

Motivating the Relevant Alternatives Approach

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I Introduction

Knowing that *p* requires being able to 'rule out' the relevant not-*p* alternatives. Such is *the core claim* of the *Relevant Alternatives (RA)* theorist. Of course, to endorse the core claim is not to have a complete and satisfactory account of knowing: any RA theorist has some explaining to do. Most obviously, anyone who endorses the core claim must ultimately provide an account of 'ruling out' and 'relevance'. And some who've been critical of the whole RA approach have done so because of a scepticism about the prospects of cashing these notions out in a satisfactory way.

But it's not the *mere* fact that the RA theorist needs an account of 'ruling out' and 'relevance' that has tended to lead people to regard the RA approach with suspicion. In itself, this simply means that the RA theorist has some further work to do; and what theorist doesn't? No; the principal source of scepticism regarding the ability of the RA theorist to come up with a complete and satisfactory account of knowing stems, rather, from an unhappiness with *the specific elaborations* of the core RA claim that various theorists have offered; for these elaborations have typically involved some rather controversial claims and/or assumptions, and it is against these claims/assumptions that the bulk of the criticism of the whole RA approach has been directed.

For example, the majority of RA theorists (e.g., Cohen, 1988, 1999; Heller, 1999a, 1999b; Lewis, 1979, 1996; and Stine, 1976) are also contextualists — their preferred standard(s) of relevance are importantly context-sensitive. Indeed, it is sometimes implied that RA theories are

inherently contextualistic. Thus, for instance, Vogel introduces RA as ‘a systematic articulation’ of the idea that ‘the requirements for knowledge are limited and context-dependent’ (1999, 155); and Sosa writes, ‘[c]ontextualism has gained center stage in epistemology mainly through its way with the skeptic, from the early days of ‘relevant alternatives’ to important recent publications’ (2000, 1). But, as contextualism is controversial to say the least,¹ the RA approach, construed as an instance thereof, is fated to be so as well.

In the same way, the RA approach is often associated with the denial of the closure principle for knowledge, whereby if *S* know that *p* and that *p* entails *q*, and as a result forms the belief that *q*, then *S* knows that *q*.² For instance, Dretske claims that if we adopt RA ‘we must live with the failure of closure’ (1991, 190), and Pritchard that ‘the RA approach to knowledge entails the denial of the closure principle’ (2000, 275). Whereas most epistemologists take the closure principle to be obviously correct. And not without reason: denying closure opens up the possibility of embracing the truth of ‘abominable conjunctions’ such as, ‘*S* knows [*p*] that he has hands, but not [*q*] that he’s not a handless BIV’ (DeRose 1995, 27-9). To the extent that such results strike us as unacceptable, we will regard closure as ‘axiomatic’ (Cohen 1999, 68) and any view that entails its rejection as inherently flawed.

However, as others have pointed out, it is entirely possible to distinguish, in principle, between the core RA claim and these more controversial, and perhaps strictly-speaking-optional, theoretical add-ons. Thus, DeRose (1992; 1995, 13; 1999, 193) notes that RA theorists don’t have to be contextualists; and Cohen (1988, 1991), Stine (1976), and Williams (1996) argue — *contra*, e.g., Dretske (1970), Heller (1999a), and Pritchard (2000) — that the RA approach *per se* does not support the abandonment of closure.

But if RA is, in principle, separable from those elements which people have found most problematic about typical RA theories, why do those elements dominate discussions of the RA approach? And why do they so persistently form part of most actual RA theories?

Well, if it’s true and unsurprising that the plausibility of a particular development of the general RA approach depends how exactly one fleshes out the core RA claim, it’s just as true, and perhaps a little more

1 Critiques of epistemic contextualism include: Bach, forthcoming; Feldman 1999, 2001; Hofweber, 1999; Kornblith, 2000; Rysiew, 2001, 2005; Schiffer, 1996; Sosa, 2000; and Stanley, 2004.

2 Further refinements to the principle may be needed, but they make no difference to the present discussion.

surprising, that the particular form an RA theory takes depends a lot on what the theoretical rationale for the general RA approach is taken to be. And, as we shall see below (Section III), it is precisely because of how it has typically been motivated that the RA approach remains as controversial as it is: standard motivations for the core claim are such that, in spite of their being in-principle-optional, taking on certain controversial theoretical 'add-ons' (contextualism, the denial of closure) will seem perfectly natural, even unavoidable. The result is an RA theory that is more or less bound to be controversial, and the theoretical significance of which might well be taken to consist precisely in those of its parts which are most contentious.

But this is not, after all, an inevitable result. For, though it is largely forgotten, we have available to us (Section II), and have had for some time, a rationale for the core claim which neither presupposes nor commits us to any inherently contentious claims or methodological principles. Moreover, this rationale makes the core claim itself — hence, the general RA approach *per se* — something that a good number of epistemologists could, and perhaps should, accept as a general constraint on knowing. Finally (Section IV), the rationale in question suggests a reconceiving of the theoretical significance of the RA approach: contrary to its typical portrayals, the significance of the RA approach lies not in its entailing certain substantive, and controversial, epistemological theses — contextualism and/or non-closure really *do* remain optional theoretical add-ons, but in its offering an alternative to the traditional framework for theorizing about knowledge.

