

# Is Epistemology Tainted?<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Epistemic relativism comes in many forms, which have been much discussed in the last decade or so in analytic epistemology. My goal is to defend a version of epistemic relativism that sources the relativity in the metaphysics of epistemic properties and relations, most saliently knowledge. I contrast it with other relativist theses. I argue that the sort of metaphysical relativism about knowledge I favor does not threaten the objectivity of the epistemological domain.

## **Keywords**

Knowledge, vagueness, relativism.

In Stanley 2005 (henceforth KPI), I defend the view that knowledge is interest-relative. I also there defend the view that *all* important epistemic properties and relations are interest-relative. I was and am sympathetic to knowledge first epistemology. The interest-relativity of the epistemic domain is inherited from the dependence of all important epistemic properties and relations on knowledge. This is the distinctive version of epistemic relativism I endorse.

The view I defend is explicitly relativist. Relativist views are widely considered to be problematic. It is therefore important for me to distinguish it from relativist views that I also reject. Chapter 7 of KPI distinguishes my view favorably from truth-relativism about knowledge, as defended in John MacFarlane's work. Chapter 8 of KPI distinguishes my view favorably from Delia Graff Fara's thoroughgoing interest-relativity about empirical properties, which underlies her theory of vagueness. My purpose in this paper is to revisit

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these issues, in the light of the more than dozen years of debate about relativism that have occurred, with the aim of providing a vigorous defense of epistemic relativism in my sense.

As in other domains, it has turned out that the evaluation of the weight of various objections depends upon one's understanding of the conceptual tools of the theory of content. This point is familiar from the literature on truth-relativism. As John MacFarlane (2014) has made clear, the use of a framework that only involves contexts of use excludes the very statement of truth-relativism. We have become used to these revisions of the conceptual scheme for definitions of truth; they no longer appear so radical. My focus on this paper is elsewhere, however, on the debate between the limited relativism about the epistemic that I defend, and the more expansive metaphysical relativism that undergirds Fara's theory of vagueness. Neither of these are forms of truth relativism. But here too, surprisingly, we find the same point; that arguments depend at least in part upon our understanding of the conceptual resources and tools in the theory of content.

Paul Boghossian (2008) sharply and usefully distinguished between *semantic relativism*, relativism about semantic notions such as truth, from *factual relativism*. This is an important distinction. Factual relativist positions pose a threat to objectivity claims. But there are differing kinds of factual relativism, even about the same domain (e.g., the epistemic). There are also different kinds of objectivity claims. In this paper, I defend my particular form of factual relativism. But the defense turns out to be subtle and complex, taking the form of distinguishing between it and many other forms of relativism, which I will argue do pose serious concerns to plausible versions of objectivity. We will need to wade through many semantic considerations to decide these issues, as well as epistemological and political ones. Such is the generality of objectivity and knowledge.

## 1 Objectivity and relativism

Boghossian (2008) distinguishes between what he calls "new age relativism" and a thesis that he calls "B relativism", for "Boghossian Relativism". The former is a *semantic* thesis, about the semantic property of truth. The second he presents "not as a semantic thesis but

as a factual thesis". John MacFarlane (2014) has defended a version of new age relativism about the relativity of epistemic propositions. Boghossian's target in his work is however not primarily new age relativism. It is rather *factual* relativism about the epistemic domain.

Boghossian elegantly brings out the distinction between factual relativism and semantic relativism by considering two different formulations of Einsteinian relativism about simultaneity. According to the first, it is a semantic thesis about the truth-predicate for propositions about simultaneity. According to the second, it is factual relativism about the nature of the relation of simultaneity. Boghossian points out, I find completely persuasively, that there is "decisive reason" to interpret Einsteinian relativity as factual relativity, relativity in the metaphysical nature of simultaneity. After all, it would be strange to report to someone Einstein's discovery as "good news! Simultaneity is absolute. But Einstein discovered that attributions of truth to propositions about simultaneity are relative to a frame of reference."

The target of Boghossian 2006 is factual relativism about the epistemic domain. In fact, his target is narrower than that. It is a particular version of factual relativism about the epistemic domain. It is a version of factual relativism that makes facts about knowledge relative to *epistemic systems*. Boghossian rejects such versions of relativism.

It is important not to confuse Boghossian's aim with the implausible view that *the epistemic system with which we now operate* cannot rationally be challenged. Boghossian's position appears consistent with Kristie Dotson (2014)'s view that we may require a "third order change" in the domain of epistemology, a change in the tools and resources, in, that is, the epistemic system. Dotson's arguments for this view are that we require a change precisely because we operate with an epistemic system that gets first-order facts about who knows what wrong. Boghossian agrees of course that there can be faulty epistemic systems that we falsely believe are correct. In forthcoming work, Dotson argues for a "third order change" in epistemology by explaining the sense in which our current epistemological scheme makes incorrect predictions about important cases. This presupposes that there are epistemic facts of the matter, even as it leaves their shape not yet resolved.

I agree with Boghossian's rejection of epistemological relativism

to epistemic systems. However, KPI argues for a version of factual relativism, of B-relativism as it were, about knowledge. So it's important for me to distinguish the kind of B-relativism I reject, the one that Boghossian argues against, from the one I defend. Not all forms of factual relativism in epistemology involve relativity to epistemic systems.

According to the view I defend, knowledge is metaphysically more complex than we realize. But its additional metaphysical complexity is not due to a dependence on *epistemic systems*. It is rather due to a dependence on *practical interests*. In KPI, this dependence on practical interests is taken to be a dependence on stakes. This is somewhat of an historical accident; the accepted judgments in the literature on "contextualism" in epistemology, found in the work of Stewart Cohen and Keith DeRose, were at the center of epistemological discussion. These examples exhibit dependence on stakes. But 'practical interests' does not mean the same as 'stakes'. One's practical interests determine one's stakes, but I am interested in the sense in which practical interests are intertwined with knowledge.

I take stakes to be a consequence of one's interests, and the view of KPI is really that knowledge depends upon interests. I explicitly include moral interests among the scope of practical interests that affect knowledge; one example is an interest in not committing acts that contribute to injustice (Stanley 2015: 262). In Chapter 10 of Sarah Moss (forthcoming), she persuasively shows how this kind of interest dependence of knowledge helps to explain what she calls "The Problem of Profiling":

Intuitively, when you hear a cardinal on that island, there is nothing wrong with believing on the basis of your statistical evidence that it is probably red, and there is nothing wrong with acting as if it is probably red. By contrast, imagine being in an office building and knowing that among the people that you see in the building, a majority of the women are secretaries. Intuitively, when you see a woman in that office building, is there something wrong with believing that she is probably a secretary?

Moss argues that there is something wrong, not just with acting on the belief that she is probably a secretary, but even with forming the belief; "what is wrong with your beliefs about the woman in the

office building is that for morally responsible subjects, those beliefs are epistemically deficient in virtue of failing to be knowledge.” Moss proposes a moral rule of forming beliefs, “the rule of consideration”, and shows that it entails that “knowledge is subject to a modest form of *moral encroachment*.” Moral interests are one kind of practical interest; for this reason the moral features of a belief can make a difference to whether it constitutes knowledge. Knowledge depends upon practical interests, including moral interests. But this does not mean that knowledge is relative to epistemic systems.

