponens in special cases. (Williamson uses similar cases to argue that semantic competence can never require even a disposition to assent to certain sentences; I do not have the space to consider this argument here.)
utterances in the absence of a special context that would override the disposition. And because the disposition comes from semantic competence rather than general knowledge, the resulting utterances will be not just strange-sounding but akin to contradictions. They will sound not just obviously false but as though they do not make sense. Among all the statements that speakers who know how to use a word are disposed to accept, this test distinguishes those that are disposed to accept in virtue of their semantic competence.

For instance, most speakers who know how to use ‘and’ will accept “There have been black dogs, and there are white cats.” But though “It is not the case that there have been black dogs and that there are white cats” sounds obviously false, it still seems to make sense. We can say “Suppose that it is not the case that there have been black dogs and there are white cats.” By contrast, anyone who knows what ‘and’ means will be disposed to accept the inference from “There have been black dogs and there are white cats” to “There are white cats.” The sentence “There have been black dogs and there are white cats, but there aren’t any white cats” not only sounds odd but does not seem to make any sense. We cannot say “Suppose that there have been black dogs and there are white cats, but there aren’t any white cats”; it isn’t a coherent supposition. This sort of oddity indicates that the disposition to reject the sentence arises from semantic competence.

Schematically, I will be using the oddity of the form “C but not D” to show that we are disposed to assert to the inference from C to D. It may seem that I need to show that speakers will find it odd to hold C and to suspend belief concerning D. But all I need is to show that speakers will be disposed to assert to the inference when it is presented to them, and if “C but not D” strikes competent speakers as akin to a contradiction, then they will be disposed to actively affirm D when presented with the inference from C to D.

A last point before enumerating the Knowledge Principles. When I speak of inferences that we are disposed to accept in virtue of our semantic competence, many will be reminded of views such as Brandom’s, Peacocke’s, and Dummett’s, on which the meaning of terms is constituted by their role in certain inferences. These views are extremely controversial, not least because of their apparent incompatibility with truth-conditional semantics and the correspondence theory of truth. My account of inconsistency does fit well with inferentialist semantics and the idea that the inconsistent predicate does not correspond to anything in the world, but it may also be possible to reconcile it with a truth-conditional semantics. Sorensen (2001) and Eklund (2002) give similar accounts of vagueness while maintaining that vague sentences have truth conditions; Sorensen argues that vague predicates have unknowable boundaries (but that at every particular point, competent users of the predicates must deny that there is a boundary there), while Eklund argues that the semantic values for an inconsistent predicate should make its meaning-constitutive principles as nearly correct as possible. Indeed, for all I say, ‘know’ may have some truth-conditionality semantics that explains why competent speakers must be disposed to accept the inconsistent Knowledge Principles; so that the Principles would be derived from some more fundamental semantic competence.

7. Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this point, and for the example, which I have modified.

8. This oddity is also different from the oddity of Moorean sentences like “p but I don’t believe that p.” We would find it difficult to make sense of someone who asserts a Moorean sentence, but not to understand what the sentence itself is asserting. We can say “Suppose that p but I don’t believe that p.”

9. For the tension between inferentialism and use-theories on the one hand and truth-conditional semantics and the correspondence theory of truth on the other, see Dummett (1978, 1973, especially pp. 463 and passim); Brandom (1994, especially pp. 300ff.); and the appendix of (Williamson 2007), in particular the complaint that “most participants in the Dummett-inspired debates between realism and anti-realism have shown little interest in the success of truth-conditional semantics, judged as a branch of empirical linguistics” (pp. 379–380 of online MS). For more criticisms of inferentialist approaches, see elsewhere in Williamson (2007) and Jerry Fodor’s forceful criticisms, for instance, in Fodor and Lepore (1992) and Fodor (1998) (reviewing Peacocke 1992). This barely scratches the surface of the debate.

10. Though my approach to knowledge resembles Sorensen’s and Eklund’s approach to vagueness, I wish to remain neutral as to whether this is the right way to approach vagueness.
instead of themselves constituting the meaning of ‘know’. Here I will merely diagnose the inconsistency, without worrying about whether there can be an underlying truth-conditional semantics.

I will focus on evidential standards for knowledge-that ascriptions, particularly as they are connected with practical reasoning.11 These standards are merely one factor in our knowledge ascriptions. Even if we assume that a belief is true and non-Gettiered, it must meet a certain evidential standard to count as knowledge. The dispute among contextualists, relativists, and sensitive and insensitive invariantists concerns how the standard is set. Insensitive invariantists think there is only one standard; sensitive invariantists, contextualists, and relativists think the standard is determined by, respectively, the circumstances of the subject to whom knowledge is ascribed, the context in which knowledge is ascribed, and the context in which the knowledge ascription is assessed. Frequently the standard is taken to depend on the practical stakes for some relevant person; knowledge requires evidence that is good enough for that person to act on, given what’s at stake.12, 13 The Knowledge Principles capture the considerations that motivate each of these views, given our limited focus on evidential standards.14 As we will see, these considerations alone are enough to generate inconsistency.

The Knowledge Principles are:

Disquotational Principle. An utterance of “S knows that p” at time t is true iff at time t, S knows
[15]
truth-conditional that p.

Practical Environment Principle. S’s evidence concerning p is good enough for knowledge iff S’s evidence for p is good enough to make it epistemically rational for her to act on the assumption that p.16

Parity of Evidence Principle. If the evidence concerning p for S and T is the same, then S’s evidence is good enough for knowledge iff T’s is good enough for knowledge.17

The Knowledge Principles are inconsistent, given only the truism that different people can have different practical stakes. Take a Bank Case (DeRose 1992), in which Hannah and Leila each have the same, rather good evidence that the bank is open Saturday, but acting on a

11. In this way my account will differ from the account given in Schiffer (1996), which also concludes that our talk of knowledge is inconsistent. Schiffer generates a paradox from the impossibility of reconciling our ordinary ascriptions of perceptual knowledge with the demands that lead to skepticism, and argues that there is no ‘happy-face’ resolution to the paradox, on which we can safely reject one of the inconsistent claims. As I will argue in Section 5, my Knowledge Principles can yield inconsistencies based on practical considerations, as opposed to the academic considerations that lead to skepticism. Nevertheless, my account owes a debt to Schiffer’s.

12. See especially the practical environment view of knowledge put forth by Hawthorne (2004) and Stanley (2005). On contextualist views, the relevant person need not always be the person who makes the knowledge ascription; see DeRose (2005, p. 189) on this. Presumably a relativist can say the same thing; there are contexts of assessment in which the relevant person is not the assessor.

13. This practical orientation means that skeptical invariantism will not be a serious contender. Almost no one is ever in a situation in which rational action requires addressing skeptical doubts, and in our actual knowledge-talk we ascribe knowledge when skeptical doubts have not been addressed. This is one respect in which my account of knowledge differs from Schiffer’s “unhappy-face solution” to paradoxes of knowledge (Schiffer 1996); see note 11 above.
mistaken belief would harm Hannah much more than Leila. Hannah is in a high-stakes context, Leila in a low-stakes context. The Practical Environment Principle, which entails that Leila knows that the bank is open and Hannah does not (given that Leila’s belief confers no non-epistemic benefits), here generates an inconsistency with the Parity of Evidence Principle, which entails that Leila knows if and only if Hannah does. Later we will see how the Disquotational Principle can also cause trouble.

In Section 2, I will discuss how a term that is governed by inconsistent inference principles can still be of use. First, however, I am going to argue that the Principles do govern knowledge ascriptions, by showing that violating a principle leads to odd-sounding utterances.

Opponents of contextualism have often cited the oddity of violating the Disquotational Principle.18 To refuse to infer in accordance with the Disquotational Principle would be to accept “Jones spoke truly when she said, ‘Smith knows that $p$’” but to refuse assent to “Smith knew that $p$.” In the absence of some factor that could defeat a disposition to assent, such as independent reason to deny that Smith knew that $p$, most speakers will boggle at such a refusal. It simply sounds nonsensical to ascribe truth to the knowledge ascription but to deny that the subject actually had knowledge. Nor can we sensibly suppose that Smith had truly asserted “Jones knows that $p$” but that Jones didn’t know that $p$, unless primed by contextualism. This indicates that semantic competence with ‘know’ disposes us to accept inferences in accordance with the Disquotation Principle, unless there are theoretical considerations overriding the disposition. Contextualists do argue that there are situations in which it is unnatural to disquote; I will discuss these situations in Sections 5 and 6. But these will be situations in which some other factor overrides the disposition to disquote, for instance when the disquoted ascription has already been denied.