II Why Be an RA Theorist? A Forgotten Rationale

As already noted, and as anyone familiar with the literature well knows, current discussions of the RA approach are dominated by a concern with contextualism and (non)closure; and to some extent that's perfectly understandable since, as we'll see in the next Section, the motivations offered by proponents of the RA approach are such that these features are, in effect, built right in from the beginning. If we are seeking a rationale for the RA approach which makes it much less controversial, even quite appealing, we'd do better to look at Alvin Goldman's 'Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge,' *DPK* (1976). Though the paper itself is still widely cited as a canonical contemporary statement of the RA approach, Goldman's specific means of motivating RA has been largely forgotten.

As presented by Goldman, the core thesis is arrived at by combining two ideas, each of which enjoys a great deal of independent plausibility: a linking of knowledge and discriminative capacities, and the idea that

knowledge is compatible with the possibility of error (fallibilism). Taking these points in order, there appears to be *some* very close relation between knowledge and discriminative capacities — it seems, as McGinn puts it, that ‘one can *know* that P only if one can *tell whether* P’ (1984, 543). Why think that this is an ‘intuitively correct principle’ (ibid.)? The evidence consists of consideration of ordinary usage and reflection on cases. Goldman begins his paper by appealing to the former sort of evidence:

My emphasis on discrimination accords with a sense of the verb ‘to know’ that has been neglected by philosophers. The O.E.D. lists one (early) sense of ‘know’ as ‘to *distinguish* (one thing) *from* (another)’... [This sense] survives in such expressions as ‘I don’t know him from Adam,’ ‘He doesn’t know right from left,’ and other phrases that readily come to mind. I suspect that this construction ... can be used to shed light on constructions in which ‘know’ takes propositional objects. (1976, 121)

Taking a subject’s knowing and his possessing certain discriminative capacities to be very closely linked is also supported by a consideration of cases. Among the intended points of Ginet’s barn case, an example as famous as any in the epistemological literature, is precisely to show that our judgments about whether *S* knows that *p* covary with our judgments about whether they are able to ‘tell whether’ *p*.³ To take a perfectly pedestrian case (no *papier-mâché* fakes!), if I can’t tell the difference between its being rainy and its being sunny outside, though I might believe truly that it’s raining, it might as well not be — my belief to that effect is entirely fortuitous. In order to count as knowledge, a true belief needs to be ‘tied down’ in some appropriate way (Plato, 1981, *Meno* 98a). And supposing that discriminative capacities do the ‘tying down’ seems a plausible enough suggestion: I need to be able somehow to ‘rule out’ the possibility that it’s sunny outside if I am to be credited with the knowledge that it is in fact raining.

Of course, if we’re not to lose touch with the pretheoretic plausibility of this linking of knowing with discriminative capacities, we shouldn’t read too much into the capacity for ‘telling’/‘ruling out.’ Michael Frede writes:

The word ‘to discriminate’ is ambiguous. It is used in cases in which one recognizes things to be of different kind and, in virtue of the awareness of this difference, treats them differently. But there are also cases in which somebody reacts differently to things of a different kind not in virtue of an awareness of their difference and

3 It is also intended to point up the inadequacy of alternative analyses of knowledge — I return to this point in the final Section.

perhaps even without knowing that there is such a kind of thing which he systematically reacts to in such a manner; there is a causal link between a feature of the object and the behavior of the person, but an awareness of the feature on the part of the person is not an essential part of the causal chain; and nevertheless such a person can be said to discriminate or to discern the feature (1987, 168).

Now, most everyone, and certainly most⁴ RA theorists, takes the avoidance of scepticism to be a *desideratum* of a satisfactory epistemic theory. Because of this, we shouldn't be too quick to take the first sort of discriminative capacity that Frede describes to be required for knowing. Such an 'intellectualistic' view would have us treat 'telling whether' p as a matter of explicitly and/or self-consciously checking whether one's present experiences suggest that p , and/or having some sort of articulable conscious awareness of the difference between p and not- p . But this makes it sound like 'telling' is something we rarely do, and are rarely in a position to do — too rarely, in fact, for 'being able to tell' to be plausible condition on knowing.

However, it is a less demanding, non-intellectualistic model of 'telling' such as the second form Frede describes that Goldman has in mind: epistemizing cognitive processes are those which 'generate different cognitive responses,' depending on the way things are in various actual and counterfactual situations (1976, 85); 'The crucial question in assessing a knowledge attribution ... appears to be the truth value of a counterfactual (or set of counterfactuals)' (*ibid.*, 91) — i.e., whether S would believe that p even if some not- p alternative, q , were in fact the case; whether S 's belief that p (or, the cognitive processes responsible for the production of that belief) is *responsive* to whether p , as we might say.⁵

But if the ability to tell whether p — in the sense of having one's belief (/cognitive processes) be responsive as to whether p — seems a fairly plausible condition on knowing, it's no less clear that knowing can't require the ability to 'rule out' *all* of the not- p alternatives — it can't require that one's belief that p be responsive, that one wouldn't believe that p , in *all* the not- p worlds (cf. Nozick, 1981, 172-9; DeRose, 1995, 34; Sosa, 1999, 142). If I know anything, e.g., it's that I have hands. But while I wouldn't believe that in a (nearby) world in which I lost my hands in a construction accident, I *would* by hypothesis believe it in a (very distant)

4 The Unger of *Ignorance* (1975), plausibly, was a sceptical RA theorist, as was (perhaps) the Descartes of the *First Meditation* (see Stroud, 1984).

