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# An Externalist, Contextualist Epistemology of Disagreement about Religion

**Abstract**

The essay uses developments in contextualism and the epistemology of disagreement to talk about the epistemic challenge of religious diversity. It first describes the central issues within the epistemology of disagreement while relating this study to religious disagreement. I describe disagreement conditions that make knowledge retention extremely challenging even for an externalist about justification. The essay then presents and defends an externalist variety of contextualism designed specifically to respond to such extreme challenges. The benefits of a contextualist approach to disagreement are appealing even in light of one of its most severe criticisms, namely, the warranted assertability maneuver.

How should exposure to philosophical and religious diversity influence the knowledge that we have? Two developments within analytic epistemology propose to answer this question for philosophical diversity, contextualism and the epistemology of disagreement. This essay uses these two developments to talk about the epistemic challenge of religious diversity.

This essay first describes the central issues within the epistemology of disagreement while relating this study to religious disagreement. We are concerned here especially with the extreme challenge during actual disagreements between opposing religious representatives. While religious diversity seriously considered often is a challenge for people even when they haven't been engaged in actual disagreements with the religious other, the extreme challenge of the latter, even for externalists about justification, has important implications for the former. This essay presents and defends an externalist variety of contextualism designed specifically to respond to such extreme challenges. The benefits of a contextualist approach to disagreement are appealing even in light of one of its most severe criticisms, namely, the warranted assertability maneuver (To be defined later).[1]

## 1 The epistemology of disagreement about religion

The object of investigation in the epistemology of disagreement is what we will refer to as the parity, disagreement context, PDC for short. Suppose two

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people disagree about an important issue, and the disagreement is not due to one party's epistemic negligence or obliviousness to relevant evidence. Nor is the disagreement clearly due to the improper function or the unreliability of a particular cognitive faculty. Here we have an example of PDC which can be formally stated, in the extreme, as a thesis about justification:

**PDC** The justification $S_1$ has for $P$ is on an epistemic par with the justification $S_2$ has for not-$P$, where justification is to be understood on either internalist or externalist lines, or on both lines.

The most central issue in the epistemology of disagreement revolves around the following question: If PDC happens, does it weaken one's confidence in, or support for, one's belief? Some have argued that it doesn't. Though one generally is on an epistemic par one can think that in a specific situation one has some epistemic advantage.[2] I have argued elsewhere that PDC usually does weaken one's confidence, and that this usually creates an extreme difficultly for externalist-based belief retention.[3] In what follows I will summarize this argument in order to highlight a problem at the core of disagreement, a problem which contextualism can provide an appealing solution for.

Before proceeding, it will be good to compare two contexts, based on actual encounters with students, which we will refer back to as paradigms, one which is a PDC compared to another which isn't.

Context One (which isn't a PDC):

A student, say Joe, came to his professor's office to talk about a paper he is writing for a class. In the course of the conversation, the student says he is a Christian. At one point he even says, 'I know that Jesus died on a cross.'

Context Two (which is a PDC):

In a class on world religions, the same student again declares he is a Christian and that Jesus Christ died on a cross. This time a Muslim student in class challenged his knowledge about Jesus' death. The Muslim talked about how the belief that Jesus died on a cross is just based on a case of mistaken identity. The person on the cross looked like Jesus, but wasn't. The Muslim student got out his Qur'an and recited Surah 4:157–158 which most Muslims believe says Jesus did not die on a cross. To Joe the Muslim said,

2. For someone who thinks this way, see Thomas Kelly, 'The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement,' in: Tamar Szabo (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005): 167–195.

3. James Kraft, 'Religious Disagreement, Externalism, and the Epistemology of Disagreement: Listening to Our Grandmothers,' *Religious Studies* 43 (2007): 417–432. Further references to work I have done earlier refer to this essay. See also: James Kraft, 'Religious Tolerance through Religious Diversity and Epistemic Humility,' *Sophia* 45 (2006); James Kraft, 'Philip Quinn's contribution to the epistemic challenge of religious diversity,' *Religious Studies* 42 (2006): 453–465.

'Do you know that it wasn't someone who just looked like Jesus on the cross?' Joe said, 'People close to Jesus testified to seeing Jesus on the cross. This is in the New Testament, which I feel was given to us by God.' The Muslim student pointed out how he has God's word, the Qur'an, backing up his claim about mistaken identity, and how God had to reveal the Qur'an to Muhammad just because the New Testament had gotten some things wrong during its long oral tradition. He pointed out how the New Testament wasn't even recorded in the language which Jesus spoke. He also knew some Greek and pointed out how the synoptic Gospels have the people closest to Jesus standing at a distance from the cross (ἀπὸ μακρόθεν). John's Gospel seems to have Jesus' mother standing closer to the cross, but then there are all sorts of discrepancies between the synoptic Gospels and John's. If Mary were there, certainly the synoptic Gospels would have indicated so. He asked Joe again, given that Joe believes God can continually reveal himself, given that sometimes people make mistakes about the identity of people especially when they are standing from a distance, and given the possibility of corruption through oral tradition and translation, 'Do you really know that it wasn't someone who just looked like Jesus on the cross.' Because the Christian student so deeply respected this Muslim student as an epistemic peer, and after a considerable delay, Joe said, 'I guess I don't know that Jesus died on a cross.'[4]

What follows in this essay is an attempt to make sense out of what Joe says in both contexts. Some think that Joe should have stuck to his guns. When the heat is on one can't just deny what one earlier took as knowledge. Knowledge doesn't vary across contexts in this way. Have a little epistemic loyalty! Yet, this paper will defend the legitimacy of what Joe said in both contexts by presenting a contextualist understanding of the epistemology of religious disagreement.

## 2 Peer disagreement as an extreme challenge for the externalist

To most deeply show the legitimacy of Joe's response to PDC, we will first consider the best externalist argument for holding firm to one's knowledge in the face of PDC. Then we will find that the extreme challenge externalist-based belief retention faces in light of religious disagreement makes the contextualist response to disagreement more appealing.