Boghossian (2010) draws a distinction between a revolutionary factulist relativist theory, and a hermeneutical factulist relativist theory. The view in KPI, as well as the view Moss develops, are hermeneutic factual relativist positions about knowledge. Boghossian is worried about factually relativist theses about normative domains, most centrally the epistemic domain. The worry that runs throughout his work is that they are inconsistent with various versions of objectivity. I will argue that epistemological relativism in my sense is not in conflict with forms of objectivity worth preserving.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, epistemological relativism *does* threaten a position that some might think is a kind of objectivity. This is the view that epistemic facts are *independent* of interests. Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath (2009: 28) have used the term ‘purity’ as an especially apt vocabulary for such views, which we will, following Fantl and McGrath, call *epistemic purity theses*.<sup>3</sup> KPI begins with an attempted characterization of epistemic purity, setting it up as the target of the work. I will argue that epistemic purity is not a form of objectivity. It is an ideology, and not an ideal.

Rebecca Kukla (2015: 212) links the discussion of “the interest-relativity of standards of evidence” in epistemology to the discussion

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<sup>2</sup> Boghossian does clearly draw the sort of distinction that I am about to make, both in Boghossian 2006: 94 in a discussion about relativity to priors, and in Boghossian (ms.), between “thoroughgoing relativism about morality” and “absolutist relativism about morality”. Absolutist relativist moral truths are truths relative to circumstances. As he points out, the latter doctrine does not threaten the existence of absolute normative truths. Absolutist relativism about morality is metaphysically similar to interest relativism about knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> Fantl and McGrath deny purism about knowledge, but accept it for other epistemic notions. This allows them to give a positive formulation of the thesis.

in the philosophy of science. She sets pragmatic encroachment in the context of a literature in the philosophy of science dating at least back to the 1950s, and Richard Rudner's 1953 paper, "The Scientist Qua Scientist Makes Value Judgments". She argues that it is a familiar point that scientific objectivity is not epistemically "pure".

"[I]t is impossible to accept the once widely held view that scientific inquiry is value-free, or even that value-freedom constitutes an ideal that it approximates", according to Railton (1991); "theoretical practice must be regulated by the goals of an agent." If science is to be objective, we must allow that objective inquiry is interest and value dependent. Objectivity should not be conflated with value and interest-independence, or situation independence. Helen Longino (1990) has also famously argued that interests resolve the under-determination inherent in scientific inquiry. If scientific objectivity is not value free, why think that the epistemic domain is value free? Purity is a bias, not an ideal.

I follow Longino, Railton, and others in holding that epistemic objectivity is not only not threatened by dependence on interests, but rescued by it. However, there are several different kinds of objectivity that an account of epistemic facts must not undermine. My goal here, as elsewhere, is to show that epistemic relativism does not threaten any of these senses of objectivity. It is only then that it will be possible to conclude that epistemic purity is not important to the project of preserving objectivity.

One objectivity thesis I am committed to is some doctrine of *shared content*. One's account of content should not erect large barriers to having mental states with the same contents. Another objectivity thesis to which I am devoted is the mind-independence of ordinary propositions about the empirical world. This is metaphysical objectivity; propositions about ordinary physical things do not generally depend upon interests and persons. I have defended my view by repeatedly contrasting it with a view that I do take to threaten these forms of objectivity. This is the ambitious version of factual relativism developed by Delia Graff Fara in her theory of vagueness. I now turn to explaining her view, and her defense. I conclude the paper by explaining that my version of epistemic relativism poses no similar threats to these senses of objectivity.

## 2 Relativism generalized

According to Fara (2000), squarely facing up to the problem of vagueness forces us to accept pervasive metaphysical relativity on interests. Let me explain how Fara is led to this conclusion by her account of the Sorites Paradox.

Sorites Paradox

- (a)  $Fa$
- (b)  $\forall x \forall y ((Fx \wedge Rxy) \rightarrow Fy)$
- (c)  $\exists b_1 \dots b_n (Rab_1 \wedge Rb_1b_2 \wedge Rb_2b_3 \dots Rb_nb_n)$
- (d)  $\sim Fz$

Fara (2000) usefully distinguishes three different questions that someone who denies the Sorites premise (b) must answer:

(1) The Semantic Question

If the universal generalization in (b) is false, what is to be said of its classical equivalent, the “sharp boundaries” claim that  $\exists x \exists y (Fx \wedge Rxy \wedge \sim Fy)$ ?

(2) The Epistemological Question

If the universal generalization is false, why are we unable to identify its false instances?

(3) The Psychological Question

Why are we so inclined to believe the Sorites premise, if it is false?

She points out that Kit Fine’s supervaluational semantics is meant to answer (1). Timothy Williamson’s theory of vagueness is meant to answer (2). Her main focus however is on theories that are designed to address, or motivated principally, by (3). These are *contextualist* theories of vagueness, such as Hans Kamp’s (which raise considerably more semantic and logical complexities than contextualist theories in epistemology). Her aim is to provide a theory that responds to the psychological question, but is not contextualist in character.

My favored version of factual relativism is about knowledge, and not properties susceptible to a Sorites series. But there is a similar structure to the response space of the sorites paradox and skepticism. In the case of vagueness, contextualism is used to explain why we accept the Sorites premise, which states that *F*-ness is hereditary in the *R* series. In epistemology, contextualism is used to explain why we accept single-premise epistemic closure, which is the principle that knowledge is hereditary under the relation of known entailment. And of course both domains involve judgments that seem to shift in response to facts that *prima facie* are irrelevant (someone can, at least apparently, move from being tall to not being tall without changing height). Fara's aim is to develop an alternative to contextualism; an account that answers the psychological question and explains the shifty nature of our judgments, without placing the explanation on the context-sensitivity of vague expressions.

It is possible that the predicate ["tall"] could express the same property from occasion to occasion, and the reason that the extension may change as the heights of things do not change is that the property expressed context-invariantly by 'tall' is a property which is such that whether a thing has it depends not only on heights, but on other things as well. I will go on to propose that despite the constant shifting standard of use for vague predicates...there is much less context-dependence than one might have initially thought (Fara 2000: 64)

'John is tall' gets analyzed as 'John has significantly more height than is typical'.

Whether or not something is significant is a judgment made relative to a person or persons at a time, based on their interests. The word 'significantly' has what Fara calls an *interest-relative* metaphysics. On Fara's view, the proposition that John is tall contains a constituent that does the work of "significantly more", and so is interest-relative. This mitigates the pressure towards postulating context-sensitivity in vague language, because that work can be taken up by shifting standards that affect the extension of the properties expressed by vague predicates. She argues that it is *interests* which underlies shifting standards. Vague predicates express interest-dependent properties, in the sense that the extension of those properties at a world and time depends upon human interests.



### 3 Objectivity redux

In Stanley 2003, I argued that Fara's view poses a threat to two forms of objectivity. The first form is epistemic; if Fara is right, we rarely are thinking about the same empirical propositions. The second is metaphysical; her view entails a thoroughgoing metaphysical dependence on interests that is threatening to the view that empirical facts do not depend on interests.

Fara's ambitious view has startling consequences. But it did not seem much of a stretch to apply her ideas to the case of knowledge. While I thought it was too much to say that the property of being a mountain was dependent on interests, the view that knowledge depends on interests has at least a familiar pragmatist heritage in the domain of epistemology.

I have two basic objections to Fara's theory, one epistemic and the other metaphysical. I will say briefly why I thought neither argument is a problem for an interest-relative view of knowledge, and also (briefly) why I was at least partially wrong (there are analogous concerns about the modal profile of interest-relative epistemic contents, as Michael Blome-Tillman has nicely brought out). I then turn to Fara's (2008) response, "Profiling Interest-Relativity", which helps us think through the modal profile issues raised by an interest-relative view of a domain.