5 So stated, this is essentially what's come to be known as the *sensitivity* requirement on knowing; but as there is disagreement as to how best to formulate this condition (see Section IV), I use the more neutral 'responsive' instead.

world in which I'm a handless BIV programmed to think it has hands. And so too for the rest of our contingent, empirical beliefs: they each *could* be false, and false in ways such that I would nonetheless persist in them; hence, for any of them to constitute knowledge, it can't be a requirement on knowing that my belief be responsive in every, even the most far-flung, counterfactual scenarios. Thus, insofar as we wish to retain our intuitive anti-scepticism, it seems we should say that knowing requires the ability to rule out only *certain* not-*p* alternatives — it requires that one's beliefs/processes be responsive only in *some range of* (plausibly, the closest) not-*p* worlds. 'A person knows that *p*, I suggest, only if the actual state of affairs in which *p* is true is *distinguishable* or *discriminable* by him from a *relevant* possible state of affairs in which *p* is false' (Goldman, 1976, 87-8; latter italics added).

But what is the standard of 'relevance'; is it fixed or does it vary across contexts? Goldman does not say. But this is not itself a weakness of his discussion. Goldman is able to 'leave open the question of whether [in any given case] there is a 'correct' set of relevant alternatives, and if so, what it is' (ibid., 90), and do so without lessening the legitimacy or significance of the role relevance plays in his theory, because the primary theoretical function of the notion of relevance for him is precisely to mark the fact that '[a] knowledge attribution imputes to someone the discrimination of a given state of affairs from possible alternatives, but not necessarily all logically possible alternatives' (1976, 86). That is, 'relevance' for Goldman marks our commitment to a fallibilistic standard of knowledge:⁶ whether that standard is also context-sensitive is a separate question, and one which he leaves open.

If you find the ideas just rehearsed at all plausible, you are in agreement with Goldman as to the attractiveness of the core RA claim — the idea that knowing that *p* requires being able to rule out the relevant not-*p* alternatives. In rehearsing our rationale for that idea, we, following Goldman, have used materials, quite *uncontroversial* materials, already available to us — a linking of knowledge with discriminative capacities, and an intuitive non-scepticism (and thus an intuitive fallibilism).

But it's not just that the present rationale doesn't rest on any controversial claims/assumptions. Our rationale is such that we have not committed ourselves to precisely the sorts of details or (supposed) consequences of an RA view that have been the focus of others' criticisms

6 'The qualifier "relevant" plays an important role in my view. If knowledge required the elimination of all logically possible alternatives, there would be no knowledge (at least of contingent truths). If only *relevant* alternatives need to be precluded, however, the scope of knowledge could be substantial' (ibid., 88).

of the whole RA approach. Thus, once again, nothing has been said about just how flexible or ‘context-dependent’ the matter of relevance is. To this point, all we’ve committed ourselves to concerning ‘the relevant not- p worlds’ is that they comprise that proper subset of all of the not- p worlds in which the subject’s belief that p must be responsive.

Likewise, nothing in the present rationale for the core RA claim forces us to reject closure. This point will come up again in the next Section, where some alleged cases of closure failure are discussed. But for now, consider the example given just above: I know that I have hands, but this can’t require that I be able to ‘rule out’ the possibility that I’m just a handless BIV — it can’t require that my belief that I have hands be responsive, even in the world in which I’m a handless BIV. ‘But wait? Don’t we then have an example of closure failure? For isn’t the implication precisely the ‘abominable conjunction,’ *I know that I have hands, but not that I’m not a handless BIV?*’ No. Let’s grant that I can’t rule out (in the present sense) the possibility that I’m a handless BIV; my inability to do so lends credibility to the idea that *being able* to do this had better not be a requirement on knowing that I have hands. Now, given that I do know that I have hands, I perforce know (by the closure principle) that I’m not a handless BIV. But how is this possible, if I can’t rule out the possibility that I *am* a handless BIV? Well, perhaps this last simply isn’t a relevant alternative (either to my having hands, or to my not being a handless BIV; cf. Stine, 1976; Rysiew, 2001, Section 8); so perhaps it’s not something I need to be able to rule out in order to know (that I have hands, that I’m not a BIV).⁷ If it isn’t, then we don’t have a case of failing to know something that’s entailed by what (by hypothesis) one does know. Nor do we have a case of our verdicts as to what one does/doesn’t know diverging from those suggested by the proposal that knowing requires responsiveness of belief in the relevant not- p worlds.

Of course, we are able to get this result (preserving closure) by exploiting the notion of relevance. But there is nothing whatever objectionable in that: on the present rationale, after all, the whole point of bringing in the notion of relevance was to give us a means of preserving our deepest intuitions about knowledge (specifically, that we have some). If closure too is at the heart of our thinking about knowledge, then our notion of

7 It is open to the RA theorist, then, to claim that in certain cases anyway, not- p is not a relevant alternative to p . But isn’t this an odd consequence? That’s not so clear. For example, most ordinary people, if asked how they know that some global sceptical hypothesis is false, or that some necessary truth is true, are liable to respond by saying ‘I just know’ (or something similar), which is just as the envisaged claim would predict.

relevance had better be consistent with that as well. In any case, the crucial point is this: Goldman's *DPK* is among the classic statements of the RA approach; in that paper, it is a coupling of fallibilism and a discrimination (responsiveness) requirement on knowing that motivates the core RA claim; so motivated, the core RA thesis does not force a position on either the closure principle or epistemic contextualism — our verdict on such matters is something which can, and should, be decided only by further considerations and arguments.