The Practical Environment Principle has also been used against contextualism (and could be cited against relativism as well). Hawthorne argues that, if contextualism were true, someone in a high-stakes situation could say to someone in a low-stakes situation, “You should rely on propositions that you don’t know to be true in your practical reasoning” (Hawthorne 2004, p. 88). If the low-stakes addressee’s evidence that $p$ is good enough for low stakes but not for high stakes, then she should rely on $p$ in her practical reasoning; but if the standards for knowledge are governed by the speaker’s stakes, the high-stakes speaker cannot truly say that the addressee knows that $p$. Yet it seems odd to say that the addressee should rely on what she does not know.

This requires some elaboration, because the Practical Environment Principle only concerns the epistemic rationality of relying on a premise or not relying on it. By this I mean that it concerns only whether the evidence in support of a proposition is good enough to make it rational to rely on this premise in practical reasoning. There may be other reasons not to rely on the proposition in practical reasoning. In the most obvious case, the proposition is not relevant to any decision you are making. It is irrelevant to anything you desire. In other cases there may be a practical reason not to rely on a proposition even though it is well supported and relevant to your decision. If you have learned that $p$ by overhearing a conversation you shouldn’t have, we might say that you should not rely on $p$ in your reasoning even though you know it. But it is for non-epistemic reasons that you should not rely on it. Your reasons for not relying on it have nothing to do with the strength of your evidence.

Most speakers will not distinguish explicitly between epistemic and non-epistemic reasons for relying on a belief. This means that we can’t directly show that the Practical Environment Principle is based on semantic competence by showing that people are disposed to infer from “Jones knows that $p$” to “Jones ought to rely on $p$ in practical reasoning, unless Jones has some non-epistemic reason not to do so.” What we can do is show that whenever someone fails to infer in accordance with the biconditional “Jones knows that $p$ iff Jones ought to rely on $p$ in practical reasoning,” there is some consideration in the offering.

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that has nothing to do with the strength of Jones’s evidence, and that in the absence of such considerations violations of the biconditional sound nonsensical. That will show a disposition to infer in accordance with the biconditional unless some non-epistemic factor bears on the use of the premise in practical reasoning.

When someone refuses to infer in accordance with the biconditional, she will be in one of the following four situations:

1. Assenting to “Jones knows that \( p \),” refusing assent to “Jones ought to rely on \( p \) in practical reasoning”;
2. Assenting to “Jones ought to rely on \( p \) in practical reasoning,” refusing assent to “Jones knows that \( p \)”;  
3. Assenting to “Jones does not know that \( p \),” refusing assent to “Jones ought not to rely on \( p \) in practical reasoning”;
4. Assenting to “Jones ought not to rely on \( p \) in practical reasoning,” refusing assent to “Jones does not know that \( p \).”

Consider positions (1) and (4). If someone says, “Jones knows that \( p \) but ought not to rely on it in practical reasoning,” it will be natural to ask “Why not?” The expected answer will be something non-epistemic like “Jones was told that \( p \) in confidence” or “Thinking about \( p \) would only be distracting.” What we will not expect is something like “Jones doesn’t have good enough evidence to rely on \( p \).” To use a concrete example, suppose someone says, “Hannah knows that the bank is open Saturday, but she ought not to count on it, because she needs more evidence.” This sounds strange. To use our supposition test, “Suppose that Hannah knows that the bank is open Saturday but she needs more evidence before she can count on it” sounds equally strange; this is an indication that the disposition to infer in accordance with the Practical Environment Principle comes from semantic competence.

For situations (2) and (3), there are certainly cases in which most people would say that Jones ought to rely on \( p \) in practical reasoning even though she does not know that \( p \). If Jones has extremely good evidence that \( p \), but her belief is unlucky false or Gettiered, then perhaps she should rely on \( p \) even though she does not know it. This does not contradict the Practical Environment Principle; as stated, the Principle concerns only whether Jones’s evidence is good enough for knowledge, which in this case it is. (To broaden the Knowledge Principles to cover whether Jones actually knows \( p \), we would need principles covering the factivity of knowledge and Gettier cases, if that were possible.)

Leaving these cases aside, there still may be situations in which we would affirm that Jones ought to reason as though \( p \) were true but deny that Jones knows that \( p \). This requires more than that Jones ought to follow reasoning that leads to the same action as if she were to rely on \( p \). If Jones is offered a lottery ticket at favorable odds, she should buy it, just as she would if she were to rely on a belief that the ticket would win. But it would be foolish to actually use such a belief as a premise in practical reasoning; the premise she uses should be about the odds that the ticket will win. A situation that better fits (2) or (3) is one in which exigencies force Jones to make some decision. If Jones is threatened by rising floodwaters and the only possible way off the island is a rickety bridge, we might say “Jones doesn’t know that the bridge is safe, but she ought to rely on the belief that it is; she has to get off the island, and worrying about the bridge will only slow her down.” But this essentially depends on the distracting effects of less than whole-hearted belief in the safety of the bridge. If the belief in the safety of the bridge weren’t going to help Jones make it across, then the case would be like the lottery case: it would be wise for Jones to cross the bridge because the possibility that the bridge is unsafe is better than the certainty that the floodwaters are rising, but the proper practical premise would be an assessment of the odds that the bridge was safe rather than outright belief in its safety. This is a non-epistemic factor because the strength of Jones’s evidence that the bridge is safe does not affect how full belief in its safety helps her cross it. And if someone says that Jones ought

19. See note 14 above.
to rely on the bridge’s safety even though she does not know that it is safe, we will expect either a non-epistemic explanation like this or an explanation of why Jones should rely on an assessment of the odds that the bridge is safe.\(^\text{20}\)

The Bank Cases that support variation in standards for knowledge also illuminate competent speakers’ disposition to follow the Practical Environment Principle. When the cases are presented separately, we judge it natural and correct for Leila to say “I know that the bank is open” and for Hannah to say “I don’t know that the bank is open”; if we did not, these cases would not support variation in standards at all. (If they are to illuminate our dispositions, the Leila and Hannah cases must be presented separately. Otherwise the contrast might override our disposition to infer in accordance with the Practical Environment Principle. See the Parity of Evidence Principle, below.) It would be a very odd speaker who, presented with a Bank Case in isolation, would agree to the speaker’s knowledge ascription but refuse to make the knowledge ascription herself, unless there were some other factor making her reluctant, such as an awareness of contextualist theories or the factors that motivate them.\(^\text{21}\) So speakers will be disposed to conform their own knowledge ascriptions to the subjects’ stakes.\(^\text{22}\)

Finally, the Practical Environment Principle is the one that keeps our knowledge-talk from being purely academic. As Hawthorne and Stanley emphasize, the idea is that the concept of knowledge should have some application to practical reasoning and evaluating someone’s practical rationality. We wouldn’t have much everyday use for a concept of knowledge if it couldn’t be so applied. Hence our disposition to link knowledge ascriptions to the knower’s stakes.

The Parity of Evidence Principle can be used against sensitive invariantism. Thus, MacFarlane argues, “[W]e do not say things like… ‘John knows that he won’t be able to afford health insurance, but if he were discussing the possibility that he might win the lottery, he would not know this’” (2005, p. 202). The problem with such statements is that John has the same evidence whether or not he is discussing the possibility that he might win the lottery, and it is odd to say that his discussion changes his knowledge without changing his evidence.\(^\text{23}\)

Someone who is not disposed to conform to the Principle will have to acknowledge cases in which someone could gain or lose knowledge while their evidence and belief remained unchanged. It seems nonsensical to say, “Suppose that Hannah and Leila both believe that the bank is open, and both have exactly the same evidence concerning whether the bank is open, but Leila knows that the bank is open and Hannah does not.” It will not be clear exactly what we are being asked to suppose, unless the speaker brings up the sort of practical considerations at issue in the Bank Case, or the hearer is already predisposed to consider them. But in that case we have, via the Practical Environment Principle, the sort of factor that can override a disposition to infer in accordance with the Parity of Evidence Principle.

We have evidence, then, that speakers who are competent to use ‘know’ as we ordinarily do are disposed to infer in accord with the Knowledge Principles, and that they are so disposed in virtue of their semantic competence; for statements that flout the Principles seem nonsensical, and we cannot even suppose that they are true. Yet the Principles are inconsistent. In the next section, I will sketch a theory of

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20. Thanks to an anonymous referee for comments that helped improve the discussion of non-epistemic factors.

21. This can also be seen as an application of the Disquotation Principle.

22. A competent speaker might be reluctant to say ‘Leila knows’ because the presentation of the Bank Case makes salient the possibility that the bank has changed its hours, but then she will also be reluctant to agree that Leila speaks truly when she says ‘I know that the bank is open.’ The salience of a counterpossibility may override a disposition to ascribe knowledge. Since this essay focuses on the effects of practical stakes on knowledge-talk, I will bracket the effects of salient counterpossibilities; a broader approach might include a principle governing when salient counterpossibilities dispose us to ascribe ignorance.

23. Here I am rejecting Williamson’s view that one’s evidence just is one’s knowledge (Williamson 2000, chapter 9). Even if we accepted that view, we might be able to reformulate the Parity of Evidence Principle in terms of another evidence-like notion.
how such inconsistent discourses might work, based on some cases in which we might expect inconsistent discourses to arise.