The externalist approach says that justification depends on epistemic conditions individuals may not be aware of or have access to upon reflection. Yet, if these epistemic conditions are met, the belief one has is justified, even when

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4. An anonymous reviewer of this essay insists the statement "Jesus died on a cross" is not necessarily a religious statement. It is more factual and historical. The statement "Jesus died on a cross to atone for our sins" is more clearly a religious statement. I see the point, yet many factual/historical claims are absolutely essential parts of religious belief perspectives. For example, "Muhammad existed" is certainly factual/historical, and affirmation of this statement is absolutely essential to Islam.

the individual knower has no idea whether the conditions are met. One popular way of understanding these epistemic conditions is reliabilism, which says the individual has a justified belief only if the belief was formed by a reliable process. Others, like Alvin Plantinga, talk about 'proper function' as being the necessary condition.

Though I have described elsewhere exactly how the externalist runs into extreme difficulties in PDC, I will here outline enough in order to show how an externalist, contextualist response to religious disagreement can be appealing. This extreme difficulty revolves around the trust the externalist has that her beliefs were formed by a reliable, or properly functioning, process. When engaged in religious disagreement the externalist doesn't have to give better reasons than her opponent, since externalists don't think knowledge requires awareness of reasons, reliability, or anything else that might be thought to justify. Yet, even though the externalist doesn't think we have to be aware of the reliability or proper function of our belief forming practices, still we need to be able to trust that they are so formed. No externalist I know of would say one should hold on to one's belief whatever happens. Externalism doesn't say people are entitled to their beliefs whatever counter considerations come to bear, since this would not allow for belief revision.[5]

To allow for both belief retention and revision, externalism is most of the time combined with the principle of conservatism, which can be stated as follows:

Principle of conservatism:

If there are no good grounds for questioning the proper function or reliability of the belief's formation process, then the belief should be retained.

Notice this principle of conservatism isn't a license to retain every belief. The antecedent is affirmed only if no grounds actually come to light to question the proper function or reliability of the belief's specific formation process. Even though externalists don't think anything that we are necessarily aware of justifies our beliefs, still most externalists recognize that the beliefs we retain have to hold up to challenges.[6] This principle of conservatism doesn't engage in any activities offensive to externalists, since there is no need to know the reliability of the formation process. All that is required is that one be able to rout challenges to reliability. One can defuse attacks on the reliability of one's belief-forming process without having to know its reliability, just like a good defense lawyer can defuse attacks on his client's character without having to prove his client's character admirable.

The main problem for externalists in challenging religious disagreements is that the antecedent of the principle of conservatism is not often fulfilled. When

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5. Alvin Plantinga, for instance, gives an example of the revision of a basic belief given the addition of challenging new information: Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 343–344.

6. For one version of the principle of conservatism, see Robert Koons, 'Bob and Carol and Tess and Ali,' *Sophia* 45 (2006).

people engage sophisticated representatives of another faith, they often find that the other is a cognitive peer just as knowledgeable about the relevant evidence, just as good at evaluating evidence, and just as good at weighing the evidence. What often results in these situations of PDC is that the epistemic situation of both parties is so similar that one cannot tell which is more likely truth-conducive. I have called this the resolution problem. Here one finds that the level of discernable details of the two epistemic situations is not adequate for telling the difference between them. The recognition of a resolution problem places great difficulty on the ability to affirm the antecedent of the principle of conservatism sufficient for belief retention. If the other is generally just as good as I am at evaluating and weighing evidence, and has access to all the information I have access to, yet comes up with something radically different, and if the other is seemingly in just as good an epistemic position as I am, then the other could have just as easily come up with the right belief. If I cannot see any discernable difference in the general capabilities between myself and the other, I tend to think I could have just as easily made the error. The trust in the reliable function of the belief forming process, a trust needed for fulfilling the antecedent of the principle of conservatism, is challenged. I could think that I got lucky, but this doesn't help one affirm the antecedent. Since most religious believers don't have the sort of resolution required to see themselves in a better epistemic position than the opponent during peer disagreement, as I have argued elsewhere, this is an extreme challenge for the externalist.[7]

Yet some do have the level of resolution needed for belief retention. Some people have had what I call unusually vivid intrinsic defeater defeaters (UVIDDs for short), which give them the ability to see how their specific epistemic situation has an advantage.[8] UVIDDs are specific, unusual experiences that are so vivid that they serve to defeat defeaters that are brought to bear by the religious other, even while acknowledging that the opponent generally is an epistemic peer. For example, if Joe had an experience of the resurrected Christ with stigmas on the wrists from crucifixion, Joe would have had a UVIDD helping him use the principle of conservatism, and so he would not have been troubled by the Muslim's challenge.

Yet the problem doesn't always end when one can refer to UVIDDs, since the most sophisticated opponents can sometimes also refer to their own UVIDDs which support alternative beliefs. Here, the resolution problem is deepened, for now one can't tell the difference between one's UVIDD forming process, and that of the opponent's. To use the language of one contextualist, David Lewis,

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7. Opposing the viewpoint I have argued for, Plantinga thinks the sense of the divine (*sensus divinitatis*) is generally functional especially in those who honestly and intensely seek after the truth, and who are moral. He says, "According to the extended model, we human beings typically have at least some knowledge of God, and some grasp of what is required of us; this is so even in the state of sin and even apart from regeneration. The condition of sin involves *damage* to the *sensus divinitatis*, but not obliteration; it remains partially functional in most of us. We therefore typically have some grasp of God's presence and properties and demands, but this knowledge is covered over, impeded, suppressed" (*Warranted Christian Belief*, 210).

8. UVIDD is a modification of Plantinga's "intrinsic defeater defeater" as described in *Warranted Christian Belief*, 371.

knowledge is elusive when one aggressively takes the alternatives seriously.[9] Knowledge is elusive during PDC for most without UVIDDs and for many even with UVIDDs.

### 3 The contextualist response to religious disagreement

The contextualist view is an appealing response to the extreme challenge often faced by externalists due to the serious confrontations with the religious other. Contextualism can show us how Joe's epistemic behaviors in the two contexts are quite appropriate. Contextualism pulls this off by engaging what we will refer to as the contextualist move:

> The contextualist move:
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>> 'S knows that P' and 'S doesn't know that P' can both be appropriate so long as they are said in different contexts.