III Standard, Problematic Rationales

Once again, just about every RA theorist takes the avoidance of scepticism as a *desideratum* on a satisfactory theory of knowledge.⁸ It is when this general anti-sceptical approach is coupled with some other commitment(s), whether substantive or methodological, that we get specific rationales for the core RA claim. Thus, as we saw above, it is the combination of fallibilism with a discrimination requirement which yields RA for Goldman. An alternative rationale, which has gotten more attention in recent years, results from combining an intuitive anti-scepticism with the thought that 'knowledge' is 'an *absolute* concept,' in the sense that 'the justification or evidence one must have in order to know a proposition *p* must be sufficient to eliminate all the alternatives to *p* (where an alternative to a proposition *p* is a proposition incompatible with *p*)' (Cohen, 1992, 430; cf. Cohen, 1991; Lewis, 1996; Unger, 1975).

But, Cohen says, while such 'absolutism' is part of our naïve epistemology, it conflicts with 'another strand in our thinking about knowledge, viz. that we know many things' (1992, 431). Thus, in terms of an example which will come up again shortly, when at the zoo we might claim to know that a certain animal is a zebra on the basis of certain visual evidence — 'a zebra-like appearance' (*ibid.*). Intuitively, however, this evidence 'is not strong enough for us to know that we are not ... deceived' — e.g., to know that the animal is not really a cleverly disguised mule; for, after all, even if we were so deceived, our evidence would be exactly the same. Hence, if we do know that we are seeing a zebra (as seems plausible, in the ordinary case), it cannot be that epistemizing evidence

8 Some have claimed that it is a virtue of the RA approach that it enables a principled response to the sceptic. However, if the presumed falsity of scepticism is part of the motivation for that account, it seems that it cannot provide a principled response to scepticism, but only a (perhaps useful) rationalization of our intuitive anti-scepticism.

must be such as to rule out all the not-*p* alternatives. Conversely, if we insist upon the latter, we will end up having to deny that much of what we ordinarily take to be knowledge really is such.⁹

Thus, it seems that we must give up either 'the absoluteness criterion' or our natural non-scepticism. Many (e.g., Klein, 1981; Cargile, 1972; Pollock, 1974; Chisholm, 1977) have gone the former route, thereby preserving one element of our everyday epistemic thinking, but only, as Cohen sees it, by sacrificing another. Whereas, Cohen says, 'the primary virtue of [the RA] approach' (1991, 17) is that it enables us not to have to choose:

The theory of relevant alternatives is best viewed as an attempt to provide a more satisfactory response to this tension in our thinking about knowledge. It attempts to characterize knowledge in a way that preserves both our belief that knowledge is an absolute concept and our belief that we have knowledge. (1992, 430)

This is achieved by treating 'knowledge' as '*relationally absolute*' (Dretske, 1981a; 1981b, 52) — as absolute, but only relative to a standard (Cohen, 1988; Dretske, *ibid.*; Lewis, 1996). Thus just as emptiness is a matter of being *devoid of all relevant things*, knowing is an evidential state in which all *relevant* alternatives are eliminated (Dretske, 1981b, 52). And if the class of relevant alternatives is suitably circumscribed, we preserve the idea that we do know many things, and do so without sacrificing our naïve absolutism. Hence *the absolutist rationale* for the core claim consists in combining our intuitive anti-scepticism with an absolutism which is supposed itself to be part of our naïve epistemology.

But is it really clear that absolutism is a fundamental aspect of our everyday thinking about knowledge? Certainly, absolutism isn't *more* essential to our naïve epistemology than is the idea that we know many things. If anything deserves the title of 'crowning principle' of naïve epistemology, it's the latter. And it's precisely because they regard non-scepticism as a *desideratum* on any satisfactory theory of knowledge

9 One might wonder whether this is really the case. If knowledge is compatible with the possibility of error, then one can know that *p* on the basis on non-entailing evidence. But this same non-entailing evidence might enable one to 'rule out' any sceptical, *not-p* possibilities, in which case absolutism does not have any sceptical consequences after all. Clearly (see above), this is not how Cohen is thinking of 'ruling out.' But even if we adopt the line of thinking just described, it only undercuts the rationale for the RA approach presently being considered. For that line of thinking suggests that perhaps one *can* rule out all of the not-*p* alternatives, in which case one need hardly introduce the notion of *relevant* (not-*p*) alternatives in order to avoid sceptical results.

that many epistemologists have rejected ‘the absoluteness criterion’ which, as we saw above, threatens the idea that we do know many things. One begins to wonder, then, whether — as portrayed by Cohen, anyway — our ordinary thinking about knowledge isn’t incoherent (cf. Schiffer, 1996): we are supposed, naïvely, to accept the absoluteness criterion; but it seems plausible that our natural non-scepticism — the other main thread in our naïve epistemology — is inseparable from a natural *non*-absolutism. Most absolutist RA theorists (e.g., Cohen, 1988; Lewis, 1996) demur, opting for a contextualistic standard of relevance.¹⁰ In relativizing — hence, effectively, weakening — the absoluteness criterion, they attempt to preserve absolutist intuitions while accommodating our natural anti-scepticism.