2. Inconsistent Discourses and Frames

My account of inconsistent discourses is adapted from Anil Gupta's theory of discourses that are founded on misconceptions (Gupta 1999). On Gupta’s account, assertions in such discourses may lack absolute content, but they can have an effective content, which is determined not only by the utterance’s meaning and its context but also by what Gupta calls its frame. The frame determines which inference principles of the discourse are brought to bear on a particular utterance in the discourse.  

Gupta gives the example of how ‘up’ might be used by a community that thinks that ‘up’ is a privileged direction in space. This community has two basic rules governing when one object may be asserted to be up above another. The perceptual criterion is that “a is up above b” can be properly asserted “in certain perceptually distinguishable situations,” like those in which we ourselves would assert it; the inferential criterion is that “a is up above b” can be properly asserted when it is inferred from “c is up above d” and “the direction of the ray dc is the same as that of the ray ba” (Gupta 1999, p. 16). Similarly, “a is not up above b” can be inferred from “c is up above d” and “the ray ab is not parallel to the ray cd.” This is a discourse we can easily imagine taking root among people who have not considered the possibility of a curved earth, but it amounts to more than a mere widespread belief that the world is flat. The principles about the use of ‘up’ constitute part of the meaning of the word. If someone were to say something like “The ray ab is parallel to the ray cd, but b is above a and d is not above c,” it would strike members of this community as not just obviously false but nonsensical. Nevertheless, this community will be able to get along reasonably well even though their ‘up’ talk is based on a misconception. Directives such as “fix the lamp above the stove” will

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serve their purpose anywhere on the globe. We may even imagine that they have a relatively successful practice of astronomy in which the inferential criterion is used more often than the perceptual one (Gupta 1999, p. 22). Their misconception about ‘up’ need not lead to total confusion.

Note also that their ‘up’ statements will be assessable as effectively true or false. “The lamp is above the stove” is effectively true if the perceptual criterion is satisfied. Accordingly Gupta distinguishes absolute and effective content: ‘Absolute content captures what an act of assertion is committed to; effective content captures the content that is in play’ (1999, p. 30). If a term is governed by incompatible inference principles, and if someone who utters a sentence is committed to any inference that her semantic competence disposes her to make, then anyone who utters a sentence in the discourse is committed to a contradiction. So the assertion’s absolute content is such that the assertion is false no matter how the world is (at least, given that the world is not flat). Nevertheless, it can have an effective content, which allows us (given the way the world is) to evaluate the assertion’s effective truth-value. The effective content is determined by the meaning of the terms in the sentence, the context in which the sentence is asserted, and furthermore a frame distinct from the context.

The frame is determined by the assertion’s role in a successful practice; it is less local than the specific context of utterance, and according to Gupta it supplies “information about normal or standard uses of sentences — information that is not localized to any speech situation but is spread across uses of language” (1999, p. 31). The best way to view the frame is as determining which inference rules are in fact applied to the assertion in the relevant practice. A typical utterance of

24. As discussed in Section 1, this account may be adaptable to other treatments of inconsistency, such as Eklund’s and Sorensen’s.

25. Gupta’s talk of uses of sentences may make it seem as though frames apply to sentence-types, so that, for instance, the effective content of any utterance of “The lamp is up above the stove” would be determined by the perceptual criterion. Gupta (personal correspondence) has confirmed, however, that frames apply to particular utterances rather than to sentence-types. As we will see, “S knows that p” can be uttered as part of different practices, and accordingly different frames.
The lamp is above the stove” is made in a setting in which it is natural to apply the perceptual criterion to it and extremely unnatural to apply the inferential criterion (at least over a great distance); perhaps in this community’s astronomy, it is natural to apply the inferential criterion and not the perceptual one. Hence the effective content of “The lamp is up above the stove” will be determined by the perceptual criterion of application: the ray from the center of the earth through the stove passes through the lamp (more or less). The effective content of “Celestial body A is up above celestial body B” will be that the ray from B through A is parallel to other astronomical rays that are said to be upward (or what Gupta calls the Standard Up). Since only some of the rules apply within each practice, these practices and their associated frames keep the community from (much) confusion and allow effective contents to be assigned to (most) utterances.

My idea here is that if someone thought of applying a rule that is not in the current utterance’s frame, it would not be seen as illegitimate; but in practice rules outside the frame simply are not applied. Gupta (1999, p. 28) gives the example of a repairman who, told to fix the lamp above the stove, travels a third of the way around the world to measure ‘up’ and figures out which ray from the stove is parallel to that ‘up’, even though the lamp he finds is not above the stove by the perceptual criterion. The point is not that the repairman made a mistake in finding ‘up’.26 He has done something impossibly eccentric, irrespective of any possibility of error.27 But among Gupta’s people, the proper reaction would be, “Good Lord! He’s shown that that lamp is above the stove, too!” (Or, much more likely, “He must’ve made some mistake in figuring out the parallel to the faraway ‘up’, because we can see that this lamp isn’t above the stove.”) Competent speakers would still be disposed to assert to inferences drawn according to rules outside the frame, if they are made; they are just too odd to make.

Frames differ from contexts of utterance in several important ways. First, as Gupta emphasizes, frames are less local than contexts. The different utterances in a single conversation are made in different contexts, differentiated for example by who is speaking; in general they will all be made in the same frame. Second, as Gupta also emphasizes, context can figure in the rules of language but frame cannot. If we could precisely formulate rules governing the meaning of “She is a philosopher,” they would surely advert explicitly to the context of utterance. By contrast, the community’s rules for ‘up’ comprise only the perceptual criterion and the inferential criterion, neither of which advert to the frame.28 Consequently, statements involving frame-dependent elements can express complete propositional attitudes, while statements involving context-dependent elements cannot. “Frank believes that she is a philosopher” ascribes a complete propositional attitude to Frank only insofar as the context of the belief ascription supplies a denotatum for ‘she’. To understand what he is thinking, we must interpret him as thinking of a certain woman. In contrast, “Frank believes that the lamp is up above the stove” ascribes a complete propositional attitude to Frank given the denotata of ‘the lamp’ and ‘the stove’, even without

26. Gupta (persona correspondence) has confirmed that on his view there is an important sense in which the repairman’s inferences are legitimate, though there may also be another sense of legitimacy on which legitimate inferences are constrained by effective content. The latter sense will not be important for us here, as we are concerned with what inferences will actually be recognized as legitimate within the inconsistent discourse.

27. As Gupta says, “More eccentric than if at a dinner party a guest should pull out a microscope to examine the contents of her plate before declaring that the host had served peas. Deep errors in our botanical theories might be revealed by this chance examination, but a dinner party is not the time and place to explore the possibility” (Gupta 1999, p. 39 n. 16).

28. Since no one in the community knows that ‘up’ is not a direction in space, speakers would have to be semantically blind (see Hawthorne 2004, pp. 107ff., and Schiffer 1996) to any rules adverting to the frame. This point holds in general for inconsistent discourses; naive speakers will not know they are inconsistent, and so would have to be blind to any rules adverting to the frames that keep the inconsistency under control.

I will return to the question of semantic blindness at the end of Section 5, in response to DeRose’s argument (DeRose 2006) that a certain degree of semantic blindness is inevitable. There I argue that semantic blindness seems inevitable in cases in which the Knowledge Principles are brought into conflict, so that the principles that in fact govern knowledge-talk cannot be simultaneously upheld.
a frame. To understand what Frank is thinking, we need not interpret him as thinking of a certain sense of ‘up’; Frank has just one concept of ‘up’.

We can also illustrate the difference between frames and contexts by contrasting illegitimate inferences with inferences that are legitimate but not carried out in practice. An inference that relevantly equivocates between contexts is recognized as illegitimate. “Big things are bigger than small things” is arguably true in every context, and “Alice’s apartment is small” and “Alice’s cat is big” are true in appropriate contexts.29 Yet no one would be disposed to infer that Alice’s cat is bigger than Alice’s apartment. “The cat’s not big compared to an apartment,” we might say. In contrast, inferences outside the frame will still be recognized as legitimate if they are made. In the frame in which the repairman asserts “The lamp is up above the stove,” only the perceptual criterion is in practice used to draw inferences from the assertion. It would be odd to say, “This means that the ray from the stove to the lamp is parallel to the ray from the stove in my West Coast mansion to the lamp above it,” but people would be disposed to accept it. The reply “We don’t mean up in that sense” will not be available.30

To apply Gupta’s analysis to knowledge: If knowledge-talk is governed by the inconsistent Knowledge Principles, then knowledge ascriptions can still have effective contents so long as they are in appropriate frames. These frames arise from workable practices that determine that in certain situations we only apply certain of the Knowledge Principles, and so do not run into an inconsistency. Given how common knowledge-talk is, and how rarely it leads to trouble, these practices must be widespread and robust. To account for the general smooth operation of knowledge-talk, we must locate most knowledge ascriptions within some frame, and it must be rare to switch between frames in a way that generates contradictions.