I'm going to reiterate the points in Stanley 2003 here. The first point is ground clearing. By itself, it is not an objection. But it sets up the other objections. The point is that in the case of vagueness, Fara does not in fact succeed in eliminating the need for context-dependence. Vague predicates are still context-dependent:

It is instructive to see why Graff needs to relativize the relation expressed by 'significantly greater than' to persons. If she did not, then the proposition expressed by 'that mountain is tall for a mountain' would be that that mountain is significantly greater than the typical height of mountains. But then no truth value for this proposition would be determined given a time and world. For a time and a world pair is too *large* to determine what is significant. Relative to this universe now, there are simply too many conversations occurring to fix on a unique set of interests. So Graff's theory is not an entirely interest-relative account. There is still some context-sensitivity associated with a vague

expression. But once one fixes upon a person or persons whose interests are at stake, subsequent uses of the vague expression all express the same property (significant for that person). (Stanley 2005: 171-2)

This point is not intended as a serious objection to Fara's view, nor is it one. Fara is committed to answering the psychological problem with interest-sensitivity rather than contextualism. And the typical sorites series occurs with a single person, over time. On her account, it remains interest-sensitivity that is doing the work of answering the psychological question, and not contextualism.

However, once one recognizes that sentences containing vague predicates, on Fara's account, need to be contextually supplemented by reference to persons (whose interests are at issue), two concerns arise about Fara's account, one epistemic and the other metaphysical. A larger literature has arisen about the first point, but it is of less importance for our purposes in this paper. I will nevertheless explain a few of the moves in the dialectic surrounding it.

The epistemic worry about Fara's account is that it seems to entail that sentences containing vague expressions (that is, virtually every sentence) uniformly express propositions *about* particular people. So, an utterance of 'that is a heap' expresses a proposition about a person, whose interests at the time help determine the extension of 'heap'. But then one cannot understand an utterance of a sentence containing a vague expression unless one is acquainted with the person about whose interests it is. And it seems clear that one can understand an utterance of 'that pile is a heap' without having any sense of whose interests are at stake. This is a manifestation of the epistemic concern I have with Fara's account.

The second objection involves the *modal profiles* of propositions containing interest-relative properties. According to Fara's interest-relative account, most propositions are about specific people and their interests. It seems to follow that these propositions would not exist, if those people and their interests failed to exist. And yet the proposition expressed by (1) does not seem to possess this kind of modal fragility, this kind of dependence on the existence of persons or their interests:

(1) This pile is a heap.

One would want to say that even if no persons existed, this pile

would still be a heap. And yet it's unclear how Fara's theory can license such a robustly realist conclusion. Fara's theory suggests that virtually any proposition we would be interested in communicating depends for its existence on persons or least their interests.

Even if we restrict attention just to gradable adjectives, there are concerns with Fara's predications. Suppose, pointing at Mount Everest, I utter (2) and (3):

(2) This mountain is tall.

(3) If no one had existed, this mountain would have been equally tall.

But if  $x$  and  $y$  are equally tall, then if  $x$  is tall, then  $y$  is tall. So:

(4) If no one had existed, this mountain would still have been tall.

And (4) is a counterfactual that is false according to Fara's theory.

Returning to the case of knowledge, it seemed to me that an interest-relative theory of the knowledge relation inherits the virtues of Fara's theory, but without its costs. The interest-relativist about knowledge holds that the propositions expressed by knowledge ascriptions depend for their truth on the interests and practical situation of the knower, in just the same way that Fara argues that the propositions expressed by sentences containing vague terms depend for their truth on the interests and practical situation of the salient person. It is surprising to discover that the truth of knowledge claims depend on all sorts of practical factors about a subject in a situation; and this sense of surprise must be explained. But it is surely considerably more alarming to discover that virtually all the propositions we grasp depend for their truth and even their existence on human interests.

There is no parallel epistemic objection to interest-relativism about knowledge. In the case of propositions about knowledge, there is clearly a subject whose interests are the relevant ones, namely the putative knower. A parallel epistemic objection cannot be raised against interest-relativism about knowledge, because knowledge ascriptions impute knowledge to a subject, and grasping the propositions expressed by them requires acquaintance with these subjects, who are the very same subjects whose interests affect the truth or falsity of these propositions. So no worry arises.

Interest relativism about knowledge on the face of it may not seem to have an analogous modal profile problem. It is clear, for example, that the truth-value of knowledge ascriptions does depend on the existence of knowers. However, there are in fact concerns about the modal profile of interest-relativist relative propositions about knowledge. Indeed, these concerns are “[t]he most obvious problem with IRI” (Stanley 2005: 106).<sup>4</sup> However, analogous problems are hard to avoid. Contextualism about knowledge ascriptions faces similar problems (2005: 107ff). And Michael Montminy (2009) has persuasively argued that semantic relativism about knowledge, the assessment sensitive approach advanced powerfully in MacFarlane (2014), also faces precisely analogous difficulties.

Famously, Schiffer (1996: 325-8) argues that ‘know’ does not behave as an indexical verb (or like the place parameter in ‘it’s raining’). Schiffer points out that we do not tend to be confused about the fact that ‘I’, ‘here’, ‘now’, and ‘today’ are indexicals. We are not confused about the fact that the extension of ‘I’, ‘here’, ‘now’, and ‘today’ and other indexical words changes with context. So if contextualism about knowledge were right, we shouldn’t be confused about the indexicality of the verb ‘knows’.<sup>5</sup> In Chapter 3 of KPI, I add to these arguments of Schiffer; that if knowledge ascriptions are context-sensitive, they are not context-sensitive in a way that is analogous to non-controversial cases of linguistic context-sensitivity. Hawthorne (2004) and Cappelen and Lepore (2005) expand on the range of arguments that offer disanalogies between indexical expressions and the verb ‘know’.

In Chapters 2 and 3 of KPI, I expand this class of arguments against contextualism to a wide variety of expressions that are widely regarded as context-dependent, and argue that knowledge ascriptions are not context-sensitive in any of these senses. I argue, following the aforementioned authors, that the knowledge verb ‘know’ is certainly

<sup>4</sup> The first time I presented a full-throated defense of interest-relative invariance about knowledge was in Canberra in 2003. The first person to ask a question was Sarah-Jane Leslie, who wanted to know what I thought of the modal profile objections to the view.

<sup>5</sup> Similar arguments against contextualism about knowledge are expanded upon in Cappelen and Lepore 2005.

not an indexical expression. I argue in Chapter 4 that context-sensitivity cannot simply be claimed “on the cheap”. The moral of my discussion in these chapters is that the onus is on the contextualist to provide some plausible linguistic model of the context-sensitivity, given that the most obvious implementation, to treat ‘know’ itself as an indexical, is the least plausible, leading to the most drastic error theory.