However, if we’re concerned merely with evaluating the *prima facie* plausibility of the RA approach, as motivated in particular ways, the contextualist manoeuvre only makes things worse: not only is the restriction to ‘relevant’ alternatives a concession to the theorist’s *non*-absolutism, it’s also a marker for contextualism. And, as noted at the outset, many have found contextualism to be, for one or another reason, unsatisfactory. Hence, in terms of both the absolutism used to motivate it, and the contextualism used to avoid absolutism’s having any dire sceptical consequences, the core RA claim ends up being, at the very least, quite unobvious.

Granted, *contextualism* isn’t required for saying that ‘know(s)’ is absolute, but only relationally so: the standard might be more-or-less context-invariant, as against the sort of quite variable standard(s) the contextualist proposes. Such is Dretske’s view of relevance. Whereas contextualists understand ‘context’ to be a matter of such things as ‘the purposes, intentions, expectations, presuppositions, etc., of the speakers who utter these sentences’ (Cohen, 1999, 187-8; cf. DeRose, 1992, 1995; Heller, 1999b, 117ff.), and see context as playing an essential role in setting the epistemic standards, Dretske regards such ‘attributor factors’ as relevant (only) to fixing (by means of, i.e., contrastive focussing) *what it is that S is said to know*; they don’t affect ‘what it takes for [S] to know’ (1992, 192) — hence, *whether S knows*. The standards to which absolute terms (‘flat,’ ‘empty,’ ‘know(s)’) are relative, according to Dretske, is set by such things as (i) the *normal* use to which they’re put — in the case of ‘know(s),’ just which extra-evidential circumstances of the knower, which discriminative capacities, are *ordinarily* taken to be rele-

10 Dretske is an exception: though he speaks of ‘the pragmatic dimension of knowing’ (1981b), he favors a non-contextualistic view of relevance — see below.

vant to whether *S* knows (*ibid.*), and/or (ii) ‘the kind of possibilities that actually exist in the objective situation’ (1981b, 63; cf. 1981a, 131).¹¹ But this just means that the standards of relevance can’t be all *that* flexible for Dretske — not nearly as flexible as is supposed by contextualists.

Of course, that there can be a non-contextualist relational absoluteness won’t comfort those who seek, in the (alleged) relational absoluteness of ‘know(s),’ some evidence for contextualism. More seriously, though, we’ve yet to answer the question of why we should regard ‘know(s)’ as (relationally) absolute in the first place. We’re trying to find a plausible rationale for the core RA claim, and the relational absoluteness of ‘know(s)’ is supposed to give us just that; but what’s the argument, exactly?

Dretske, at any rate, wants to regard the non-comparative character of ‘know(s)’ as deriving from ‘the absoluteness, or conclusiveness, of the justification required to know’ (1981b, 49; 1971). But, on the face of it, the demand for conclusiveness of justification is once again tantamount to a demand for infallibility. And now we’re back to the question of what, if anything, infallibilism — even if it’s ultimately qualified; even if it ends up being only infallibility-relative-to-a-standard — has to recommend it.

Well, there is the Lewisian argument:

If you claim that *S* knows that *P*, and yet you grant that *S* cannot eliminate a certain possibility in which not-*P*, it certainly seems as if you have granted that *S* does not after all know that *P*. To speak of fallible knowledge, of knowledge despite uneliminated possibilities of error, just *sounds* contradictory. (1996, 549)

But, granted that ‘overt, explicit’ fallibilism sounds ‘wrong’ (*ibid.*, 550), it doesn’t immediately follow that ‘knowledge is, by definition, infallible knowledge’ (*ibid.*, 566). For whether the oddity here is due to semantic factors — and, if so, whether this really impugns fallibilism — remain open to question.¹²

Next, we might try to motivate the idea that ‘know(s)’ is (relationally) absolute by showing that others concepts exhibit the same logical struc-

11 It’s not clear just how Dretske views the relation between such factors as (i) and (ii); it’s not clear, indeed, just what Dretske’s considered view as to the standards of relevance are (cf. DeRose, 1999, 203-4, n. 3). It is clear, however, that he doesn’t think that the standards are anywhere as variable as contextualists suggest (see, e.g., his 1992, 185-96).

12 For responses to Lewis on these two points, see Rysiew (2001) and Stanley (2005), respectively.

ture (Cohen, 1992, 431; Dretske, 1970, 40-47; 1981b, 48-52; Lewis, 1996, 425). But this can't be the whole of the argument; after all, lots of concepts *don't* exhibit an absolute (/relationally absolute) structure. Considerations of precedence might serve as a kind of reassurance, revealing that in treating 'know(s)' as (relationally) absolute we would be not positing an otherwise unknown phenomenon. The question, though, is why we should posit it in the first place.

How about examples of the sort Dretske gives — instances, as he sees it, of epistemic operators' failing to penetrate to all of the logical consequences of a given proposition? Dretske thinks such examples at least *suggest* that 'know(s)' is relationally absolute — that in order to know that *p* one doesn't have to be able to rule out all of the not-*p* alternatives, but only the 'relevant' ones — , which is just the core RA claim.