In Section 4, I will present an account of how these frames work. Briefly, my suggestion is that a knowledge ascription’s frame depends on the purpose of the conversation in which it was made. Often, when “S knows/doesn’t know that p” is said, all that matters is whether S has a true belief that p (in fact, often the truth of p is presupposed and the question is whether S believes that p). Other times, the purpose is to say how well justified S is, in order to determine whether S would be a good source of information given some concern the participants in the conversation have. In other cases the purpose is to assess whether S is or would be rational to act on p. Each of these purposes limits the inferences that people will actually make, even if they would be disposed (in the absence of countervailing factors) to accept any inference in accordance with the Knowledge Principles that they were actually presented with. So long as an ascription that is made with one purpose is not reused in a conversation with another purpose, knowledge-talk will stay out of trouble. The effective content of a knowledge ascription in one of these frames will be that S’s belief meets the standard determined by the purpose of the ascription.

Before I set out this picture in more detail, I will consider a model for this inconsistent knowledge-talk. This model is a world whose inhabitants have no pressing reason to develop the concept of time zones. In such a world, I will argue, we should expect time-talk to follow an inconsistent set of principles much like the Knowledge Principles. These time ascriptions will have frames corresponding to their purposes, much as knowledge ascriptions have frames corresponding to their purposes; the effective content of the time ascription will depend on whether it is meant to say how things are with someone who is being discussed or how things are with one of the conversational participants. Establishing this model is necessary to show that we should take the semantics of knowledge to be governed by the inconsistent Knowledge Principles rather than going to great lengths to find some consistent semantics. If an inconsistent discourse develops naturally

29. In fact, these utterances tend to create the appropriate contexts. When apartments are being discussed, the context is such that something counts as big if it is big compared to an apartment or dwelling; when cats are being discussed, the context is such that something counts as big if it is big compared to a cat or pet. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for a correction here.)

30. Thanks to Kevin Scharp for discussion of the points in this and the preceding paragraphs.
in the model, and the model is a good model for our knowledge-talk (as I will argue in Section 4), then we should expect our knowledge-talk to be inconsistent.31

3. Carambolia

The world I will describe, Carambolia, is so called because of its shape: It is shaped somewhat like a star fruit (fruit of the Carambola tree), spanned from north to south by high mountain ranges.

The mountains are hard but not impossible to cross, so people live in the valleys between them and usually stick to their own valley. People far apart within one valley frequently communicate by telephone and FM radio, but talk between valleys is only carried out by a few

31. Developing the model also may help defuse another argument: that any philosophical puzzle could be dissolved by declaring that one of the predicates involved is inconsistent, but that this solution is too general. (Stanley [2005, pp. 155–156] has made similar criticisms of contextualist approaches to philosophical problems.) The inconsistency theory must show, not only that a predicate involved in a puzzle can be seen as governed by inconsistent principles, but that there is some reason to think that it is governed by those principles. We can provide such a reason by constructing a model in which another predicate clearly would be governed by inconsistent principles and showing that this is a good model for the puzzle predicate. Presumably this will not be possible for every philosophical puzzle. Thanks to Matthew McGrath here.

hobbyists using shortwave radios. (We shall suppose that these hobbyists interact very casually, never making appointments to be on the air at the same time; if they tried to make such appointments, they would quickly discover that their time-talk was inadequate for these purposes.) As with us, time measurements keep track of how far the day has progressed, so that the sun is overhead roughly at noon. All the clocks in a single valley are set to the same time, perhaps by a centralized radio broadcast; the valleys are narrow enough so that the sun is roughly overhead everywhere in the valley when the clocks in the valley read noon. Clocks are too big to carry across the mountains. On rare journeys from one valley to the next, travelers lose track of time in the mountains and ask the next valley’s inhabitants the time.

I stipulate that Carambian time-talk is governed by three Carambolian Time Principles, analogous to the three main Knowledge Principles. Corresponding to the Practical Environment Principle, which ensures that knowledge has practical application for the subject, we have a principle ensuring that time ascriptions describe the way things are for the subject of the ascription:

Chronological Environment Principle. The statement “S Fs/Fed/will F at noon” is true iff S Fs/Fed/will F more or less when the sun is directly over S’s head, correcting for latitude. Other time-ascriptions are determined by dividing the period from noon to noon into twenty-four hours.

“It is n o’clock” is treated as though the speaker is the implicit subject S. Corresponding to the Parity of Evidence Principle, which says that the evidence that suffices for knowledge for one person suffices for knowledge for another, we have a principle assuring that the time that counts as noon for one person counts as noon for another:

Simultaneity Principle. If S and T were to say “It is n o’clock” simultaneously, then S’s statement would be true iff T’s was.32

32. Bracketing questions of tolerance, according to which “It is three o’clock” uttered at 3:04 might be true by one standard but not by another.
The Disquotation Principle is as before:

Disquotation Principle. An utterance of “It is n o’clock” is true iff at the time of the utterance it is n o’clock.

The Chronological Environment and Simultaneity Principles lead to inconsistency if applied to people in different valleys, as the Practical Environment and Parity of Evidence Principles lead to inconsistency when applied to people with different practical stakes.

Another stipulation: The Carambolian language has no resources for localizing time ascriptions. “It’s four twenty-three here” sounds as odd to a Carambolian as “It’s four twenty-three at this velocity” sounds to us.

Given the way I have described Carambolia, it would be perfectly natural for Carambolians to talk about time in this way. And this time-talk will be stable; it will rarely lead them into trouble. To begin with, for the vast majority of Carambolian utterances, the speaker, audience, and subject are all in the same valley. These will be the time ascriptions with the most practical value. If Alice says to Sarah, “Janet will eat lunch at noon,” the effective content is that Janet will eat lunch when the sun is overhead in the valley all three inhabit. If they all want to meet for lunch, this assertion will be a useful guide.

Even when the speaker, subject, and audience are all in different valleys, trouble will be rare. So long as the conversation sticks to one purpose, the time-talk can be assigned an appropriate frame. Suppose that Alice and Kim in their separate valleys are using the shortwave to discuss Natasha in yet another valley. If the conversation concerns Natasha’s habits and lifestyle, then Alice’s assertion “Natasha woke up at 6 AM” will serve as the basis for inferences based on the Chronological Environment Principle, so Kim can infer something about where the sun is in relation to Natasha when Natasha wakes. Kim will be unlikely to use the Simultaneity Principle to infer that she or Alice could truthfully say “It is 6 AM” when Natasha wakes, because the conversation isn’t about them. In a conversation about Alice, different inferences will be natural. Suppose that Alice is narrating her day, describing how early she awoke and whom she talked to on the shortwave throughout the day; she talked to Natasha just after Natasha awoke. Alice says, “Natasha woke up at 6 AM.” The natural inferences for Kim to draw are (by the Simultaneity Principle) that Alice could also truly say “It is 6 AM” when Natasha awoke, and (by the Chronological Environment Principle) that when Natasha awoke the sun was at a 90-degree angle from Alice’s zenith. It is not natural for her to apply the Chronological Environment Principle to infer that Natasha is an early riser, because the conversation is not about Natasha. The natural inferences will be restricted similarly if the conversation is about Kim.

When an inter-valley conversation sticks to the concerns of one particular person, the effective content of an assertion of “It is n o’clock AM” in the conversation is that the sun is at an angle of (180 minus 15n) degrees from that person’s zenith. Even when a conversation switches to the concerns of another person, no inconsistency or misleading inferences will arise until assertions made within one frame are used as premises for inferences in another frame. Take the following dialogue:

Carambolian Time-Shift

[1] Kim: Has Natasha been sleeping late?

[2] Alice: She woke up at ten this morning. She told me so; she turned on the time broadcast first thing in the morning.

[3] Kim: Have you been waking up early yourself?


[5] Kim: So you woke up before Natasha. You must have been awake when Natasha tried to raise you on the shortwave.

[6] Alice: No, when Natasha tried to raise me I was still asleep.

[7] Kim: But you just said that you woke up at eight and Natasha woke up at ten! Isn’t eight o’clock before ten?
Alice’s utterances [2] and [4] are meant to illuminate Natasha’s and Alice’s habits, respectively, so they are in different frames. Until the frames are broken, the effective content of [2] is that Natasha awoke when the sun was 30 degrees from her zenith, and the effective content of [4] is that Alice awoke when the sun was 60 degrees from her zenith.