Contextualism can respond to particular cases of religious disagreement in a way similar to how it responds to global, skeptical challenges to knowledge, and our understanding of the former will be deepened by comparing it to the latter. The discussion of the problem of skepticism will help us understand more deeply both the contextualist move and the contextualist's response to the warranted assertability maneuver.

Near universally in analytic epistemology the problem of skepticism is described as a problem for how to relate three types of intuitions. The first is the affirmation of some everyday, ordinary knowledge. That it seems so appropriate to make knowledge claims in our everyday life without having to contest them we shall call the ordinary intuition. For example, G. E. Moore is famous for saying he knows that he has hands. Religious people also have such ordinary intuitions, for example, the Christian sense of the appropriateness of claiming *prima facia* knowledge about Jesus' death on a cross.

The second intuition of the problem of skepticism is the recognition of some skeptical error possibility. Here is one example: 'I don't know that I am not in a matrix.' The skeptic tells us that if we were really in a matrix like the one described in the movie 'Matrix,' everything would appear as it appears now. 'Chocolate' would be just as satisfying and 'water' would feel just as wet. The movie was a great success because skeptical error possibilities are so appealing. A quite intuitive response for many is that we don't know these skeptical error possibilities are not happening. We shall call this the skeptical intuition.

The error possibilities contextualism responds to in religious disagreements often are not as global as the one's skeptics bring up. For example, the error possibility brought up by the Muslim—'Do you know that it wasn't someone who just looked like Jesus on the cross?'—isn't a global skeptical error possibility in the sense that I can still know that I have hands even if I don't know that Jesus died

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9. David Lewis, 'Elusive Knowledge,' in: Keith DeRose and Ted A. Warfield (ed.), *Skepticism: A Contemporary Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 220–239.

on a cross. Though the error possibilities brought up in religious disagreement aren't always global, they are no less problematic. We are treating the problem of skepticism as a type of PDC, i.e, one that has global consequences for all ordinary intuitions.

The third intuition appealed to in the problem of skepticism goes by the name 'closure.' The idea is that if one knows something, then one knows also what is implied by what one knows. So, for example, if I know Sam is a human, and if I know that having lungs is implied by the fact that one is a human, I know that Sam has lungs. Most people, Robert Nozick and Fred Dretski notwithstanding, would admit they have the closure intuition. Now, we can see how closure relates to the other two intuitions of the problem of skepticism. The skeptic uses the second intuition along with closure in order to disabuse one of the ordinary intuition. Both the skeptic and Moorean agree that knowing one has hands implies that one knows one is not in a matrix. Only the skeptic does *modus tollens* where the Moorean does *modus ponens*. The skeptic reasons as follows: if I know that I have hands, then I know that I am not in a matrix. But I don't know that I am not in a matrix. So, I don't know that I have hands. The Moorean reasons as follows: If I know that I have hands, then I know that I am not in a matrix. I do know I have hands. So, I do know that I am not in a matrix.

Given what has been said so far about the contextualist response to religious disagreement and how it parallels the contextualist response to skepticism, we can now be more precise about the unique response of the contextualist to religious disagreement. The beauty of contextualism – some think its bane – is that both the skeptic and the non-skeptic can thrive when in their own domain, and this while accepting a certain way of thinking about closure. The contextualist move purports to preserve intra-contextual closure while denying inter-contextual closure. Like Moore, but unlike Nozick and Dretske, the contextualist accepts closure. The ordinary intuition and the skeptical intuition aren't at war with each other, given closure, because, on the contextualist model, their respective uses of closure are confined to their own domain. In a context where extremely challenging error possibilities are focused on in a religious disagreement, for example in the 'second context' described above, the skeptical intuition is used with closure and *modus tollens* in order to deny knowledge. In a context where extremely challenging error possibilities are not focused on, one can go with one's ordinary intuition combined with closure to deny, through *modus ponens*, all those incompatible possibilities within the purview of the ordinary context.

Before proceeding on to look at a major criticism of contextualism, it would be good to say more about the specific contextualism pursued here. Types of contextualism vary by their understanding of the mechanism driving the contextualist move. More specifically, varieties of contextualism are differentiated by what they think varies about 'know' in different contexts. Like Keith DeRose and David Lewis, this essay pursues a contextualism whereby the truth conditions

of 'knows' change between contexts.[10] For example, to know that there is a table in front of me I need to be able to rule out that it is a stool. Additional truth conditions come to play when moving to a skeptical context where I know it is a table only on the condition that I can rule out that it is just a virtual table. Joe's claims that he knows in the first context and that he doesn't know in the second context don't contradict each other because the meaning, as represented by the set of truth conditions in play, of 'know' has changed from one context to another.[11]

As the number of truth conditions increase the belief-forming process must be able to distinguish the actual world from more merely possible worlds. The level of ability to engage such distinctions we shall call the resolution. The term 'resolution' is chosen carefully so as to appeal to externalist sensibilities. Resolution is a quality a knowing process possesses whether or not an individual knows she possesses it. A telescope possesses a certain resolution, whether or not the person using it knows what the resolution is. The externalist doesn't have to prove that her belief-forming process has adequate resolution in a particular context. But, she does need to be able to trust that there is adequate resolution, and she can do this so long as nothing comes along that leads her to question the reliability of her belief-forming process. Here we have the principle of conservatism. The problem is, as mentioned earlier, the most challenging situations of peer religious disagreement often show one unable to distinguish the other's belief forming process from one's own, and this erodes the required trust. Say there are two of the same electric thermometers which give significantly different readings. The two thermometers are manufactured by the same factory and they are the exact same model made in the same year. One is not functioning properly, but I don't know which one because I can't tell the difference between the two. My knowing process doesn't have enough resolution.

Similarly, Joe has knowledge, in context one, that Jesus died on a cross. When the number of truth conditions on knowledge is increased in context two such that he must be able to rule out that the witnesses simply mistook someone else for Jesus, his belief forming process no longer has the ability to distinguish between a world where Jesus died on a cross and a world where he didn't, so Joe reasons, though not in these words. Joe sees the Muslim student as an epistemic, cognitive peer, and he cannot tell the difference between his Muslim classmate's process of knowing and his own. Here there is a resolution problem where he can't trust that the level of clarity of details, i.e. the resolution, he has is adequate to make the necessary discrimination. However, if he were to get appeared to by Jesus with stigmata, then he would have a UVIDD that gives him adequate resolution.