Unfortunately, Dretske's examples aren't persuasive. Thus:

Case #1: If the creature I see is a zebra, it's not a cleverly disguised mule. But I can know that it's a zebra without knowing that it's not a cleverly disguised mule. And how else to explain this, if not because, absent some reason to think that the zoo authorities might be up to no good (or whatever), its being a cleverly disguised mule simply isn't a relevant alternative to its being a zebra (1970: 39)?

Comments: Dretske regards this as an instance of closure failure and, as noted earlier, some of the things he says suggest that he takes the whole import of the RA approach to be that 'we must live with the failure of closure' (1991, 190). However, others have argued persuasively that the RA approach *per se* is perfectly compatible with preserving closure. With regard to the present example, e.g., one could say that the appearance of closure failure rests on an equivocation between 'contexts' (e.g., Stine, 1976; Cohen, 1988). Nor does charging Dretske with equivocation require presuming a contextualist framework: Once the sceptical possibility (painted mule) is introduced, 'the evidence you *had* for thinking [the creatures] zebras has been effectively neutralized, since it does not count toward their *not* being mules cleverly disguised to look like zebras' (1970, 39). Fair enough; but, with that evidence neutralized, why suppose one *does* know that they're zebras (but not that they're not cleverly disguised mules)? Finally, as noted in the previous Section, one could say, with Stine (1976), that one does know that the creature isn't a cleverly painted mule because *that it is* simply isn't a relevant alternative, and so isn't something that one need rule out. In the example, one doesn't undertake any special precautionary checks to ensure that it's not a cleverly disguised mule (getting up close and sniffing for paint, etc.), but the closure principle is a *logical* principle — it concerns what you know (*modulo*

certain other conditions' holding), given what else you know; it's not a methodological principle, whereby (e.g.) to know that p you've got to make sure that something it entails, q , is true.^{13,14}

Case #2: Ordinarily, we take ourselves to know such things as that a wall is red without having undertaken any special precautionary checks — without having determined that the lighting (etc.) is normal. Rather we simply assume, and perhaps with good reason, that the conditions are normal. But, Dretske says, 'I do not think these reasons are sufficiently good ... to say of the particular case we are in that we *know* the conditions are normal' (1970, 38-9)

Comments: This is not, in fact, a candidate instance of non-closure; for what's supposed to be known (that the wall is red) doesn't entail what's alleged not to be known (that the conditions are normal). That the lighting conditions are normal is something that's entailed *by my knowing* certain things; that I *know* that the conditions are normal is at best something that's entailed *by my knowing that I know* that the wall is red. In fact, it emerges that Dretske himself thinks, not just that RA entails closure failure, but that the failure of closure 'merely means, among other things, that normally we will not (perhaps cannot) know *that* or *when* we know' (1991, 191; cf. 1981a). But the closure principle — hence, by Dretske's lights, the RA approach — is in fact orthogonal to the issue of whether or how often we know that we know, and/or whether knowing entails knowing that one knows. It's not the falsity of the closure principle that explains such 'seemingly paradoxical' facts as that '[o]ne does not have to *know* that one's eyes are *not* paralyzed in order to see [hence, know] that something is moving' (1981a, 123). One can quite happily reject 'the *kk* principle' (Nozick, 1981)¹⁵ while remaining neutral as to the (de)merits of both the principle of epistemic closure and the core RA claim. This is good news for RA theorists, of course, insofar

13 Here, and with regard to the next example, I am much indebted to Williams' excellent discussion of the closure principle and alleged cases of closure violation (1996, 330-6).

14 In arguing against '*modus ponens* fallibilism,' a view he attributes to Klein (1981), Cohen (1999) does treat the issue as one of epistemological priority — it has, for him, to do with 'the structure of reasons.'

15 Because, e.g., one thinks it that involves a 'level-confusion' (Alston, 1980), that it is a recipe for irredeemable ignorance, or simply that it's a requirement epistemologists shouldn't obviously insist upon (cf. Goldman, 1986, 56-7; Nozick, 1981, 245-7).

as the RA approach doesn't entail rejecting closure. But it's bad news too for anyone who was seeking evidence for the core RA claim in cases of closure failure.

In canvassing non-Goldmanian motivations for the RA approach, we've found wanting those rationales which presuppose, or lead directly to, such things as the denial of closure, infallibilism, (relational) absolutism, and contextualism — each of which is at least as controversial as the core RA claim itself. Hence the attractiveness of the other principal means of motivating the RA view to be found in the literature — *the direct approach*. Here, we look simply to features of our ordinary knowledge-attributing practices, where (it's claimed) we find evidence of an antecedent commitment to the core RA claim.

Thus, there is the following passage from Austin, who is seen by some as the modern progenitor of the whole RA approach:

[S]pecial cases where doubts arise and require resolving, are contrasted with the normal cases which hold the field *unless* there is some special suggestion that deceit, etc., is involved, and deceit, moreover, of an intelligible kind in the circumstances, that is, of a kind that can be looked into because motive, etc., is specially suggested. There is no suggestion that I *never* know what other people's emotions are, nor yet that in particular cases I might be wrong for no special reason or in no special way. (1946, 113; cf. *ibid.*, 88)

Hookway provides another instance of the direct approach. The evidence here is even more straightforwardly linguistic:

Whether I can correctly claim knowledge appears to be relative to the purposes underlying the conversations to which I am contributing...
I have the right to make a claim to knowledge when I can rebut or respond to every contextually salient challenge to my claim which I ought to take into account. (1996, 1, 5)

Nor are Austin and Hookway alone in finding evidence of the core RA claim in our unreflective thought and — especially — our ordinary talk of who knows what. A number of other leading RA theorists have been guided in their thinking by considerations of what we are/aren't 'reluctant to say' (Cohen, 1988, 93), 'what one means' when one says that *S* knows that *p* (Stine, 1976, 255), the conditions under which 'we would say' that *S* knows that *p* (Goldman, 1976, 91), and so forth.