With [5] and [7], however, Kim invokes the Simultaneity Principle to infer from [2] to something about how things are with Alice. If Alice could truly say “It is eight o’clock” when she woke up, then Natasha could have truly said “It is eight o’clock” at the same time. Applying the Simultaneity Principle to assertions made in different frames leads to what I will call an aporia, in that none of Alice’s available responses is satisfactory:

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Disclaimer Alice: I didn’t say Natasha woke up at ten.
Confession Alice: I must have been mistaken about when Natasha woke up.
Positive Claim Alice: Natasha woke up at ten, and I woke up at eight, but Natasha woke up before I did.
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Disclaimer violates the Disquotational Principle. It will be completely incomprehensible unless Kim is familiar with contextualist theories of time ascription. Positive Claim sounds just wrong about the way time works; ten isn’t before eight. It violates either the Simultaneity Principle or basic facts about the number line. Most likely, if Alice and Kim are not aware of the inconsistencies in their time-talk, they will opt for Confession. But it seems that Alice did not make a mistake when she said that Natasha woke up at ten; her assertion was not based on any

33. In explaining frames, I argued that outside-the-frame inferences are legitimate but unnatural. In this conversation Kim’s use of the Simultaneity Principle is natural. That, however, is because no single frame can be assigned to this entire conversation. Recall that frames are associated with successful practices that employ the inconsistent discourse. This conversation could not be part of any successful practice. The point is that, given Carambolian life as I have described it, such conversations will be extremely rare.

The Inconsistency of Knowledge Ascriptions

false beliefs, unless we count the belief that Carambolian time-talk is consistent. And Confession leads to further pernicious consequences. Alice and Kim seem likely to conclude that Natasha was lying or mistaken about how high in the sky the sun was when she awoke.

The different standards for knowledge, I will argue, are analogous to the different valleys of Carambola. Carambolian time-talk can develop the way it has only because most conversation takes place within a single valley, and inter-valley conversations generally do not use statements about people in one valley as the basis for inferences about people in another. In our knowledge-talk, the speaker, hearer, and subject of the discussion will usually all be in a practical environment that constrains them to the same evidential standard. When they are not, the conversation usually sticks to a single purpose in a way that prevents confusion from arising. But when a conversation switches from one purpose to another, an aporia can result, in which inferences that we are disposed to accept lead to a contradiction.

4. How Knowledge-Talk Works

We must ask, then: What are the purposes of knowledge ascriptions, what evidential standards are brought into play by these knowledge ascriptions, what are the practical environments of the participants, and what inferences are typically drawn from the ascriptions?

The purpose of many knowledge ascriptions is simply to establish whether the subject believes some truth, without regard for justification. If John Dillinger asks, “Do the Feds know we’re hiding out here?”, the point is to find out whether the Feds have the true belief; if the Feds have a true but unjustified belief, it will be no consolation. Similarly, if we say “N percent of United States citizens know that Canada is the United States’ largest trading partner,” we are reporting what N percent of people believe, not whether they arrived at that (true) belief by a lucky guess or by relying on an unreliable source. In these cases the purpose of the ascription is not to evaluate anyone’s practical rationality, so the conversational participants will not usually be using the Practical Environment Principle to infer that the subject has a high
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enough level of justification. The most likely inferences will involve how the subjects came to their belief and what the conversational participants are to do about it. In this kind of frame the effective content of “S knows that p” is that S has a true belief that p.24

In other conversations, knowledge ascriptions do invoke the subject’s degree of justification. This is particularly likely when the word ‘know’ is stressed; if we think that Hannah believes truly that the bank is open Saturday, but we are concerned with whether her evidence meets a certain standard, we may still ask, “But does Hannah know that the bank is open Saturday?” This question may be asked out of concern with whether Hannah’s beliefs and actions are rational; or with whether it would be rational for us to rely on Hannah’s word that the bank is open; or with whether a third party, perhaps our audience, would be rational to rely on Hannah’s word.

It might seem that the subject, speaker, and hearer will usually have different standards for knowledge; if, for instance, it is much more important to the speaker than to the subject to have a true belief about whether the bank is open Saturday. On the contrary, most knowledge ascriptions will take place in a setting where the same standards apply to all parties. Rarely will we ask whether S knows that p out of mere academic concern for S’s rationality. The person who says that S knows that p is usually concerned with whether S is an adequate source of information, for the speaker or the addressee or some other party who might be drawn into the conversation.35 If S is a potential informant, the rationality of her acting on the assumption that p no longer depends on what actions she is planning to take on her own behalf. For one of her potential actions is testifying that p. A cooperative conversationalist would not in fact testify that p unless her evidence is good enough for whoever's asking. So S's stakes in the question whether p — the stakes of the subject of the knowledge ascription — will be brought into line with the stakes of the ascriber and her audience.

In such a case it is as if the subject, the ascriber, and the addressee are in an extended and partially potential conversation, whose purpose is to gather information suitable for one particular person to act on. It is natural to apply the Practical Environment Principle to the person who needs to act; for her to come to know, she must obtain evidence that is good enough given what is at stake for her. Most of the time it is roughly true that, if she is relying on the subject’s testimony, the evidence she gets from the testimony will be no better than the evidence the original subject has. If Hannah can’t get good enough evidence for knowledge from having checked the bank’s hours three weeks ago, then she can’t get good enough evidence for knowledge from the testimony of someone who checked the bank’s hours three weeks ago.36 Thus, the person who needs to act will have no stronger evidence than the subject of the knowledge ascription; it is natural to apply the Parity of Evidence Principle to conclude that the subject has knowledge only if her testimony would give the actor knowledge. The subject of the knowledge ascription would be hypothetically faced with a choice about what to tell the actor; it is natural to apply the Practical Environment Principle to the subject, to conclude that she ought to tell the actor that p is true only if her evidence that p is good enough for her to know it, which by the previous applications of Principles is only true if her evidence is good enough given the actor’s

35. Compare the argument in Craig (1990) that the reason we have to develop a concept of knowledge is to identify people who would be good informants on the subject of whether p. Someone who merely has a true belief whether p may not be someone we have any reason to ask whether p, but someone who knows that p will be more likely to have an identifiable characteristic that marks her out as a good informant.

This account of knowledge, Craig emphasizes, will not provide a sharp analysis of necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge. In this I think Craig’s account is compatible with mine, in predicting that in some cases knowledge attributions would lead to confusion. We can see the Practical Environment Principle together with the idea that testimony transmits knowledge as capturing what it takes for someone to be a useful informant, while

36. This is an approximation; Graham (2001) and Lackey (2008) have criticized the view that testimony transmits the doxastic properties of a belief from the speaker to the hearer.

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stakes. In this frame, the effective content of a knowledge ascription is that the subject’s evidence is good enough to act on given the actor’s stakes.

In rarer cases our concern with whether S knows or knew is academic. Still, the purpose of such an ascription may determine its effective content. Suppose that you and I are considering whether Leila knows that the bank is open Saturday; we have no stake in the bank’s being open but are merely concerned with whether Leila is behaving rationally. We will use the Practical Environment Principle as applied to Leila, and we will conclude that she does know, since her evidence is good enough for her purposes. We will not be tempted to use the Parity of Evidence Principle to conclude that, since we share Leila’s evidence, we know that the bank is open, and then to conclude by the Practical Environment Principle that we would be rational to act on that assumption. Our interest being academic, we are not considering acting on that assumption.

Academic cases can also call for standards that depend on the ascriber’s stakes rather than the subject’s. Suppose that Lola is in a low-stakes situation but (unlike Leila) has no evidence concerning the bank’s hours. She cannot find Hannah, but she knows that Hannah was at the bank three weeks ago, and she is wondering whether Hannah would be useful to her if she were available. “If the bank is open Saturday, Hannah knows that it is,” Lola says. When we evaluate this ascription, we care about whether Lola is being rational; we are not concerned with using her or Hannah as an informant about the bank. (We already know that the bank is open Saturday, and that Hannah was there three Saturdays ago.) Since Lola can’t find Hannah, Hannah will not have to decide whether to tell Lola that the bank is open. So Hannah’s practical environment with respect to the bank’s hours may well differ from Lola’s.

Still, if we are concerned with Lola’s rationality, we should consider whether it would have been wise for her to take Hannah’s word concerning the bank’s hours if she had been able to talk to Hannah. Since it would have been, we conclude that Lola’s conditional knowledge ascription is effectively true, even if Hannah is in a high-stakes situation. It is natural to use the Practical Environment Principle as applied to Lola to set the standard for what evidence suffices for knowledge, and to use the Parity of Evidence Principle to conclude that Hannah knows, if her evidence meets Lola’s standard. Our focus on Lola’s rationality keeps the effective content of the knowledge ascription dependent on Lola’s stakes. It is not natural to apply the Practical Environment Principle to Hannah and to conclude (wrongly) that she would be rational to act on the assumption that the bank is open, because we aren’t focused on Hannah’s predicament.