In Chapter 6 of KPI, in my discussion of the modal objection to interest-relativity, I took the most plausible linguistic implementation of contextualism to be one that treats the knowledge verb as a modal of some kind (a treatment which results from treating attitude verbs as quantifiers over possibilities). I argued that this linguistic implementation would face analogous modal profile problems as interest-relativism about knowledge. In response, Blome-Tillman (2009: section 3) argues that we should then treat ‘know’ straightforwardly as an indexical verb, and thereby solve these modal profile worries. This is to treat this worry for contextualism about knowledge ascriptions in complete isolation from other worries, which raise even more substantial problems than modal profile worries for the indexical verb treatment of ‘know’.<sup>6</sup>

MacFarlane (2014: 186) concurs with Blome-Tillman’s curt dismissal of modal profile objections to contextualism about knowledge ascriptions. He is wrong to do so. The model of contextualism about knowledge ascriptions that treats the verb ‘know’ as an indexical in the sense of David Kaplan is considerably more implausible than other models. MacFarlane also defends assessment sensitivity against Montminy’s charge in Montminy (2009) that it too faces analogous

<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that contextualism about knowledge ascriptions has been refuted. Schaffer and Szabo (2014) agree that the verb ‘know’ is not to be treated on the model of indexicals, gradable adjectives, or quantificational determiners. And they agree that the most promising model for contextualism about knowledge ascriptions treats the knowledge verb as a kind of quantificational expression, an adverbial quantifier. And they defend this against a range of objections, including the modal profile objection, arguing that adverbial quantifiers allow for “domain coordination” (2014: 530ff). This is not a facile dismissal of the modal profile objection to contextualism about knowledge ascriptions. Schaffer and Szabo 2014 shows that contextualism about knowledge ascriptions is very much a live proposal.

objections. In response, I have argued (Stanley 2016) that Montminy is after all right that assessment sensitivity about knowledge faces precisely analogous concerns to the modal profile objections to interest-relativism about knowledge. All of these accounts face the same difficulty.

Nevertheless, I agree with critics of interest-relativity that there has yet to be a satisfactory account by the interest-relativist (or anyone else with an account of “shifty” intuitions about knowledge ascriptions) of why we make these modal errors. Here is a way of bringing the concern out, which I owe to Paul Boghossian (p.c.). We think of domains such as humor as involving facts that depend on cultural features of populations; what is funny depends on the projects, interests, and purposes of a group. But for this very reason we don’t think of humor as fully objective. If I am right, the difference between the epistemic domain and the domain of humor may seem to be one of degree, and not of kind. We clearly are resistant to thinking of the epistemic domain as involving interests. My previous attempts to explain this resistance have been unsatisfactory. Why, if knowledge is “impure”, does it *seem* pure? I turn to a new answer to this problematic question in the final section of the paper.

#### 4 Masking interests

Fara (2008) addresses the epistemic and metaphysical objections in detail. She responds to the epistemic objection by denying that, on her view, a sentence like ‘Mount Everest is tall’ expresses a singular proposition about a contextually salient person (or their interests). The reason she gives is that the particular semantic analysis of gradable adjectives such as ‘tall’ or ‘large’ that she offers does not entail that the contextually salient person (or interests) is a constituent of the structured proposition expressed by sentences containing them. Rather, her analysis of gradable adjectives involves the postulation of an unpronounced positive morpheme in the syntax. This element denotes, relative to a context, what she calls a ‘high-type function’. The view is still interest-relative, because which high-type operator it denotes is a function of the contextually salient person, or their goals and interests. As she writes:

So what type of function or property must the positive morpheme be in order to achieve the [postulated semantic interpretation]? Given the order of composition dictated by the syntactic structure (SS) it will be a high-type function having measure functions for its domain and functions from comparison classes to properties of individuals for its range. On my interest-relative theory, it is a function  $f$  such that  $f(G)$  ( $C$ ) is a property that is true of a thing  $x$  just in case  $G(x)$ ,  $x$ 's amount of  $G$ -ness, is significantly (to  $a$ ) greater than the typical ("norm") amount of  $G$ -ness for a  $C$ . Which function precisely this is will depend on which of the various norms, and what agent  $a$ , is operative in the context.

When Stanley says (2003: 278) that according to this view the positive morpheme denotes the *significantly-greater-than relation* which requires as an implicit argument an agent with interests, and that the view therefore requires there to be interested agents as constituents of propositions expressed using gradable-adjective predications, he glosses over the pertinent aspect of my view. The positive morpheme does not denote a relational expression, but rather the high-type function just described. (Fara 2008: 331-2)

Fara's response is that her view does not entail that grasp of the proposition expressed by a sentence containing a vague term requires acquaintance with a contextually salient person or their interests. First, a possible worlds account of propositions, she argues, is too coarse grained to use to characterize a notions like a de re proposition. Secondly, she argues that the structured Russellian proposition expressed by a sentence containing a vague gradable adjective, on her account, also does not require acquaintance with a contextually salient person or their interests. The reason is that the contextually salient person (the "agent...operative in the context") determines the semantic value of a context-sensitive unpronounced morpheme in the syntax. But, relative to a context, the morpheme contributes only a high-type function to the proposition expressed, and not also an individual or their interests. And on the Russellian account of propositions, grammatical categories correspond neatly to epistemic ones. On this theory, expressions in grammatical categories associated with high-type semantic values are not associated with demanding epistemic requirements.

## 5 Interests unmasked?

Possible worlds accounts of content are not too coarse grained to allow a characterization of a de re proposition. Stalnaker (1999: 163ff) argues that on his account propositions do not come with a “strong acquaintance relation” towards particular objects. Nevertheless, he argues that one can make sense out of *some* kind of de re belief ascription in his framework. My concern is that the beliefs that would be attributed by sentences containing vague terms would all be de re beliefs in this sense, if Fara is correct. This is enough to resurrect the worry, because, counter-intuitively, virtually any belief ascription would attribute a de re belief about a usually not explicitly mentioned salient agent. In sum, we can in fact resurrect a weak sense of de re belief on a coarse-grained view of content. It follows that we can still pose the objection that it threatens to make all empirical belief de re belief about persons, a consequence that remains worrisome even in a weaker sense of de re belief.

Adoption of the framework of Russellian structured propositions considerably strengthens Fara’s position. Fara treats the element in the structure that depends on a contextually salient person as a high type operator expression. She assumes that this means that the epistemic requirements for grasp of its content are not as demanding as the ones involved in grasping the content of singular terms. Fara therefore assumes, in her response to the epistemic objection, that epistemic categories neatly correspond to grammatical ones. And she is absolutely right that this is a standard assumption of those who employ the apparatus of Russellian propositions. Responding to her argument therefore requires challenging the connection Russellians typically hold obtains between semantic categories and epistemological ones. Challenging a basic assumption of a research program is difficult. In the end, it required a paper, Armstrong and Stanley 2011.

Using an acquaintance based epistemology as a model, Armstrong and Stanley 2011 places the Russellian assumption of a match between semantic and epistemic categories under pressure. Suppose one introduced an operator, ‘Johnly’, which meant the same as ‘According to John’. Intuitively one might think that linguistic competence with ‘Johnly’ requires acquaintance with John. But Fara could argue, via the same reasoning she employs above, that linguistic



competence with ‘Johnly’ does not require acquaintance with John, since an operator meaning is a kind of “high type function”, and not an object. Restricting acquaintance requirements to directly referential expressions allows too easy exploitation of the Russellian framework to evade epistemic commitments.

One example we use involves Montague’s theory of proper names. One could have good semantic reasons for treating proper names as denoting function from properties to truth-values.<sup>7</sup> Suppose one has good semantic reasons to treat proper names in this way. There is a perfectly natural way to retain the sense in which understanding a sentence containing a proper name involves having a singular thought about the bearer of that name, even if the propositional content of the sentence on that occasion does not contain it as a constituent. Linguistic competence with a proper name, such as ‘John’, consists, on this semantic theory, in the state of knowing that ‘John’ denotes a function from properties of John to true, and all other properties to false. Being in such a state involves having acquaintance with John (or whatever one’s favored model of singular thought involves). Nevertheless, the semantic values of proper names are still, on this view, higher-type operators.