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10. See Keith DeRose, 'Solving the Skeptical Problem,' *The Philosophical Review* 104 (1995): 1–52; and DeRose, 'Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense.' For a good description of different types of contextualism, see Duncan Pritchard, 'Two Forms of Epistemological Contextualism,' *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 64 (2002): 19–55.

11. Jonathan Schaffer discusses how the skeptic equivocates, from the perspective of contextualism, with the word "know": Jonathan Schaffer, 'From Contextualism to Contrastivism,' *Philosophical Studies* 119 (2004): 73–103, see 75.

Here we have an externalist, contextualist epistemology of disagreement about religion which defends the legitimacy of what Joe said in both contexts.

### 4 Hold up to the warranted assertability maneuver?

But, can this response to religious disagreement stand up to one of the most formidable criticisms, the warranted-asserted maneuver, WAM for short? This most challenging criticism thinks both the ordinary and skeptical intuitions are legitimate, yet one of them has to be subordinated and explained away. We can learn a lot more about contextualism by seeing how it responds to WAMs, which say one of the conflicting intuitions is generated not because of changes in the truth conditions of 'knows,' but rather because of changes in assertability conditions. The truth conditions for knowledge are invariantly set along with all the initial facts regarding the epistemic situation (Hence people who use WAM are invariantists about truth conditions). Critics of contextualism are invariantist about the truth conditions of 'knows.' Once the invariant truth conditions are set, it's either true or false that those truth conditions are met. Patrick Rysiew says this best:

> What the invariantist denies is that one can fix all the facts about $S$'s beliefs and evidence (*vis--vis p*), and all the objective features of $S$'s circumstances, and then *in virtue merely of some shift in the psychologyof the attributor*, bring about a shift in the truth conditions (and hence the truth value) of the relevant knowledge attributing sentence: according to the invariantist, once these facts are fixed, so are the truth conditions of a sentence used in attributing knowledge to $S$.[12]

Because the truth conditions for a knowledge claim are set along with the initial, objective features of the epistemic circumstance, the sort of changes of context contextualists talk about don't change the truth conditions. There is one set of truth conditions for knowledge no matter what alternatives one is considering, no matter what the culture, time, or place, so long as the objective facts about the epistemic situation don't change.

WAMmers often explain the shift in assertability conditions as due to the generation of false implicatures produced by violations of definite pragmatic conversational maxims. When in what contextualist call the high-standards context, the person still knows, it is just that the person no longer can assert the knowledge, since to do so would mean she would generate a false implicature by breaking some conversational maxim or principle. For example, if I know a policeman is in the next room, and I say to the person next to me, 'It is possible he is in the next

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12. Rysiew, 'The Context-Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions,' see 479; see also Rysiew, 'Contesting Contextualism,' especially 51. Martijn Blaauw defines invariantism in a very similar way in Martijn Blaauw, 'WAMming Away at Contextualism,' *SATS: Nordic Journal of Philosophy* 4 (2003): 88–97, see 94: "The truth value of knowledge attributing and knowledge denying sentences does not vary in accordance with the context; there is one, invariant, set of conditions for knowledge."

room,' a false implicature is generated to the effect that I don't know the police-man is in the next room. The false implicature is generated, even though what I said is literally true, because of the violation of the following conversational principle: Assert the stronger claim when one can. Likewise it becomes un-assertable in Joe's disagreement with the Muslim for him to say he knows that Jesus died on a cross because to do so implies that his belief-forming process has enough resolution to rule out that it was just someone who looked much like Jesus. When false implicatures are generated there is semantic confusion about what 'knows' means. WAMmers clear up the confusion by showing how there really aren't any new truth conditions for 'knows,' only new assertability conditions that must be taken into account; and when we do so, the confusion is resolved and the urge to think there are new truth conditions for 'knows' should be adequately resisted.

Among WAMmers there are many proposed candidates for which conversational maxim is violated in the examples contextualists refer to, violations which trigger the false implicatures and consequently the un-assertability of what earlier was assertable. Duncan Pritchard says the contextualist examples violate the conversational maxim of evidence.[13] Tim Black prefers to talk about the sub-maxim of strength of Grice's maxim of quantity.[14] He also talks about conversational relevance as a violated principle. Jessica Brown and Rysiew also focus on relevance.[15] I will focus on responding to Rysiew's relevance-based WAM, since we are already considering his understanding of invariantism. I will not go into the other descriptions of candidates for conversational principles violated, since I believe they can be handled in a way similar to the way we will deal here with a particular relevance-based WAM.

Rysiew distinguishes between relevant and salient alternatives, the former being the possibilities that must be ruled out initially for knowledge to take place, the latter being those that surface after meeting the initial truth conditions for knowledge and before encountering any new facts which change the epistemic situation.[16] Pragmatics can adequately explain away the contextualist urge to posit multiple contexts of truth conditions. Contextualists bring up examples

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13. Duncan Pritchard proposes a WAM which does the three things Keith DeRose says a successful WAM against contextualism can't do: Duncan Pritchard, 'Contextualism, Scepticism and Warranted Assertibility Manoeuvres,' in: J. Keim-Campbell, M. O'Rourke, and H. Silverstein (ed.), *Knowledge and Skepticism* (MIT Press, 2005). DeRose presents these three things in DeRose, 'Assertion, Knowledge, and Context,' and DeRose, 'Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense,' especially 195–197.

14. See Tim Black, 'Classic Invariantism, Relevance, and Warranted Assertability Manoeuvers,' *The Philosophical Quarterly* 55 (2005): 328–336. Here he defends a WAM objection to contextualism with a distinction between relevant and salient alternatives, a distinction he acknowledges comes from Rysiew. See also Black and Murphy, 'Avoiding the Dogmatic Commitments of Contextualism.'

15. Brown, 'Contextualism and Warranted Assertibility Manoeuvres'; Jessica Brown, 'Comparing Contextualism and Invariantism on the Correctness of Contextualist Intuitions,' *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 69 (2005): 71–99; Jessica Brown, 'Adapt or Die: The Death of Invariantism?' *The Philosophical Quarterly* 55 (2005): 263–285.