If the focus of the conversation switches, we may be led into error. Suppose that, after focusing on Lola’s rationality, we start considering Hannah’s. Then we naturally will use the Practical Environment Principle on “Hannah knew the bank was open Saturday” to infer that she would be rational to rely on that assumption.37 This conclusion is false; Hannah is in a high-stakes situation and needs better evidence. We have erred because we made a knowledge ascription while evaluating Lola’s rationality and applied it while evaluating Hannah’s rationality. These two purposes generate different frames. It is no surprise that switching from one frame to another leads to false conclusions.

So far our knowledge-talk behaves much like the Carambolian time-talk. As most Carambolian conversations take place within a single valley, so in most conversations the participants and subject all have the same practical stakes; either because practical stakes are irrelevant (as when we do not care about justification) or because the stakes for all are linked to the stakes for one conversational participant, the one who is thinking of acting. Inter-valley Carambolian time-talk can usually be assigned an effective content because it stays fixed on how things are with the speaker, the hearer, or the subject. In academic knowledge-talk, the speaker, hearer, and subject may all have different

37. The Disquotational Principle also comes into play here. We have concluded that Lola’s statement “If the bank is open Saturday, Hannah knows that it is” is true; we can use the Disquotational Principle to infer from this that if the bank is open Saturday, Hannah knows that it is.
stakes, but effective contents can usually be assigned because the conversation focuses on the stakes of one of them. It is only when these discourses switch between frames that they lead us into error.

In Carambolian Time-Shift, a conversation in which it was natural to shift from one frame to another naturally led to an aporia. A similar aporia can arise in our knowledge-talk, in a carefully constructed situation in which it is natural to use a knowledge ascription made in one frame as the basis for inferences in another frame. Take this case, adapted and modified from DeRose (2005, pp. 186, 196):

Interrogation. The police are questioning Thelma about John’s whereabouts the day before, when a horrible crime was committed. She saw John in the office and accordingly says (a) “I know that John was in the office yesterday.” The police, wanting another witness, ask her (b) “Does Louise know that John was in the office yesterday?” Thelma knows that Louise has the following evidence that John was in: someone told her so, and she saw John’s hat in the hall. This is not good enough evidence for her to serve as a witness for the police. So Thelma says, (c) “Louise doesn’t know that John was in.” The police then play Thelma a wiretap recording of Louise in a bar saying, (d) “I know that John was in the office yesterday.” (e) “Is one of you lying?” they ask.38

In the interrogation room, the conversation has high stakes. The purpose is to gather information that is good enough for the police to act on, and the police’s actions can have grave repercussions. Accordingly,

38. In DeRose’s second presentation of the case, Thelma is in the bar (and not yet in a high-stakes context) when Louise says “I know.” So she knows of Louise’s utterance and the police do not. I have changed the example so that the police know of Louise’s utterance and Thelma does not, until they tell her. I have also added the last question (e) from the police; in a different conversation “Is one of you lying or mistaken?” might be more apposite, but in interrogations the police might aggressively accuse someone of lying even when they might be mistaken. (Thanks to an anonymous referee on this point.) I discuss DeRose’s use of the example below.

Thelma’s knowledge claim (a) requires strong evidence, which she has. This is a natural application of the Practical Environment Principle. With (b) and (c) the focus remains on the police’s needs; it is natural to use the Practical Environment Principle to conclude that the police would need strong evidence to know, and then to use the Parity of Evidence Principle to conclude that Louise knows only if her evidence is strong.

But (d) is an utterance from another conversation, with another purpose, in another frame. Let us suppose that Louise is justifying some action she took based on the assumption that John was in, where it was perfectly rational for her to rely on the assumption given her evidence. (Say, she didn’t lock the office door, when leaving it unlocked overnight would not have been disastrous.) Since Louise’s assertion of (d) is focused on her own rationality, it is natural for her to apply the Practical Environment Principle to herself, so her weak evidence is enough for her to claim knowledge.39 In the bar, there is little risk that Louise’s knowledge claim will be used to justify a false conclusion. When her claim is cited in a different conversation with a different purpose, however, it can create confusion. It is natural for the police to use the Disquotational Principle to conclude that Thelma and Louise have contradicted each other, and to ask who is wrong, as in (e). (Note also that interrogations are unusual conversations, in which it is natural to bring in assertions from other conversations in order to catch the witness in a contradiction.)

As in Carambolian Time-Shift, none of Thelma’s available responses is entirely satisfactory.

Interrogation Disclaimer Louise didn’t say she knows John was in.

Interrogation Confession Louise does know; I was wrong when I told you she didn’t know.

39. She can even make a stressed knowledge claim: “I know John was in the office.”
Interrogation Blaming
Louise doesn’t know; she must be lying or mistaken.\(^4\)

Interrogation Positive Claim
Louise does know, but I was telling the truth when I said she didn’t know.

Disclaimer and Positive Claim, I think, would make the police extremely impatient (but see further discussion in Sections 5 and 6). I wouldn’t recommend trying them during an actual police interrogation, unless your lawyer is very good. Anyone who is not familiar with esoteric philosophical considerations would be disposed to think that Louise said that she knows and that utterances (c) and (d) contradict each other. That’s the Disquotational Principle.

Confession and Blaming make more sense on their face, but they are still unsatisfactory. Confession may lead to things’ gratuitously going less well for Thelma than they ought. She wasn’t lying when she told the police that Louise didn’t know, nor was she mistaken about Louise’s evidence. Furthermore, Confession undermines the purposes of the conversation. Louise would not be an adequate informant for the police. Blaming is more cooperative; it lets the police know that they should not be relying on Louise. Still, it sells Louise short to say that her utterance (d) was false. Louise is neither lying nor mistaken about her evidence that John was in. So Blaming results in a conversation that makes sense on its face, but that in fact leads the participants into error (as did Confession in Carambolian Time-Shift.)

So our knowledge-talk resembles Carambolian time-talk in the way that it avoids aporia and the way that it can be led into aporia. It avoids aporia because in most conversations the participants and subject all have the same stakes, as on Carambolia most conversations take place within the same valley. Academic knowledge ascriptions usually can be assigned a frame even though the speaker, subject, and audience may have different stakes, because so long as the conversation sticks to a single purpose only one person’s stakes will be relevant; as inter-valley Carambolian conversations usually can be assigned a frame because it is only relevant how high the sun is in one of the valleys. When the conversation leads us to use an ascription made with certain stakes in a context in which other stakes are at issue, confusion ensues, just as confusion ensues on Carambilia when we compare time ascriptions that are based on different valleys. Since it is natural for the Carambolians to have developed inconsistent time-talk, this gives some reason to believe that the knowledge-talk we have developed is also inconsistent.

5. Alternatives

The Carambolian model may make the inconsistency account palatable, but we still need to show that it is more palatable than the alternatives. Consistent semantics for knowledge, I will argue, not only make incorrect predictions about what we will judge to be true and false; they fail to account for how we can be drawn into an aporia. The inconsistency theory best predicts the occasions when we don’t have anything useful to say.

Schiffer (1996) and Hawthorne (2004, pp. 107ff.) criticize contextualism for requiring what Hawthorne calls “semantic blindness”: if contextualism is true, then most speakers must be ignorant of the semantics of the terms they use. For instance, they will accept disquotations involving ‘know’ even though the semantics for ‘know’ does not license disquotation. DeRose (2006) counters that we must postulate some semantic blindness. When people are presented with high-stakes and low-stakes Bank Cases, some will argue that the high-stakes speaker who says “John doesn’t know” doesn’t really contradict the low-stakes speaker who says “John knows” about the same subject and the same proposition. Even people not already committed to contextualism will sometimes deny that there is a contradiction here. Either these people

\(^{4}\) Blaming has no analogue in Carambolian Time-Shift, because that case involves a single asserter whereas Interrogation involves two. In both cases, there are two assertions, and Confession involves repudiating the earlier one. In Interrogation the earlier assertion was the speaker’s own and the later assertion is someone else’s, so the speaker has the Blaming option of saying that the other asserter was wrong. In Carambolian Time-Shift, there is no motivation for the speaker to repudiate her own later assertion rather than her earlier assertion.
are blind to the workings of their own terms, or those who always accept disquotation are.

We can extend the point beyond DeRose’s example. As I argued in section 1, speakers are disposed to infer in accordance with the Knowledge Principles in virtue of their semantic competence with the word ‘know’; this is part of what it is to know how to use the word as we use it in English. Every consistent semantics for ‘know’ predicts that one of the Principles is false. So on these views, most competent speakers who have not yet overridden their disposition to conform to the Principles will be blind to some aspect of the semantics of their term ‘know’. In fact, if I am correct that semantic competence requires inferring in accordance with the Knowledge Principles, then understanding ‘know’ requires what these views construe as semantic blindness.

In contrast, the inconsistency theory explains why speakers arrive at different verdicts when presented with high-stakes and low-stakes Bank Cases. Competent speakers have a disposition to accept inferences in accordance with the Knowledge Principles, but those dispositions can be overridden. In the literally academic setting of the classroom in which DeRose presents the contradictory Bank Cases, people will be disposed to accept each of two contradictory inferences. One disposition must give way. Since neither disposition is semantically privileged, it is no surprise that different people opt for different inferences.