Our second argument concerns the word ‘actually’, as it occurs in philosopher English. We argue that any plausible syntax and semantics of philosopher English will treat ‘actually’ as having an operator as its semantic value. We motivate the existence of powerful epistemic demands associated with grasping an occurrence of ‘actually’, specifically in the counterfactual case. If this is right, then the desired Russellian links between semantic categories and epistemic categories will fail. It will not be simple or straightforward to grasp operator meanings. Our discussion threatens the neat match between semantic categories and epistemic ones presupposed by standard Russellianism. It also threatens to undermine Fara’s novel strategy of concealing the subjective metaphysics of her view behind an imposing wall of type-theoretic semantic values.

<sup>7</sup> On Montague’s theory, ‘Jason Stanley’ denotes a function from properties I have to the true, and properties I lack to the false.

## 6 Fara vindicated?

Armstrong and Stanley (2011) argue that different semantic categories can correspond to the same epistemic category. For example, linguistic competence with a proper name requires acquaintance with a bearer, whether Kripke is right about the semantics of proper names or Montague. Whether ‘actually’ denotes a possible world or an operator, linguistic competence with ‘actually’ typically (invariably?) requires having a thought about the actual world. The goal of Jeffrey C. King 2015 is to defend the standard Russellian assumptions against Armstrong and Stanley’s critique, by rejecting both these claims.<sup>8</sup> If King is correct, it vindicates the central assumptions of Fara’s reply to the epistemic objection to her relativist view.

King first argues that one can grasp one of Montague’s semantic values for proper names without having acquaintance with the individual who is the bearer of the name. The key premise of his argument is that “one can become acquainted with a function by being told enough about it by someone already acquainted with it.” Let’s say  $f_j$  is Montague’s semantic value for the proper name, ‘John’, a function from properties to truth-values. According to King, we can grasp  $f_j$  by being told “enough information about it” by someone acquainted with it, e.g. about its values given arguments like *being a philosopher*. This is sufficient for acquaintance with it. If so, then one can be acquainted with the function  $f_j$  without being acquainted with the person John. King concludes that if Montague is correct about the semantics of proper names, grasping the contents of sentences containing them does not require having singular thoughts.

According to King, one can grasp  $f_j$  given only some of its values for some of its inputs, without having information that allows one to even come close to uniquely identifying  $f_j$ . The under-determination is resolved by the fact that the person who informed you of the highly partial information about the function has acquaintance with it, which you can then inherit. King’s argument appeals crucially to *deference*. It is because I defer to a person who has acquaintance with

<sup>8</sup> The “standard Russellian account” of singular thought explains this epistemic category in terms of the metaphysical apparatus of structured propositions, understood in the sense of contemporary Russellian theorists of content.

the function, that I also acquire acquaintance on the basis of non-uniquely identifying information.

With a capacious enough notion of deference, one can conclude that one can acquire acquaintance with  $f_j$  without acquiring acquaintance with John. King is right that the capacious notion of deference required for the argument is still not capacious enough to pass on the speaker's acquaintance with John. After all, given only the information provided in King's example, for instance, one might become acquainted with  $f_j$ , while falsely taking it to be the semantic value of the quantifier expression 'someone'. In particular, King is clearly correct that a person in this situation lacks acquaintance with John.

And of course, King's case does not rest simply on the single case of 'someone'. His argument is that as long as proper names are given Montague semantic values, there will be cases in which one intuitively lacks acquaintance with the object. His argument goes through as long as there are cases in which one does not know if one is thinking about a quantifier semantic value associated with a general term, or the quantifier semantic value associated with a singular term, and nevertheless, via the route he describes has acquaintance with the semantic value of the singular term.

Here are two claims about proper names (here construed as including all expressions certain theorists consider as "devices of direct reference"). One is that grasp of the correct semantic value of a proper name N requires acquaintance with the bearer of N. The other is that, linguistic competence with a proper name N requires acquaintance with the bearer of N. The first is a claim just about the semantic values proper names have, and the second is a claim about proper names themselves. These claims are easy to conflate. In Armstrong and Stanley 2011, we endorsed both without noticing their differences. But they are distinct claims.

The direct reference theorist about names holds that the semantic value of any proper name is its bearer. If direct reference theory is true, the two claims do not diverge in truth-value. King's argument shows however that these two claims *can* diverge in truth-value. Specifically, in the context of Montague's semantic theory of proper names, the claims come apart. King's argument is against the first of these claims. But it does not undermine the second claim, about linguistic competence. And if we restrict Armstrong and Stanley's

point just to linguistic competence, it raises no less of a problem for the standard Russellian framework.

Linguistic competence with a proper name requires knowing that it is a proper name. This truism is embedded into theories that reflect proper name status in the distinctive semantic values that are assigned to them, as in the case of direct reference theory. In contrast, Montague semantics treats proper names as a subclass of generalized quantifier expressions. King's argument trades on some of the unforeseen consequences of this assimilation.

If we think of Armstrong and Stanley's arguments in terms of the notion of linguistic competence, King's concerns do not arise. Understanding the name 'John' requires knowing that it's a proper name. This means that if someone inherits the capacity to talk about John using the name 'John', they will not be confused about whether or not they are thinking about an individual or the quantifier meaning of 'someone'. They may not be able to distinguish John from Dean, but they will nevertheless be acquainted with John, in the capacious sense of acquaintance also at work in King's arguments. This is enough to conclude that understanding certain utterances requires having singular thoughts, *even though the sentences uttered do not express singular propositions*. And that is enough to reject the standard Russellian framework, which denies this possibility.

The stronger claim, the one explicitly targeted by King, is that grasping the Montagovian semantic value of a proper name requires acquaintance with its bearer. There is also a plausible defense of this claim against King's argument. If someone does not know whether or not their thought concerns a specific individual, or the denotation of 'someone', then they are certainly not having a singular thought. But that may also be because they do not have a coherent thought at all in this situation. The key premise of King's argument is that "one can become acquainted with a function by being told enough about it by someone already acquainted with it." If one hasn't been told "enough about" a function to know whether it's about a specific individual or just the quantifier denotation of 'someone', then one hasn't been told enough about it to have a determinate thought about it all.

What about the more general case? If one hasn't been told enough about the semantic value of a proper name such as 'John' to distinguish the thought one is having from the thought one would be

having with (for example) ‘many people’, or ‘all but three people’, it’s hard to imagine one is having a coherent thought at all. There is nothing specific in this response to the case of ‘someone’. Perhaps only acquaintance with John delivers acquaintance with that function from properties to truth-values that takes a property to the true if and only if John has it. If one falls short of this epistemic standard, it is arguably not clear one is grasping a specific thought at all. I am not seeing a route out of intuitional impasse in this case.

Let’s now turn to King’s second argument, concerning our discussion of ‘actually’ in the semantics of philosopher English. Recall the goal of Armstrong and Stanley 2011, to undermine the standard Russellian assumption that there is a correspondence between semantic categories and epistemic ones. We wanted to argue that the semantic distinctions between for example operators and singular terms did not in and of themselves entail significant epistemic differences. We used the term ‘actually’ to make this point. In King’s second argument, he turns to the topic of ‘actually’, seeking to show that instead of posing a problem for traditional Russellian assumptions connecting semantic categories to epistemic ones, reflection upon it vindicates them. Indeed, King uses ‘actually’ to show that propositions containing operators can be grasped without any singular thought.