But if it is a virtue of the direct approach that, on it, the core RA claim falls directly out of observation of our everyday knowledge-attributing behaviour, there are drawbacks all the same. First, there is the fact that if we are being guided by observations about our everyday knowledge attributing practices, there seems to be no reason to stop short of a full-blown contextualist view, whereby (for instance) it suffices to make an alternative relevant that it is *mentioned* (e.g., Lewis 1979, 1996). In this

way, the direct approach lends itself to contextualism even more directly than the absolutist rationale.

Second, there is the worry that the direct approach invites us to commit ‘the pragmatic fallacy’ — that is, the fallacy of supposing that if the use of a given expression fulfils some illocutionary purpose of the speaker, it must also characterize the expression’s semantic content (Salmon, 1991). No doubt, we’re differentially willing to attribute/deny knowledge, depending on such matters as how high the stakes are, or whether we’ve just come from a philosophy class where Descartes’s evil demon has been discussed. In such cases, we’re liable to think of alternatives we’d otherwise have ignored, and may even take them ‘seriously’ (Goldman, 1976, 89), with the result that the naturalness or ‘correctness’ of attributing (/denying) knowledge will vary accordingly. But whether this is semantically significant is a separate question¹⁶ — that it is will be ‘obvious’ only on the dubious assumption that semantic facts alone guide our linguistic behaviour. So, in view of both the contextualistic consequences it naturally invites and its suspect methodology, the direct approach to motivating the core RA claim isn’t any better than the absolutist rationale.

IV Conclusion: The Status and Significance of the Core Claim

Unlike the more standard rationales for the RA approach we’ve just reviewed, Goldman’s rationale in *DPK* neither employs any dubious methodological assumptions (e.g., that semantic facts can be read off of the naturalness of saying this or that) nor presumes any contentious epistemic claims (e.g., about our intuitive absolutism, or the supposed connection between closure and the *kk* principle). In this respect, the present rationale is superior to those which have figured prominently in the literature: the RA approach may prove ultimately unsatisfactory, but whereas the standard rationales are such as to render it controversial

16 Thus, e.g., while Goldman introduces the restriction to ‘relevant’ alternatives as a marker for his non-scepticism (hence, fallibilism), he shifts at times into using ‘relevance’ in its colloquial sense, whereby relevance is not distinct from salience: ‘If the speaker is in a class where Descartes’s evil demon has just been discussed, or Russell’s five-minute-old-world hypothesis, he may think of alternatives he would not otherwise think of and will perhaps treat them seriously’ (1976, 89); here, these ‘hypotheses’ would be not “‘idle’” but “‘serious’ (‘relevant’)” (ibid.).

from the outset, as motivated by Goldman, the core RA claim is entirely the product of — and no more controversial than — the responsiveness requirement, together with fallibilism about knowledge.¹⁷

But is the core claim, so motivated, at all interesting? We might have avoided begging any questions about closure or contextualism, but at the same time haven't we entirely gutted the RA approach of any real content — hence, of any real theoretical interest? Not at all. But before explaining how that's so, it's worth pointing out the extent to which this imagined objection might get things right — i.e., the extent to which the core claim itself, as motivated in Section 2, is something that very few epistemologists would quarrel with.

To begin, just about everyone is a fallibilist about knowledge — certainly, that is the 'intuitive' view, which theorists are led to abandon only because they take themselves to be in possession of some arguments suggesting the contrary. Thus, it is no objection to the RA approach as motivated in Section 2 that we have yet to say just what the correct standard of relevance is. For recall, once again, that as Goldman introduces it 'relevance' is simply a marker for our commitment to fallibilism. Thus, anyone who is a fallibilist owes an account of 'relevance' in the present sense: if you think that *S*'s knowing that *p* doesn't entail that *S* can't be wrong about whether *p*, you must answer the question, *which* ways of possibly being wrong *do* disqualify *S* from knowing that *p* — which ways of possibly being wrong are 'beyond the pale' (not disqualifying) and which are 'real' (disqualifying)? This, note, is really just the challenge faced by post-Gettier epistemologists, and everyone has to answer to that; there is nothing especially novel or problematic about the issue as it arises here.

Moreover, it is arguable that very few epistemologists would want to *reject* the responsiveness requirement on knowing — few, that is, would want to *deny* the idea that, if *S* knows that *p*, *S* would not believe that *p* in at least all the nearby not-*p* worlds. There is, of course, disagreement over whether responsiveness is *enough* to convert a true belief into knowledge — this, arguably, is *the* issue over which externalists and internalists part ways.¹⁸ Further there is disagreement — especially

17 The point, then, is not that the standard rationales for the RA approach do not withstand serious scrutiny, whereas Goldman's rationale does. It is, rather, that the former (but not the latter) introduce into the very RA framework certain quite controversial claims, or make the whole approach rest upon methodology which many would regard as suspect.