Nor does the inconsistency account require semantic blindness. It holds that competent speakers will be disposed to accept inferences in accordance with the Principles. The aporias do not show the competent speakers to be wrong; their dispositions to accept can still be part of their mastery of the ordinary use of ‘know’, even if those dispositions cannot always be exercised. Most speakers will be ignorant about the semantics of ‘know’ in that they will not be aware that it is inconsistent, but this is just to say that most speakers don’t espouse the correct theory of the semantics. Since most speakers espouse no semantical theories, this is hardly a unique problem for the inconsistency theory.

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Furthermore, the inconsistency theory better accounts for the aporia of Interrogation, precisely because it predicts confusion. On each consistent semantics, one of the responses will be true: Confession on subject-sensitive invariantism, Disclaimer on prototypical contextualism, and Blaming on prototypical relativism. So each faces a problem in explaining why the true response sounds odd.

DeRose defends contextualism by arguing, in effect, that Disclaimer is not so odd. His target is Hawthorne’s Disquotational Schema for Knowledge, according to which a speaker who sincerely utters ‘S knows that p’ expresses the belief of S that she knows that p. Hawthorne says:

If, for example, someone sincerely utters ‘I know that I will never have a heart attack’, we have no hesitation whatsoever in reporting the contents of his mind by claiming that he believes that he knows he will never have a heart attack. That is how the verb ‘knows’ seems to work. (2004, p. 101)

DeRose, discussing his version of Interrogation, asks of Thelma’s conversation with the police:

41. By prototypical contextualism and relativism I mean versions of those theories on which the speaker’s or evaluator’s stakes, respectively, determine the standard of knowledge to be applied. As DeRose points out (2005, p. 189), contextualists can hold that the subject’s stakes sometimes help determine the standard for knowledge in a context; relativists can argue similarly. This will not necessarily resolve the oddity of the dialogue in Interrogation, however; if anything it pushes the contextualist toward Positive Claim and the relativist toward Confession.

DeRose may hold that in cases like this the standard for knowledge is ill-defined; he argues (2004) that in some cases knowledge ascriptions have no truth-value because the participants in the conversation adopt different standards. In that case my view would be much like his, as discussed in Section 6. (DeRose’s prescription for how Thelma should resolve the confusion in Interrogation is much like mine.)

42. More precisely, if ‘S’ is a term referring to s, then the speaker expresses the belief of s that she knows that p; see Hawthorne (2004, p. 101) for more detail. Issues of reference can be bracketed in Interrogation, as it is common knowledge among everyone that ‘Louise’ refers to Louise, etc.
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Now, in this elevated context, will Thelma display ‘no hesitation whatsoever’ in reporting, ‘Louise believes that she knows? Intuitively, it actually seems that it would be wrong for Thelma to say that in her highly charged context; it is certainly not so clearly the right thing to say as to occasion ‘no hesitation whatsoever’ in saying it. (2005, p. 197)

DeRose is considering a case in which Thelma knows about Louise’s knowledge claim (\(d\) in my example) but the police do not.43 In such a case it seems as though Thelma probably should deny that Louise knows; it is natural to use Parity of Evidence rather than Disquotation. Even when Louise’s knowledge claim is in the foreground, it seems right for Thelma to hesitate before saying, “Yes, Louise does believe that she knows.”44 But now Thelma should also hesitate before saying what the contextualist prescribes, “Louise does not believe that she knows.” Neither alternative is entirely satisfactory. The inconsistency theory explains this; we are disposed to make two conflicting inferences, and should hesitate before settling on one.

6. Unvoiced-Standards Contextualism

The aporia isn’t utterly intractable; Thelma can explain herself by stepping out of the discourse of knowledge tout court. As DeRose suggests, she can say something like “Louise said that, but she was speaking casually.” Other alternatives are “Louise wasn’t saying she knows by standards that will hold up in court” or “Louise saw John’s hat in the hall, and I told her he was in, but she didn’t actually see him herself.” (Note that in the last case Thelma is simply communicating Louise’s degree of justification without using the word ‘know’.)

This may suggest a contextualist theory on which every knowledge attribution refers to a standard for knowledge, implicitly or explicitly. Ludlow (2005) suggests that the verb ‘know’ is L-marked (Chomsky 1986) for a standard of knowledge: every use of ‘know’ is associated with some phrase denoting standards for knowledge, which may be pronounced or unpronounced. When the phrase is unpronounced the standard of knowledge may well be determined by the context of the ascription. Ludlow provides many examples in which non-philosophers advert explicitly to standards of knowledge: ‘known by any objective standards’, ‘known with some confidence’, ‘known with complete certainty’, etc.

Unvoiced-standards contextualism entails some semantic blindness.45 Whenever the standard set by the context differs from the standard appropriate to the subject’s situation, then contextualism predicts that inferences made in accordance with the Practical Environment Principle will lead to falsehoods. This may not be a great problem; perhaps in contexts in which we are likely to use the Practical Environment Principle, the implicit standard depends on the subject’s stakes, so we are not disposed to infer the ascriptions that contextualism predicts to be false.46

43. Unvoiced-standards contextualism also is not obviously a consistent semantics. As DeRose (2005, p. 189) points out, contextualists need not hold that standards are always set by the speaker’s stakes; in many contexts it will be appropriate to consider the subject’s stakes. These will include conversations in which the subject’s rationality is at stake, since presumably disquoted knowledge ascriptions will carry the same standards as the originally quoted ascription. DeRose (2004) also notes that in some conversations, more than one standard may be in play; on his account this arises when different conversational participants insist on using different standards, but on unvoiced-standards contextualism this could happen when a disquoted ascription that depends on one person’s stakes is invoked in a conversation in which another person’s stakes are at issue (as in Interrogation). DeRose suggests that when the subject’s evidence falls between the two standards in play, a knowledge ascription is neither true nor false. These truth-value gaps will occur when an ascription lacks a frame and so the inconsistency theory does not assign an ascription. It is not obvious that a semantics that leaves truth-value gaps should count as consistent, especially since the inconsistency theory assigns an effective truth-value to most of the ascriptions to which contextualism assigns a truth-value.

44. This is a point against relativism; on relativism Louise has expressed the belief that she knows tout court, but that belief is false when evaluated in Thelma’s context.

More serious semantic blindness arises from the violation of the Disquotational Principle. When the standards of the original context and those of the context of the report are different, the disquotation “S knows that p [by x standards]” is true if S knows that p [by y standards]” may come out false. Here unvoiced-standards contextualists might respond (as Cohen [2005] does) that the problem is no worse than that faced by contextualism for terms like ‘tall’ and ‘large’, which is widely accepted. The contextualist may claim that we are also disposed to disquote ascriptions of tallness and largeness, even though the semantics for these words predict that disquotation can lead to falsehood.

The problem for this reply is that it is much easier to block disquotation for ‘tall’ and ‘large’ than for ‘know’, and that the cases in which disquotation is natural but misleading do not support unvoiced-standards contextualism for ‘know’. Richard (2004, p. 229) argues that in most circumstances it is simply incorrect to disquote tallness ascriptions when more than one comparison class is in play; it does not seem similarly incorrect to disquote knowledge ascriptions when more than one standard is in play, unless the standard has been brought to the foreground as in Interrogation.

There is a further way in which the contextualism about ‘large’ fails to support unvoiced-standards contextualism about ‘know’: ‘know’ does not behave as though it has an unvoiced standard. Richard (2004, pp. 237–8) argues for a combination of contextualism and relativism.

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Richard argues that knowledge ascriptions exhibit the kind of context-sensitivity that arises from shifts in the cutoff point; I will argue that such context-sensitivity is incompatible with unvoiced-standards contextualism.

For instance, as Richard acknowledges, we typically allow disquotation of knowledge ascriptions. Richard points out that we also allow disquotation with gradable adjectives after a shift in the cutoff point, even if we do not allow it after a shift in the comparison class. After saying “He is rich,” it makes no sense to deny later that you said that he is rich, even if your interlocutor has shifted the cutoff point by pointing out that he can’t afford a house in the Vineyard. (Compare Disclaimer in Interrogation and Carambolic Time-Shift.) To take another example, Stanley (2004) has argued that a disanalogy between ‘small’ and ‘know’ is that the standards for ‘small’ can shift within a sentence, as in “That butterfly is small and that elephant is small.” Richard defends contextualism by arguing that the comparison class can shift, but not the cutoff point. “That butterfly is small [for a butterfly] and that elephant is small [for an elephant]” makes sense; “That butterfly is small [for an animal; low cutoff point] and that elephant is small [for an animal; high cutoff point]” does not (Richard 2004, pp. 237–8). So ‘know’ remains analogous to uncontroversially context-sensitive gradable adjectives. In both these cases, the behavior of ‘know’ with

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48. Ludlow in fact takes a different approach in response to a disquotational argument against contextualism (Hawthorne 2004, p. 102). Suppose someone in a high-standards context accepts as true the utterance of a speaker in a low-standards context “You know you have feet.” Ludlow argues that even if the high-standards speaker disquotes and herself asserts “You know you have feet,” this is not inconsistent with the high-standards assertion of “You don’t know you have feet” that she might make in the high-standards context. His argument is that on contextualist semantics these statements are not inconsistent. But this does not solve the problem contextualism faces, which is that the statements appear to be inconsistent. A theory on which they are not inconsistent ascribes semantic blindness to speakers.