King seeks to show that grasp of a proposition containing the denotation of an occurrence of ‘actually’ does not place the kind of epistemic demands on an agent that are required to grasp propositions expressed by sentences containing singular terms.<sup>9</sup> Let us see if his argument establishes the required epistemic asymmetry between sentences containing operator expressions and sentences containing singular terms.

<sup>9</sup> There is much that is interesting, but not dialectically central in King’s response. King spends many pages arguing that possible worlds are properties and not objects, according to the theorists we criticize. But this is irrelevant. Even if possible worlds are properties, the semantic content of an occurrence of ‘actually’ is not simply a possible world, but some more complex model theoretic type. The aim of Armstrong and Stanley 2011 is to show that the epistemic criteria that one must satisfy to grasp these more complex model theoretic types can be similar or even the same as those implicated in linguistic competence with predicates and singular terms.

King takes the character of ‘actually’ to be a function from contexts to a function from worlds to a function from intensions to truth-values. Given the inputs of a context  $c$  and a context world  $@$ , its content is a function such that for any proposition intension (function from worlds to truth-values)  $I$ ,  $Ac@(I) = T$  iff  $I(@) = T$ . King writes:

Now consider a particular proposition of this form  $\langle Ac@, P \rangle$ , for some proposition  $P$  that I grasp. Does grasp of this proposition constitute having a singular thought about  $@$ ? It seems not. For here is how I grasp this proposition without having a singular thought about  $@$ . I imagine a function that when applied to any world  $w$ , yields a function that maps proposition intensions that are true (not true at  $w$ ; true!) to true and the others to false. This is just the function  $Ac@$ . So far I haven’t had a singular thought about  $@$ . But surely having imagined this function in this way, I am now in a position to grasp propositions that have it as a constituent. I told you what the function was after all! But this means I am in a position to grasp  $\langle Ac@, P \rangle$ , since I grasp  $P$ . So, I can grasp  $\langle Ac@, P \rangle$  without thereby having a singular thought about  $@$ . Hence  $\langle Ac@, P \rangle$  is not a singular thought.

King here argues that if one occupies world  $@$ , there is a way of grasping  $\langle Ac@, P \rangle$ , without having a singular thought<sub>p</sub> about  $@$ . Grasping the character of ‘Actually’, and occupying the context in which it is evaluated allows one to formulate a description of the content of ‘actually’ in this context. King presents this as a method by which one can grasp  $\langle Ac@, P \rangle$ , without relying on one’s acquaintance with  $@$  (although he concedes, in a footnote, that one is in this case acquainted with  $@$ ).

Obviously, King’s point does not address the epistemic requirements for counterfactual knowledge of actuality. The procedure he describes is hopeless in this case, as it would invariably lead to a thought about the world in which one occupies. A richer epistemology is required. But if counterfactual knowledge of actuality requires acquaintance with the actual world, that is enough to establish Armstrong and Stanley’s point about ‘actually’. So King’s argument is in fact irrelevant to the Armstrong and Stanley claim that grasp of the content of certain operators requires acquaintance with the world states. The account King gives does not generalize to counterfactual knowledge of actuality, and for all he says counterfactual knowledge

of actuality does involve acquaintance with the actual world state. King provides no method or account of counterfactual knowledge of actuality, and so strictly speaking there is no need to even address his discussion to defend Armstrong and Stanley (2011).

More generally, it is *prima facie* odd to give an account of acquaintance that is restricted to actual knowledge of actuality, i.e. the conditions under which actual world agents grasp the semantic content of an occurrence of ‘actually’ or ‘actual’. All the arguments that center on the difficulty of grasping actuality operators involve the difficulty of *counterfactual* knowledge of actuality, not *actual* knowledge of actuality.<sup>10</sup> So even if King’s argument were to be successful, its philosophical utility is at best marginal. Nevertheless, since I found myself unconvinced by his account of actual knowledge of actuality, it is worth discussing.

King writes, “imagine a function that when applied to any world  $w$ , yields a function that maps proposition intensions that are true (not true at  $w$ ; true!) to true and the others to false.” He argues this is enough to grasp, in the actual world, the content of ‘actually’ relative to that world. The obvious response is that it is not enough, that one needs to imagine a function that is associated with truth-values in the actual world. King addresses this response in a footnote, where he writes:

Is thinking about true proposition intensions having a singular thought about [the actual world state]? I don’t see why it would be unless you thought that being true was being true [at the actual world state]. But nobody should think that. That grass is green is true is contingent, but that grass is green is true [at the actual world state] is not.

<sup>10</sup> Consider, for example, Timothy Williamson’s response to one of Dorothy Edgington’s accounts of Fitch’s knowability paradox (Edgington 1985). Edgington rightly points out that the paradox can be blocked if we formulate the knowability principle with actuality operators. Williamson (1987) replies by arguing that counterfactual knowledge of actuality is a very demanding or perhaps impossible condition to meet (absent a complete descriptive specification of another world state), and so the resulting knowability principle should be rejected on independent grounds. Soames (2002) also uses the difficulty of counterfactual knowledge of actuality against actualized description theories of proper names. The philosophical puzzles here entirely pertain to counterfactual knowledge about the actual world. It is mysterious why one would care about producing an account that only addresses actual knowledge of the actual world.

Armstrong and Stanley (2011) argue that there are properties, and even higher-typed functions such as operator meanings, that one can only think of if one has acquaintance with an object or property that is not this semantic value. Here, they would argue that thinking about true proposition intensions requires having acquaintance with the actual world-state. What they reject is that the only way to make sense of this is by identifying being true with being true at the actual world state. This just dismisses without argument the possibility of the logical, semantical, and epistemological space that Armstrong and Stanley argue to be perfectly coherent.

The argument begs the question in another way as well; it can be brought out by reflecting upon a precisely analogous method one might use to argue that one could have a first-personal thought perfectly generally. Consider the proposition I would express by, ‘I am a philosopher’. Consider the function that takes a context and yields the agent of that context. Suppose I am the agent of the context. Isn’t this a perfectly general way of coming to grasp the proposition that I am a philosopher? The agent of the context is a philosopher and I am the agent of the context.

One might deny this possibility, because one might reasonably deny that purely descriptive information is enough to yield grasp of  $\langle \text{Jason}, P \rangle$ . In order to grasp  $\langle \text{Jason}, P \rangle$ , one needs the additional information that the agent of the context is Jason.

If one is inclined to reply in this way, one should also deny that King’s original procedure is a possible route to grasping  $\langle \text{Ac}@, P \rangle$ . The procedure he describes yields only *descriptive* knowledge of  $\text{Ac}@$ . One might think that to grasp  $\langle \text{Ac}@, P \rangle$ , one needs the *additional* cognitively significant information that the function that is the output of the character rule for ‘actually’ relative to the context world is  $\text{Ac}@$ . And this plausibly requires acquaintance with  $\text{Ac}@$ .  $\text{Ac}@$  takes proposition intensions and yields True iff those proposition intensions are true in  $@$ . It is reasonable to take the additional information that allows one to grasp  $\langle \text{Ac}@, P \rangle$  to be acquaintance with  $@$ . I do not see a persuasive disanalogy between the case of the philosopher’s ‘actual’ and the first person pronoun; if descriptive knowledge of the content of the former is possible, so is descriptive knowledge of the content of the latter. But the latter is perhaps the paradigm Russellian singular term.