18 It bears noting that the RA approach is often (misleadingly) presented as inherently internalistic. The versions Vogel (1999) discusses, e.g., are all evidentialist; and while

among externalists; for it is they who tend to talk about knowing in just such terms — over which account of responsiveness *exactly* is to be preferred.¹⁹ Finally, there is disagreement about whether we ought to build our preferred responsiveness requirement directly into our account of knowledge, or merely seek an account which (i.a.) has as a consequence what the responsiveness requirement itself demands. Nozick-style tracking theories tend, like Goldman's account in *DPK*, to go the former route. Most traditional theories of knowledge do not — there, what needs to be added to true belief in our list of the requirements on knowing is generally thought to be justification, with people disagreeing over what *that* requires.

However — and this is the important point — none of the traditional theories of knowledge has as a result the *denial* of what Goldman asserts: that if you have a subject who, though he believes truly that *p*, would still believe that *p* even in a relatively nearby not-*p* world, then you do not have a knower. Thus, e.g., if my true belief *bears the right relation to the rest of what I believe* (coherentism), or if it *owes its justification to my basic beliefs* (foundationalism), or if it *does not depend for its justification on any false beliefs* (Harman), or if *there's no true proposition which would defeat my justification for believing it* (indefeasibility theories), or if it is *the result of (some subset of) my cognitive truth-oriented faculties functioning properly in an environment similar to that for they were designed* (Plantinga), or if it is *the output of a reliable cognitive process* (reliabilism), then, as a matter of empirical fact, I will not believe that *p* in nearby worlds in which not-*p*. In short, it's arguable that, extensionally speaking, responsiveness of belief — the second element in Goldman's rationale for RA — is something all epistemologists are after. Nor is this surprising. For everyone,²⁰ from Plato onwards, agrees that knowledge is *at least* non-accidentally true belief. And it is at least a very good indication that your belief that *p* is only accidentally true, and perhaps even definitional of the notion, that you would believe what you do even in a very close world in which

he sees that this is not mandatory, Cohen too carries out his discussion 'in terms of internalist notions like evidence and rationality' (1999, 70).

19 Among the accounts we have on offer are Nozick's (1981) sensitivity of belief, Goldman's (1976, e.g.) reliability of cognitive processes, DeRose's 'Rule of Sensitivity' governing belief attributions (1995, Sections 3-10; 2004), and Sosa's (1999, 2000) 'safe' belief.

20 Well, just about everyone: Sartwell (1991, 1992), according to whom knowledge is merely true belief, is a notable exception.

p is false. Where people differ is over *how to secure the result* that this not be true of any knower.

Now, the discussion of the preceding three paragraphs is not essential to the arguments of the preceding Sections. Thus, even if that discussion is off the mark, it would leave untouched the claims that Goldman's rationale is superior to standard ones, and that it leaves what have been the most familiar, and controversial, elements of most RA views the genuinely optional commitments that they are. Thus, we're able to see that dressing disagreements about closure or contextualism up in the language of disputes about the RA approach itself is, and has been, counter-productive.

Still, if the foregoing *is* on the right track, it helps reduce any residual concern that the core RA claim, as motivated above, is itself deeply controversial. At the same time, though, the preceding discussion only sharpens the worry about triviality noted above: if, as the immediately preceding remarks suggest, the core RA claim (as motivated in Section 2) is not itself something that the majority of epistemologists would, or should, find controversial, that would seem to suggest that the core claim itself, as motivated above, does nothing to advance epistemological debate.

It is this last claim that should be resisted. Goldman closes *DPK* with an explanation of the 'the intended significance of [his] analysis' (1976, 101). It is notable that, in so doing, he doesn't mention closure, or contextualism, or even the response to scepticism which the RA approach might enable (see nn. 6 and 8, above) — he doesn't mention, that is, precisely those things which are standardly held up as *the* theoretically interesting features of the RA approach. Rather, what he says is this:

The trouble with many philosophical treatments of knowledge is that they are inspired by Cartesian-like conceptions of justification or vindication. There is a consequent tendency to overintellectualize or overrationalize the notion of knowledge....I am trying to fashion an account of knowing that focuses on more primitive aspects of cognitive life, in connection with which, I believe, the term 'know' gets its application. A fundamental facet of animate life, both human and infra-human, is telling things apart, distinguishing predator from prey, for example, or a protective habitat from a threatening one. The concept of knowledge has its roots in this kind of cognitive activity. (ibid., 102)

Progress in philosophy sometimes takes the form of forcing theorists to rethink some of their most deeply held assumptions. The significance of the RA approach, as Goldman sees it, lies in its providing an alternative to justification-centered accounts of knowledge. The core claim itself hardly constitutes a complete epistemology; but working within the RA framework may put us in a better position to productively discuss the exact contours of knowing. If it turns out that the RA

approach to understanding knowledge can be motivated in such a way that just about every epistemologist would, even should, accept it, so much the better for Goldman's claim to have recovered the real roots of the concept.²¹

Received March 2004

Revised November 2004

Revised September 2005

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(Pagination of in-text citations follows that of the reprint, where listed.)

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21 A previous version of this paper was presented at a meeting of the WCPA; Tim Schroeder was commentator. Thanks too to Dom Lopes and Melinda Hogan for their feedback on a previous draft and, especially, to two anonymous referees for this journal.

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