16. See Rysiew, 'Contesting Contextualism,' especially 54; and Rysiew, 'The Context-Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions,' especially 489–490.

where people only think that they don't know after initially meeting all the truth conditions for knowledge because salient error possibilities come up which are confused for relevant ones. Yet the salient possibilities simply aren't relevant to the initial knowledge affirmation. Relevant alternatives pertain to truth conditions, while salient alternatives pertain to assertability conditions. The insistence on the relevance of merely psychological, salient possibilities violates the conversational maxim of relevance. Asserting knowledge when salient possibilities are foregrounded seems to imply that one can rule them out, though of course one can't. But, one doesn't need to, since the salient possibilities are not relevant.

For those who rely on the pragmatic principle of relevance there is always the sticky question of how relevancy is determined. Who or what determines what is relevant? Take, for example, Rysiew's view:

> But the account of relevance I favor is this: the relevant alternatives are fixed by what we (normal) humans *take to be* the likely counter-possibilities to what the subject is said to know. So, e.g., whether $q$ is a relevant alternative to $p$ depends on how likely we attributors, *qua normal humans*, think it is, in the circumstances in question, that the actual state of affairs is $q$, rather than $p$ (or how likely we *would* think $q$ is, in the case of circumstances we simply haven't considered).
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> Notice that the favored standard of relevance (like the psychology of a knowledge-attributor, *qua normal human*) is fairly invariant. So I'm advocating a fairly *invariantistic* RA semantics for "know(s)."[17]

The estimations of normal people determine which alternatives are relevant, and so which truth conditions are in play in any particular affirmation of knowledge. Because there is one set of alternatives recognized by normal persons as relevant, so there is one appropriate set of truth conditions that must be fulfilled for ruling out these alternatives. The highest court of appeal for relevancy is what normal humans take to be the likely counter-possibilities.

What unites all WAMmers is that they assert contextualists inappropriately advocate, as a solution to the semantic confusion, a bifurcation (or trifurcation, etc.) of sets of truth-condition contexts where there really is just one set of truth conditions for 'knows.' Unless the fundamental facts regarding the epistemic situation change from the initial facts, the set of truth conditions is the same as the initial set. And the cases contextualists bring up are not instances where the fundamental, objective features of the epistemic situation change.

Whose solution to the semantic confusion is best, the contextualist's bifurcation of contexts of truth conditions or the invariantist's universal set of truth conditions? The main error of the WAMmers is that they don't see, or are in denial about, what often happens when the dust settles in many of the examples pointed out by contextualists. For example, consider the case of three sisters deciding whether to put their aging mother in a nursing home.[18] The sisters are concerned

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17. Rysiew, 'The Context-Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions,' 488.
18. This example is based loosely on one developed by DeRose in DeRose, 'Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense,' 191.

about a traumatic experience their mother had when she was young. When she was twelve she was put in a foster care home after her parents suddenly died in a car accident. She subsequently had a debilitating depression and anxiety because of the loss and because of the separation from her friends. The sisters are aware of the latest studies about depression in nursing care facilities, and they all come up with the same low estimate of the risk that their mother will become severely depressed or anxious. While all the sisters have the same assessment of the risk, the much younger sister, Mary, thinks the risk is worth taking. Her sisters say any risk should be avoided. Yet Mary says we can't avoid all risks. There is a risk we could get hit by a truck going across the street. But this doesn't stop people from going across the street. So, Mary says, 'I know mom will be ok in the nursing home.' Her older sisters then say she only claims to know this because she is young and isn't as familiar with the debilitating aspects of separation anxiety and depression. The following false implicature gets generated with Mary's knowledge claim in this context: Mary can rule out the possibility that she just thinks this way because of her youthful inexperience with separation anxiety and depression, and she can rule out the possibility that the action will trigger in their old mother the experience from her youth and in so doing produce in their mother a debilitating reaction. Semantic confusion ensues when a false implicature is generated to the effect that her knowledge meets the extra considerations. Meanwhile Mary is impressed with the error possibility brought up by her older sisters. She is aware of many ideas she has changed from when she was younger, and she is not sure this wouldn't happen as she becomes more familiar with depression and separation anxiety. Mary remembers how she has changed her mind drastically on such things as homosexuality and welfare. And her sisters have been right before when they have told her she will find alternative views more compelling later when she is older. Mary acknowledges that she hasn't had much experience with such psychological difficulties. She sees the extra consideration as relevant, and not just salient, to her initial knowledge claim. Extra truth conditions must be fulfilled, but can't.

What often happens next in such cases is an implicature cancellation which ends in a bifurcation of truth-condition contexts. To clear up the semantic confusion, and to indicate that she is in a lower-grade knowledge context even while recognizing the legitimacy of a higher standard context, Mary says, 'I know that mom will be just fine in the nursing home even though I can't rule out that I am just benighted by my youthful lack of familiarity with such situations.' We often are aware that our initial knowledge claims can't fulfill all the truth conditions that come to play in different contexts. While acknowledging the legitimacy of higher standards contexts, we often still maintain knowledge limited to a specific context of restricted alternatives considered.

If WAMmers are right, and the difficulties contextualists point to in their examples are simply the result of changing assertability conditions with one underlying, universal set of truth conditions for all times and places baring changes in the epistemic situation, then the cancellation of the false implicatures would clear up the semantic confusion without remainder, and, when the dust settles, the

initial, invariant truth conditions would show themselves as applicable in all the contexts under consideration. No need to recognize a new context with its own set of truth conditions. No need to recognize a new standard of justification. The extra demands on knowledge should be seen as irrelevant, merely the product of added salient, rather than relevant, alternatives. In such cases people should, however reluctantly, be resolved to reaffirm their beliefs in the same way they initially did recognizing that it has just become hard to assert it due to the fact that the particular conversation has raised merely salient alternatives as a result of the violation of a conversational expectation. End of the matter!