## 7 Relativism and modality

A fully general relativist metaphysics such as Fara's faces an epistemic objection that more limited versions of relativism, such as epistemological relativism, do not. One might think that a parallel moral will emerge from consideration of modal dependence. A general, broad sweeping metaphysical interest-relativity will, at least *prima facie*, run a far greater risk of misclassifying facts as metaphysically dependent on interests and persons. And one might think that here too a more limited relativist claim for the epistemic domain will avoid problematic predictions of unintuitive modal dependencies. It is much more surprising to be told that whether or not that mountain is large depends metaphysically upon unmentioned persons, than it is to be told that whether or not Hannah knows something depends on the existence of Hannah.

Thanks mainly to Michael Blome-Tillmann (2009), it has emerged in the literature, that counter-intuitive modal objections will arise for *any* hermeneutical interest-relative view of any interest. This is, in retrospect, unsurprising. Interest-relative views of the sort I have been discussing postulate *non-obvious* relativity to human interests in our ordinary thought about a domain. Modal objections arise to interest-relative views of this sort as a means to test the dependency claims to which such views are committed. The objector rejects the interest-relativity claim of the given domain, because it is inconsistent with our intuitions about counterfactuals that connect changes in interests to changes in facts about that domain. The problem facing Fara is more general. How does she reply?

Her main response to worries about individual judgments is to complicate her semantic theory. But the virtue of her version of relativism is that it is *genuine* relativism, in Boghossian's sense, *factual* relativism, rather than "new age relativism", which is semantic. The more weight one places on special semantic explanations, the more it seems that Fara's relativism is semantic after all. Fara response undermines one of the motivations to accept her view, that it is factual relativism.

Fara's general metaphysical view elicits a certain surprise, what, following David Lewis, is called the "incredulous stare". But Fara rejects the demand to address this; it is, according to her,

question-begging. Yet it's hard to see this response as true to the spirit of Fara's original view either.

Recall the modal objection specifically to Fara is that her theory predicts an incorrect modal profile for ordinary sentences like 'This is a heap', one that makes its truth dependent upon the existence of interests. But it seems that even if there were no people, this would still be a heap. Fara's basic strategy is to block arguments from counterfactuals of the form 'if  $p$  were the case then  $q$ ' to the content of stand-alone occurrence of  $q$ . She provides an account of the counterfactual that putatively accounts for the truth of 'if there were no people, this would still be a heap', without it compromising her interest-relative metaphysics for the proposition that this is still a heap.

Fara's thought is that in counterfactual evaluation, we often keep the interests fixed. We rigidify on the interests in some (albeit mysterious) manner, and then evaluate the consequent of the counterfactual, even with respect to worlds at which those interests do not exist. As she writes, "the evaluation of counterfactuals often involves holding certain facts fixed, even when those facts *would not have obtained* had the antecedent of the conditional been true."

Fara provides some interesting data supporting her claim, such as the following kind of case:

- (5) If no people had ever existed, it would be very surprising for this cave wall to be so smooth.

I do not understand how the proposed rigidification on interests is supposed work. But I have a considerably more foundational concern. However the rigidification mechanism works, it must be associated with interest-relative words such as 'surprising'. But this suggests that her metaphysical relativism is accompanied by modifications to the semantic theory to accommodate it.

A central motivation for interest-relativity, present both in the literature in epistemology and in Fara's work on vagueness, is that it evades the semantic commitments of contextualist and truth-relativist views about the domain. It is not, as Boghossian would say, "new age" relativism, that is, semantic relativism. It is rather factual relativism, relativism about the subject matter. But the view that there is a special mechanism that rigidifies interests and allows them to be relevant for the truth-conditions of modal claims (even those

involving worlds in which the interests do not exist) relinquishes just this very motivation from the view. The motivation for factual relativism is that there is no *special semantics* for interest-relativity. Interest-relativity is a metaphysical hypothesis about certain properties and relations, rather than a semantic hypothesis, as contextualism and “new age” relativism are. But if we require special treatment of expressions that express interest-relative properties when they are embedded in counterfactuals, the view begins to look like it too involves special semantic commitments. Furthermore, these commitments more exotic than the ones incurred by other semantic theses, such as contextualism or truth-relativism.

I am open to the possibility that there is a non-standard semantics that will enable Fara to retain the interest-relative interpretation of ‘that mountain is tall’, according to which the proposition it expresses could only be true in worlds with interests, and yet validate counterfactuals such as:

(6) If no people had ever existed, that mountain would still be tall.

I just remain unclear exactly how it would work. There are no interests in a world with no people. So if we somehow rigidified on the interest-sensitive component of the predicate ‘tall’, it is not clear how to use this-worldly interest about mountains in a possible situation without them. I would like to briefly explore another line of inquiry inspired by her suggestion about the counterfactual.

Fara’s thought is that perhaps interests interact with the interpretation of counterfactuals so that counterfactual interpretation does not track the modal profile of the ordinary embedded sentences. She chooses to realize this strategy by altering the semantics of terms with interest-relative semantic contents. But *prima facie* one can accomplish this in a way that does not affect the interpretation of expressions with interest-dependent contents, but just the counterfactual operator itself.

Let’s suppose that interests were something that were kept fix in counterfactual evaluation. I am here not thinking of the more baroque proposal that some expression inside the scope of the counterfactual is subject to a rigidifying operation. I am rather thinking of a proposal according to which the similarity relation for the counterfactual may only connect to worlds in which, where possible,

the interests of relevant parties were the same. For obvious reasons, Fara does not suggest this simpler option; the counterfactuals that pose problems for her view involve the consideration of worlds with *no* interests. But there are no correspondingly problematic counterfactuals for the interest-relative about knowledge. So it is an option worth exploring in this case.

Let's see how this suggestion would help with the modal profile objection facing interest-relativism about knowledge. Suppose that Hannah is in a low stakes bank case — nothing much hangs on whether or not the bank is open. She has some evidence that the bank is open, sufficient in the situation to know that the bank is open. If however Hannah had a check coming due, then she would be in a high stakes case. The following counterfactual seems false:

- (7) If Hannah had had a check coming through, then she wouldn't know that the bank is open.

On the face of it, the interest-relativity of knowledge predicts that (7) is true. If these judgments about such counterfactuals are robust, then our counterfactual judgments do not pick up on the interest-relative metaphysics postulated by the thesis of interest-relativity of knowledge.

For the sake of simplicity, let's consider a Stalnaker selection function semantics for counterfactuals. The proposal I just suggested, inspired by Fara's 2008 strategy (but distinct from her implementation of it), is to have the selection function take the antecedent world, and yield a consequent world in which Hannah's interests are the same. In other words, counterfactual evaluation would not shift interests of relevant parties. Cases such as (7) involve counterfactuals the antecedents of which are attempts to shift interests. But given the stipulation about the selection function, it would fail to do so. Judgments about (7) would be judgments about possible situations in which Hannah had a check coming, but it didn't affect her practical interests. The proposed meta-semantic claim (the proposed hypothesis about the choice of selection function) would render the correct intuitive judgment in cases such as (7), namely it would be false. As in the case of Fara's proposed strategy, it would not follow that the proposition that is in the consequent of the counterfactual lacks an interest-relative metaphysics.

However, there are counterfactuals that do explicitly involve the changing of interests, as in:

- (8) If I wasn't interested in going to the park, I would have told you so.

And of course we need a selection function that selects antecedent worlds with different interests to generate the right results here. So the suggestion could not be that no selection function is responsive to changes in interests. There would have to be some special pleading for a non-standard selection function for examples such as (7), and that would have to be motivated.