49. Though Richard does not explicitly discuss the example, he would presumably allow that you can deny that you said that he is rich after a shift in the context class. “He is rich”; “The other senators are all rich”; “I didn’t say he was rich for a senator.”

Stanley (2005, p. 56) claims that adding enough background to the house-in-the-Vineyard dialogue may make the refusal to disquote sensible. If this is true, it is even harder for the contextualist to dismiss the disquotability of ‘know’ by analogy to gradable adjectives.
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I have described our knowledge-talk as inconsistent; but this does not mean we should abandon it. Our knowledge-talk serves our normal purposes better than any alternative would. If we talk about people's evidence by using "S knows that p" in accordance with the Knowledge Principles, we will be almost always be led to the conclusions we need will only need to do so when we apply knowledge ascriptions across different frames, which (for reasons discussed in Section 4) will be rare. So we will not have developed a vocabulary for making standards for knowledge explicit, even if 'know' has an implicit argument place for standards.

The question here is why we should posit an argument place for standards unless ordinary linguistic practice reflects its existence. The argument place would allow us as theoreticians to assign absolute truth values to problematic knowledge ascriptions, but if ordinary practice does not reflect these truth values, it is not clear that we should be able to assign them. People do not treat knowledge ascriptions as though they had a hidden argument-place, disquotation is not blocked as it is for gradable adjectives with hidden argument-places, and speakers find themselves hesitant to make ascriptions that come out true. The main merit to positing this argument place seems to be that it lets us avoid the inconsistency theory; but with the analogy to Carambola, I have tried to show why the inconsistency theory is not to be feared.

Put another way, we could make Carambian time-talk consistent by positing a hidden place for time zones. We could also marginally improve the accuracy of our velocity ascriptions by positing a hidden place for inertial frames of reference. But Carambian language must be as Carambians make it, and our language must be as we make it, and there is no reason to think that we have made it with these hidden argument places, and considerable reason to think that we would not do so. (This is by no means to say that speakers of a language must be aware of its semantics.) So the contextualist perhaps needs to provide some argument that, in our language as we speak it, 'know' would be a hidden argument place for standards.

That said, the inconsistency theory may be compatible with such a contextualist account. Eklund and Sorensen suggest that, even when our semantic competence leads us to accept inconsistent principle, we can still assign truth values; see the discussion of Eklund and Sorensen in Section 1. If so, perhaps the best way to assign truth values is in accordance with this contextualist theory. But if the theory's main virtue is that it provides some way to assign the truth value, then it will hold because of the inconsistency, not instead of it.

7. The Role of Linguistic Practice

respect to the shifts in the standard for knowledge is like the behavior of a gradable adjective with respect to a shift in the cutoff point rather than the comparison class.

The problem is that this is the opposite of the behavior predicted by unvoiced-standards contextualism. 'Know' behaves like 'rich for a senator' or 'small for a cat', which allow shifts in the cutoff points but have a fixed comparison class. If the behavior of 'know' were explained by an unvoiced-standards phrase, then 'know' *tout court* should behave like 'rich' or 'small' *tout court*, and voiced-standards ascriptions like 'know' by standards that will hold up in court should behave like 'rich for a senator' or 'small for a cat'. If the context-sensitivity of 'know' depended on an unvoiced ascription of a standard for knowledge, then it would be easy to resist disquotation when the standard had changed, and the standard for knowledge could shift in the middle of a sentence.50

Another argument against unvoiced-standards contextualism is that the standards for knowledge are simply not salient in the way that the standards for tallness are. As Schiffer says, "no ordinary person who utters 'I know that p,' however articulate, would dream of telling you what he meant and was implicitly stating was that he knew that p relative to such-and-such standard" (1996, pp. 326–7).51 In contrast, it is easy to get speakers to explain the comparison class for tallness ascriptions. When someone says "That man is tall," it makes sense to ask, "Tall for what?" even if the answer is "For a man, dummy." In most cases, an ordinary speaker asked "By what standard do you know?" would be nonplussed. In fact, sometimes there will be no answer; I doubt that English has a word for the variation in standards between high-stakes and low-stakes Bank Cases, whereas with 'tall' there are arbitrarily many terms for comparison classes.52 If know-

50. Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing Richard's work to my attention.

51. MacFarlane (2005, p. 209 n. 6) also argues that mastery of the word 'know' does not require the ability to specify an epistemic standard.

52. An anonymous referee (whose comments have been particularly helpful throughout this section) suggests that there are so few terms for epistemological standards because we rarely need to make the standards explicit. We
to draw given the purpose of the conversation. And knowledge-talk is economical. It would be a waste of breath to constantly specify what standards $S$’s evidence meets, and the simplicity of the Knowledge Principles means that knowledge-talk is easy to master. So the inconsistency theory does not require a radical revision in ordinary practice. Knowledge-talk must be abandoned or supplemented with talk of standards only in the peripheral cases in which ordinary practice itself breaks down.

However, the talk that is good enough for ordinary practice may not be good enough for epistemology. Epistemology should aspire to general answers to questions like “When does $S$’s evidence make it good for her to believe that $p$?” If the concept of knowledge, applied with full generality, commits us to inconsistencies, then the concept of knowledge will not be suited to giving such general answers. Epistemologists should concern themselves more with concepts that can be used in general answers; for instance, determining when $S$ is justified in believing $p$ rather than when $S$ knows that $p$.

This conclusion reflects more general methodological concerns about the importance of ordinary linguistic practice in philosophy. When we ask which concepts epistemologists should study, knowledge has a head start over concepts like justification, because it is entrenched in our ordinary practices. Ordinary people speak of knowledge all the time, much more than of justification of beliefs. It would be odd for us to have continued speaking of knowledge if the concept had no use. So knowledge has a presumption of importance that other epistemological concepts lack.

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53. “$S$ knows that $p$” also economically conveys many other things: that $S$ believes that $p$, that $S$’s belief is true, and other factors that enter into knowledge. This essay has focused only on the variation for strength of evidence required for knowledge; discussing what else is conveyed would require considering more Principles and frames.

54. Contrast MacFarlane on eliminativism about knowledge; see note 2 above.

55. We can’t say “Epistemologists should study knowledge because epistemology just is the study of knowledge.” That would just raise the question, “Why do epistemology rather than study justification?”

56. This is not the only motivation we might have for considering knowledge.

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Yet if this is why knowledge has a presumption of importance, our inquiry into knowledge must stick closely to our ordinary use of ‘know’. The more our analysis of knowledge departs from ordinary linguistic practice, the less the entrenchment of knowledge in ordinary practice gives us a reason to think that the resulting concept is important. Hence the importance of arguments over contextualism, invariantism, and relativism that try to capture our ordinary practice. But if, as I have argued here, ordinary practice is inconsistent, then the presumption that knowledge is epistemologically important is undermined. Any attempt to turn knowledge into a well-defined concept will move it away from the ordinary practice that gave us reason to think it was important.

If the entrenchment of knowledge-talk suggests that knowledge is important, it may suggest even more strongly that knowledge is a consistent concept. If knowledge-talk is inconsistent, how have we managed to use it for so long? To answer this, I have told a story about how our use of ‘know’ almost always avoids inconsistency in practice. The word ‘know’ is key to several overlapping practices of evaluating beliefs: practices focused on the subject, on the speaker, and on other conversational participants; practices focused on the subject’s practical rationality and on whether the subject could serve as a useful informant. Consistent replacements for ‘know’ would make it more difficult to negotiate the overlap and would complicate our practice unduly by forcing us to keep track of some factor that determined when the Knowledge Principles did not apply. (For instance,
unvoiced-standards contextualism would require us to keep track of what the unvoiced standard was, which might not be derivable from the context in any simple way.) The gain in avoiding occasional error would be outweighed by the extra work.

The important epistemic concepts, however, will be the ones that would govern the individual overlapping practices if they were separated. These will be the concepts that will be involved in the effective contents of knowledge ascriptions in various frames, such as justification to various degrees. So beginning with a concept that is entrenched in ordinary usage leads us to focus on nearby, less entrenched concepts. As Austin (1961) said, though ordinary language may not be the last word, it is the first one.57

References


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