But this is not the end of the story. The closure and resolution WAMmers would have to predict after people realize the pragmatic source of the semantic confusion don't always pan out. The problem is not always cleared up once there is recognition of the pragmatics and a cancellation of the applicable false implicatures. People don't always feel totally comfortable in their knowledge claims even though they have fulfilled all the initial truth conditions. WAMmers ignore, or are in denial about, instances of implicature cancellations that end in bifurcations. WAMmers could say we have mistaken salient alternatives for relevant ones. But this is inadequate. Mary doesn't think the alternatives her sisters bring up are just salient, just some radical psychological speculations . . . spurious epiphenomena. No, she thinks her sisters have important concerns that her initial knowledge claim can't rule out, and would need to rule out if she were to have more robust knowledge. WAMmers want to show the unity of a semantic context by dismissing alternatives as merely salient and so not acknowledging added truth conditions.[19] Yet this does violence to the way people often find their initial knowledge claim can't fulfill subsequently recognized truth conditions it should be able to fulfill. And this is not due to some epistemic irresponsibility in the initial knowledge claim resulting from overlooking alternatives as relevant when one should have seen them as such, so much as it is due to the inherent limitations of our ability to know. Our initial knowledge claims can't fulfill all the truth conditions that come to play when all contexts are considered. How strange it is that Rysiew and others think 'normal' people ought to be able to specify in their initial knowledge claims all the alternatives that are likely to be the case – and therefore which alternatives are relevant – in 'circumstances we simply haven't considered.' Invariantism is a denial of the finitude of knowledge. The bifurcation of contextualism is the result of the acknowledgement of the limitations of human knowledge. There are different, legitimate contexts of relevant alternatives, and so different contexts of truth conditions needed in order to rule them out. The semantic confusion cannot be always attributed simply to the pragmatic generation of false implicatures

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19. Though a fellow WAMmer Jessica Brown is critical of Rysiew's notion of salience because she thinks it doesn't capture the impact of the practical importance on knowledge attributions. See Brown, 'Contextualism and Warranted Assertibility Manoeuvres,' especially 424. Yet Brown doesn't go far enough in seeing the semantic, and not just pragmatic, significance of what often happens in implicature cancellations.

due to violation of conversational rules.[20] Implicature cancellation doesn't always get rid of the intuition that there are new truth conditions brought on by taking more possibilities seriously. Mary doesn't see herself as simply violating some conversational maxim.

To be sure, WAMmers can recognize the difficulties that remain during the cancellation of implicatures. Both Brown and Pritchard even point to a section in Grice's work where Grice recognizes the difficulties sometimes associated with implicature cancellation.[21] Rysiew responds to Stewart Cohen's view that the presence of uncomfortable cancellations indicates that pragmatics isn't the only thing going on in contextualist examples. Brown attributes this discomfort to instances 'where speakers tend to confuse what's literally said by an utterance with what it pragmatically conveys' (428). Rysiew says something similar:

> Speakers aren't very good at—or, as I'd prefer to put it, don't much care about—distinguishing between what *they mean in uttering* certain sentences and what *the sentences they utter* mean; they're not very good at (/don't much care about) distinguishing between what's *pragmatically conveyed* by their uttering certain sentences, and what the sentences they utter *literally express.* (496)

Brown and Rysiew are saying that uncomfortable cancellations of implicatures are the result of people confusing what they say with what they pragmatically convey. Certainly this type of confusion sometimes does happen. For example, when I tell the person next to me, knowing that there is a policeman in the next room, 'It is possible the policeman is in the next room,' I am being lazy, intentionally wanting to be funny or teasing, or I just don't know the conversational rule described by Grice. We teach our children not to say something is possible if they know it to be the case; not to tell someone desperately in need of gasoline that there is a gas station around the corner without also telling them it is closed. The teachings we give our children about conversational maxims are pretty good. I don't know of any competent English-speaking twelve year old who wouldn't immediately know I am teasing him, if, after asking me 'Do you know what time it is?' I simply say the following: 'Yes.' The sort of implicature cancellations contextualists use as rock bottom examples are cases where sophisticated language users know both exactly what they are literally saying and exactly what is pragmatically conveyed by what they are saying. The whole purpose of such implicature cancellations is both to show that one does understand the difference between what is said and

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20. These two authors have said something similar: Adam Leite, 'Some Worries for Would-Be WAMmers,' *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 69 (2005): 101–125, especially 107; Daniel Halliday, 'What Explains our Intuitions about Knowledge Ascriptions?' *Proceeding of the Aristotelian Society* 105 (2005): 393–402, 397. Halliday puts it well: "Upon uttering this sentence, the speaker would seem to have done enough to cancel any implicature that he can rule out the alternative that his wife has made salient. But, importantly, it still seems that the speaker has said something false. That the intuition of falsity has not disappeared upon removal of the implicature suggests that this implicature is unconnected with the intuition" (379).

21. Brown, 'Contextualism and Warranted Assertibility Manoeuvres,' see 428; Rysiew, 'The Context-Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions,' see 495.

what is pragmatically conveyed, and then to move on to assume the legitimacy of a bifurcation of truth-condition contexts. Mary and Ebony completely recognize that their continued assertions of knowledge pragmatically convey something false in the new context, and that is exactly why they engage the implicature cancellations. The real discomfort in such cases of implicature cancellation comes when people realize they can't have a God-like ability to fulfill all the truth conditions that come into play in all contexts. Recognition of limitations is sometimes painful.

Consider what is going on in another example. A young woman, say Kirsten, is deciding whether to get an abortion.[22] Her parents tell her she should because she is young, the father is a deadbeat, and she should have a career and a good job before having a child so that she will be able to provide well for a child. Very much persuaded by what her parents have told her, and taking as many likely alternatives into account as she can, she says, 'I know that I should have an abortion.' Her sister then says, 'But can you rule out the possibility that you will later develop a spiritual viewpoint that causes you to have debilitating guilt about the abortion?' Her sister's error possibility gives her pause. Kirsten has changed her spirituality in the past, and she thinks this might happen in the future. Kirsten engages the following implicature cancellation: 'I don't know that I won't be debilitated by this in the future due to a new spirituality that I take up. You are right that this is relevant, and I can't rule this out. But, I still know I should have the abortion.' We make these sorts of limited knowledge claims all the time.