More problematically, no solution to the modal problems plaguing interest-relative views that locates its source in the interpretation of the counterfactual conditional can be correct. This is because the problems arise not just with modals, but also with temporal expressions. Stanley (2005: 106) gives the following example:

...suppose that on Thursday, Hannah had a bill coming due over the weekend. So, on Thursday, she did not know that the bank would be open on Saturday. But suppose that, on Friday, the company to whom the bill was owed decided to alleviate the debt of all of its customers. So, on Thursday, Hannah was in a high stakes situation, whereas on Friday, she was not. Then it would seem that IRI entails the truth of:

- (2) Hannah didn't know on Thursday that the bank would be open on Saturday, but she did know on Friday.

No solution specific to the counterfactual construction can help here. Nor is it clear that even temporal rigidification on 'know' would help, because it is not clear what interests on which one should rigidify, the interests on Thursday or the interests on Friday.<sup>11</sup>

I am dubious that there is a semantic solution to these problems. More generally, by seeking a special semantic explanation, Fara blurs the important distinction between factual relativism and semantic relativism. Fara regards it as an advantage of her view that it is a direct response to the data, reflecting our judgments in the metaphysics, and is therefore to be preferred to semantic accounts such as

<sup>11</sup> Of course, if one rigidified on the speaker's interests, that is, the interests of the knowledge attributors, the view would, again, collapse into contextualism.

contextualism or what Crispin Wright calls “new wave” relativism. But the fact that she must employ a non-standard semantics to evade problems undermines this virtue of her theory.

Fara (2008) concludes by repudiating a more direct, non-modal version of the objection to her interest-relative metaphysics. The objection she considers is just an incredulous stare at the view that ordinary propositions, such as the proposition that Mt. Everest is tall, can only be true in worlds with interests. This objection is just a way of making public one’s commitment to the subject-independence of ordinary propositions, a way of making public a commitment to a form of metaphysical realism that Fara’s theory explicitly repudiates. Fara rejects the demand to address this worry, which she describes as a “flat-out denial” of her view.

Yet it is difficult to see how Fara is entitled to respond in this way to the incredulous stare. Recall that Fara’s view is introduced as a response to an incredulous stare — to the falsity of the Sorites Premise. Her view emerges precisely as an answer to the “psychological question” of why, if the Sorites Premise is false, are we so strongly inclined to believe it to be true? A similar psychological question arises about the metaphysical consequences of her view. If facts about mountains are dependent on interests and people, why are we so inclined to believe otherwise? She is scarcely in a position to deny the need to address this question; it is a version of the psychological question, just one level of analysis down.

And here is where the more limited factual relativism about the epistemic has a great advantage over Fara’s more general factual relativism. The psychological question that arises for my view is the following: if epistemic facts are dependent on interests, why are we so inclined to think otherwise? The source of the intuition here is adherence to *epistemic purity*. And advocates of epistemic relativity in the sense of KPI are far from the first to express skepticism about epistemic purity.

In the first section of Railton 1991, a section called, “On the Ideological Character of Belief in the Objectivity of Science”, Railton (1991) argues that the thought that objectivity and knowledge are value-free operates ideologically. Value-free conceptions of knowledge or objectivity are ideological because they prevent one from recognizing that one’s own perspective lacks special value-free authority.

We are motivated by self-interest to regard our own inquiry, as opposed to the inquiry of others, value-free. This gives our inquiries, and our judgments, the special authority of neutrality, which seems to us the authority of knowledge.<sup>12</sup> This manifests in ground level beliefs that knowledge is not dependent on interests, beliefs that are reflected in our rejection of certain counterfactuals. But the general underlying belief in purity that explains them is no more plausible in the knowledge case than in the objectivity case.

Louise Antony (2006) describes “Draagnet objectivity” as the view that a “good investigator will...discipline herself to consider just the facts — the raw, undisputed, facts of the matter, unadorned by personal speculation and uncorrupted by emotional interest in the case.” She argues that draagnet objectivity will lead to *less* knowledge rather than *more*, and so is a bad epistemic ideal for limited human agents; this is also the motivation of KPI. But Antony also argues that draagnet objectivity also has an *ideological* function. Specifically, draagnet objectivity is a useful tool for elites to employ to gain a putative epistemic advantage; “...the promulgation of draagnet objectivity functions ideologically to safeguard and reinforce the political status quo.” Antony’s “draagnet objectivity” is nothing other than epistemic purity.

In Stanley 2015: Chapter 6, I argue that in many cases of democratic deliberation between those with more advantages and those with less, the dependence of knowledge on interests will result in an epistemic advantage for those better off. If the epistemic advantage is seen as due to material advantage or other kinds of social privilege, it will be recognized as less authoritative. The only ideology I need to appeal to in order to do the explanatory work of explaining the sense of lack of metaphysical dependence on interests is the ideology of privilege.

What about those who are the victims of the sort of epistemic injustice discussed in Stanley 2015: Chapter 6? I maintain that they will in fact recognize that the knowledge wielded by elites is often

<sup>12</sup> Carl Schmitt (1996: 35) writes: “As with every political concept, the neutrality concept too is subject to the ultimate presupposition of a real possibility of a friend and enemy grouping. Should only neutrality prevail in the world, then not only war but also neutrality would come to an end.”

dependent on differentials in resources and power. They will see elites absorbing the same news channels and they do, and act with greater epistemic authority. On my view, knowledge is constitutively connected to action, and elites will have less constraints on their actions because they will have more power. I maintain that this dependence of knowledge on power and interests will be clear to those who suffer from disparities in power and resources, provided they have achieved some measure of critical consciousness.

In short, I find plausible the classic critical theory explanation for our tendency to recoil from the metaphysical dependence of knowledge on interests. It is often in the interests of elites to do so, and they are engaged in wishful thinking. I think that those subject to this kind of epistemic oppression will be much more likely to recognize it. So we have an explanation ready to hand in terms of ideology and wishful thinking to explain why we fail to see dependence of *knowledge* on interests. I do not see a similar explanation in terms of ideology and self-interest that would explain our failure to recognize the metaphysical dependence of all ordinary empirical facts upon interests.

There is a *prima facie* tension between objectivity and genuine relativism. I have argued that my favored relativist view evades these worries. While it involves some surprising metaphysical claims, the view straightforwardly also predicts a pattern of resistance to these claims. The hypothesis that I am suggesting is that the first order modal judgments about modal dependencies of knowledge on interests that are the basis of most philosophers' rejection of this version of epistemic relativism is a manifestation of this pattern of resistance.

## 8 Conclusion

I began this paper with Paul Boghossian's distinction between factual relativism and semantic relativism. One moral of the discussion of Fara is that, as factual relativism becomes more general, the distinction between the two begins to blur. The reason is that any interesting factually relativist thesis will have consequences that are sufficiently upsetting that they will have to be masked. As we have seen in detail in the case of Fara, if the relativism is general enough, the masking will employ the tools and resources of semantics. This



invariably blurs the lines between factual and semantic versions of relativism.

The central concern facing any factually relativist claim is that it will compromise some important forms of objectivity. I have tried to illustrate this point with the use of Fara's very general form of relativism. The relativist view I hold involves just the epistemic domain: epistemic facts are relative to interests. I have argued that this is a version of epistemic relativism that is both genuinely relativist and consistent with all plausible versions of objectivity. Of course, it is not consistent with the view that there is a realm of pure epistemic fact, free of practical dimensions. I have argued that our inclination towards this position is ideological. There is no reason to take purism about epistemology as the default view. None of our most central concepts of objectivity require it.<sup>13</sup>

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