One might think it an extreme copout to bifurcate and to go with the lower-grade knowledge, especially with respect to things as important as the care of a beloved, elderly mother or the life of a fetus. Kirsten and Mary should withdraw their knowledge claims rather than bifurcate if they can't rule out a relevant alternative that shows itself. They should strive for gaining the extra details necessary to make a more robust knowledge claim, given that their situations are so important. Contextualism is a lazy person's epistemology, or at least it is prone to dogmatism as Tim Black and Peter Murphy think.[23]

Quite the contrary. Contextualism can advocate that one try to attain the highest level of resolution one can. It is just that many people honesty find they can't attain the level of resolution needed, or they can't reach the level of resolution in a timely manner. Mary and Kirsten simply can't rule out the challenging alternatives presented to them in a timely manner. They have to make a decision without a God's eye view which presumably could fulfill all the truth conditions that come to play in all contexts, that is, an Augustinian-type God who sees everyone's past, present, and future simultaneously.

Contextualists can go a quarter of the way with WAMmers. Contextualists can agree that the examples they marshal generate false implicatures due to the initial violation of general conversational principles. In the situation in which

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22. This example is a modification of one used by Guliz Kurt in conversation.

23. Black and Murphy, 'Avoiding the Dogmatic Commitments of Contextualism,' especially 170.

Mary's sisters bring up new error possibilities, a false implicature is generated that Mary can rule out the alternatives. There is no reason for contextualists not to think the difficulty in contextualist cases starts with false implicatures. It is just that the generation of false implicatures due to the violation of conversational rules can't be the final story.[24]

Contextualists can also agree with WAMmers that the fundamental facts about the support of a belief don't change in the examples contextualists refer to. Many contextualists are committed to saying the standards change in different contexts, but not necessarily the justification of beliefs. When the standards are raised the support we have can remain the same, whether understood on the internalist or externalist line. Yet the support is no longer adequate for knowledge just because it no longer fulfills the higher standards in the new context.

Yet there are many ways in which contextualists and invariantists essentially disagree, and we are now in a position to clarify and summarize. While the facts about justification in contextualist examples don't necessarily change, the standards do (Granted this is pursuing a particular type of contextualism.). At a lower standard for knowledge the level of detail we have about a situation often is adequate support for a belief. But, as more relevant alternatives come into play, the standards get more rigorous and the same level of detail and support is no longer adequate. So, for example, when Kirsten has to be able to rule out that she will take on a spirituality opposed to abortion, the level of details she has about herself isn't adequate to tell the difference between a world where she would have debilitating spiritual troubles from one where she wouldn't (the facts are not determining), hence the resolution problem. Similarly, a two megapixel digital camera is good enough to represent a general impression of what someone looks like from a distance. But if I really want to be able to tell that person as distinct from all the others who merely look like him, I would need a camera with higher resolution. As more and more alternatives are taken as relevant, the level of resolution we have becomes less and less adequate until eventually the possibility of knowledge diminishes altogether. At a certain point only God (if one is a believer) has the ability to avoid full on skepticism, since only God can distinguish between the best possible virtual world (Say, for example, an idea in God's mind of a possible world before actually creating any world.) and an actual world.

The following summarizes the ways in which contextualists agree and disagree with invariantist WAMmers:

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24. DeRose says the pragmatics WAMmers use can't account for the phenomena contextualists point to. His threefold test for a successful WAM is designed to show this. On my reading DeRose's test doesn't rule out the possibility that pragmatics can be involved in the initial stages of the phenomena contextualists describe, just that it can't be the final story, as is evident when looking at what often follows implicature cancellation. For the threefold test, see DeRose, 'Assertion, Knowledge, and Context,' and DeRose, 'Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense,' especially 195–203.

Contextualist views compatible with WAM

1. Pragmatics plays an initial part in the semantic confusion.

2. The facts about the sources of support don't change.

Contextualist views not compatible with WAM

3. The relevant alternatives in play change from context to context.

4. Standards of justification change.

5. People can't initially fulfill all the truth conditions that come into play in different contexts.

6. There is a need for bifurcation.

Consider other ways in which people can't initially fulfill all the truth conditions that come into play in different contexts. We sometimes just aren't aware of relevant error possibilities. We have a limited ability to be aware of all the relevant alternatives and take them initially into consideration (internalism), and our knowing process is not reliably able to weed out all the relevant alternatives that come to play in different contexts (externalism). Rysiew and other invariantists act as if we can determine initially all the alternatives that are, and will ever be, relevant all at once, and so fulfill all the truth conditions that must be fulfilled for ruling them out. We even should gauge how likely the alternatives would happen 'in the case of circumstances we simply haven't considered.' But we don't always initially take all the considerations into account, and we often find this out later. Considerations often later come to mind that clearly should have been taken as relevant initially and would have been so taken had one been aware of them. This isn't necessarily due to bad luck or irresponsibility where one should have anticipated something but didn't. We don't think, in the initial assessment of knowledge, about all the truth conditions that come into play in different contexts. Before 9/11 a person could more easily say they know major buildings in Manhattan will be there for a long time. And think of the case of disagreement mentioned regarding the death of Jesus Christ on a cross where error possibilities are brought up for the first time. It never occurred to Joe to think about the possibility that it was just someone who looked like Jesus on the cross. Once he becomes aware of this alternative it immediately struck him as relevant to his initial knowledge claim and so in need of ruling out, if he is to have stronger knowledge. If we had to take into account all the alternatives and rule them out before making any knowledge claim, we wouldn't have much knowledge . . . if any.

Take another way in which the truth conditions for knowledge claims are not set for all time, but rather vary across contexts. In our daily lives we have to make knowledge claims knowing that they are low grade, and knowing that we would not be able to fulfill all the truth conditions needing to be fulfilled should we be required to have higher grade knowledge. For example, as a person who knows just a little about wine, I say, 'I know this wine will be good for the party.' My knowledge is good enough when I am considering only my friends will be

there who don't know much about wine. But, if I think wine connoisseurs will be there, then there are all sorts of new relevant alternatives that come into play that I cannot rule out. Likewise I often hear religious people say, 'Mine is not to question why, mine is but to do or die.' By this adage they are often engaging a bifurcation of truth-condition contexts. They often are acknowledging the resolution they have to be good enough in their context, and at the same time they are pointing to another context of questioning which requires more resolution. They often trust that the higher resolution learning of their priest, imam, high priestess, or rabbi is adequate to withstand the more intense scrutiny. Low resolution telescope lenses are good for some purposes (like when I need to see more of the surrounding terrain), and not good for others.

Consider also examples where the stakes often get higher, as in the bank case DeRose focuses on.[25] As the stakes for knowledge increase, we naturally want to be able to rule out more and more remote error possibilities, more and more remote alternatives. If I need to get up at 8 am in order to attend an event I am not crazy about without much riding on it, I will simply set the usual alarm clock. If I have to get up at 8 am in order to have time to make it to an interview for a job I really want, I will set two alarms in order to account for the remote possibility that one will fail. At higher stakes more remote possibilities show up as relevant and in need of ruling out, and so more truth conditions must be fulfilled for ruling them out.

Consider another way in which people find they can't initially fulfill all the truth conditions that come into play in different contexts. Often the serious consideration of different cultures and religions causes people to see the truth conditions fulfilled in their initial knowledge claim were not the only ones, and the added truth conditions can't always be fulfilled. This happens especially in disagreement with a cognitive peer from another religion. As pointed out earlier, when two people from different cultures disagree over a practice or a belief, they often examine their belief-forming process and compare it to the other's. To focus our discussion consider a disagreement in one of my philosophy classes between a Muslim (Ebony) and a Buddhist (Jamal), about whether there is a soul. Before the disagreement, Ebony says, 'I know I have a soul,' and she offers as evidence that she has felt a sense of continuity throughout her life. Jamal, very philosophically sophisticated, turns to Ebony and says,

> You only think this way because our culture is influenced by Platonic thought and because you are combining together sense impressions of yourself you have observed over a long time. Look closely, reflect, and meditate, and you will not find anything continuous that makes you up, only interrelated characteristics that we artificially see as essentially a unity due to an unenlightened way of looking at the world. All is emptiness. Can you rule out that the feeling you have of continuity is just due to cultural contingency, self delusion, or mere constant connection? (We had just read Plato, Alfred North Whitehead, David Hume, and Nagarjuna on individual identity.)

25. Keith DeRose, 'Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions,' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52 (1992): 913–929.

After thinking about what Jamal said, Ebony reasons she can't rule out that her feeling of continuity isn't just the result of these things. She hadn't thought about these possibilities before. She knows Jamal to be a very sincere, thoughtful, and reasonable individual, that is, a cognitive peer. And she sees that she must be able to rule these alternatives out in this context. She now says, 'I don't know that I have a soul.'

The examples of Joe and Ebony provide a way of seeing the legitimacy and appeal of a contextualist response. Often people see the other as an epistemic peer, that is, someone just as knowledgeable about the relevant facts and just as capable of evaluating them. The belief-forming processes of each seems 'normal.' Ebony has taken Jamal seriously to a large extent because she knows how smart and careful in thinking he is. If someone is truly an epistemic peer it is just as likely that they would come up with the right answer as me. One lacks enough resolution of comparative details regarding the respective belief-forming processes to be able to see which one is more likely truth-conducive, hence the resolution problem described earlier. One of the belief-forming processes is faulty, but the person lacks the resolution to be able to say which one it is. I need to be able to trust that my belief-forming process can rule out the alternatives made relevant by the fact that someone equivalently, epistemicly situated comes up with something different than me. But, I can't, just like I can't trust that my belief-forming process about my thermometer, in the example above, is any better than that of my opponent. I can't fulfill this truth-condition and I couldn't at the initial time when I made the knowledge claim, but I would need to in this new context. How bizarre it is for Rysiew and others to assume that all 'normal' people would agree on which alternatives are relevant![26] The new context Joe and Ebony are in isn't just the result of irrelevant, psychologically generated, error possibilities, no more than the error possibility in the presence of someone with a conflicting readout of the same thermomenter is a merely psychological problem. The shifts in contexts contextualists talk about are the result of a very careful and sobering look at the limitations of our ability to know.

Contextualism gives people like Joe and Ebony the ability to make sense out of their disparate epistemic behaviors by making the contextualist move: They can say respectively both 'I know that Jesus died on a cross,' 'I know that I have a soul' and 'I don't know that Jesus died on a cross,' 'I don't know that I have a soul' so long as they are said in different contexts. Here we recognize the characteristic epistemic bifurcation of contextualism. While Joe and Ebony don't engage implicature cancellation as do Kirsten and Mary, they still have the bifurcation characteristic of contextualism. As said, contextualists accept the limitations of knowledge. We don't always have the ability to fulfill all the truth conditions brought in play by the consideration of new relevant alternatives. If we always had initially to rule out all the relevant alternatives from all possible challenges and so fulfill all resulting truth conditions, we would be skeptics never

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26. See Rysiew, 'The Context-Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions,' especially 489–490, 499.

having any knowledge, or we would be a God who has the capability of infinite resolution. But, we can have knowledge when we stay within the contexts where our epistemic abilities are adequate for ruling out a limited number of alternatives. Should one get UVIDDs or should one build up one's background one would be able to have higher-grade knowledge. The motto of contextualism: Know within your means!

An externalist, contextualist epistemology of disagreement about religion isn't for everyone. Those who insist on a theory of knowledge whereby the truth conditions for 'knows' never changes will never be happy with contextualism. But then they are in denial about the way knowledge often works in our daily lives, or so I have argued. Of course more needs to be said about other criticisms of contextualism, especially Jason Stanley's linguistic view that 'knows' doesn't semantically change in the way contextualists think, John Hawthorne's view that contextualism cannot account for propositional attitude reporting, or Hilary Kornblith's view that contextualism doesn't adequately address the problem of skepticism.[27] While we can't respond here to all the criticisms, at least the warranted assertability maneuver cannot serve as a roadblock to the use of contextualism as an externalist epistemology of religious disagreement.

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27. John Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries* (Oxford: Oxford, 2004), especially 98–111; Jason Stanley, 'On the Linguistic Basis for Contextualism,' *Philosophical Studies* 119 (2004): 119–146; Hilary Kornblith, 'The Contextualist Evasion of Epistemology,' *Philosophical Issues* 10 (2000): 24–32, especially 313.