

# DEFENDING STANDARDS CONTEXTUALISM

Robert HUDSON

ABSTRACT: It has become more common recently for epistemologists to advocate the pragmatic encroachment on knowledge, the claim that the appropriateness of knowledge ascriptions is dependent on the relevant practical circumstances. Advocacy of practicalism in epistemology has come at the expense of contextualism, the view that knowledge ascriptions are independent of pragmatic factors and depend alternatively on distinctively epistemological, semantic factors with the result that knowledge ascriptions express different knowledge properties on different occasions of use. Overall, my goal here is to defend a particular version of contextualism drawn from work by Peter Ludlow, called 'standards contextualism.' My strategy will be to elaborate on this form of contextualism by defending it from various objections raised by the practicalists Jason Stanley, Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath. In showing how standards contextualism can effectively repel these criticisms I hope to establish that standards contextualism is a viable alternative to practicalism.

KEYWORDS: pragmatic encroachment, standards contextualism, practicalism, Jason Stanley, Jeremy Fantl, Matthew McGrath

## 1. Introduction

According to the proponents of the pragmatic encroachment on knowledge, whether one can be said to know a claim depends on the practical circumstances in which one finds oneself. For example, according to Jason Stanley's 'Interest-Relative Invariantism,' "whether or not someone knows that *p* may be determined in part by practical facts about the subject's environment."<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath defend a similar view. They defend a pragmatist principle called 'Action' which states: "if you know that *p* you are proper to act on *p* when the question of whether *p* is relevant to the question of what to do."<sup>2</sup> Stephen Grimm calls the view Stanley, Fantl and McGrath are defending 'practicalism,' which Grimm contrasts, "borrowing Stanley's label and basic idea, and in keeping with similar thoughts by Fantl and McGrath," with the doctrine of

---

<sup>1</sup> Jason Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 85.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath, *Knowledge in an Uncertain World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 49.

‘intellectualism,’ that “whether a true belief amounts to knowledge depends exclusively on truth-related factors.”<sup>3</sup>

The defense of practicalism, Grimm notes, usually focuses on the celebrated ‘bank cases.’<sup>4</sup> In general terms the bank cases involve an agent who has seemingly good evidence for a true claim, but who intuitively speaking knows this claim, or not, depending on how much is at stake for her. That is, given the same amount of evidence, it can happen that the agent knows this claim if very little is at stake, but not know the claim if a lot is at stake. For Stanley, Fantl and McGrath, and Grimm, the best way to explain this phenomenon is to reject intellectualism (or more precisely, for Grimm, ‘threshold’ intellectualism) and to allow into the normative evaluation of knowledge claims practical considerations.

But, as Stanley points out, the celebrated bank cases have also been used to justify contextualism, the “distinctively epistemological”<sup>5</sup> semantic thesis that knowledge predicates (i.e., ‘knows that ...’) “denote different knowledge properties on different occasions of use.”<sup>6</sup> What it means for context-sensitivity to be distinctively epistemological is subject to interpretation. “A sentence is context-sensitive,” Stanley asserts, “if and only if it expresses different propositions relative to different contexts of use.”<sup>7</sup> So, with distinctively epistemological context-sensitivity, we find that epistemological factors lead to sentences expressing different propositions. But how does this come about? Stanley describes various ways this can occur, but for the most part settles on one version (deriving he notes from work by Peter Ludlow<sup>8</sup>). On this version,

predicates that are instances of the schema ‘knows that p’ are context-sensitive since they are really of the form ‘knows that p relative to standards s’ where s receives a value from context.<sup>9</sup>

I will call this version of contextualism ‘standards contextualism.’

An important feature of contextualism, generally speaking, is that it is a form of intellectualism: with contextualism, whether one knows a claim, or not, is determined independently of pragmatic factors. Thus, practicalists like Stanley,

---

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Grimm, “On Intellectualism in Epistemology,” *Mind* 120 (2011): 706.

<sup>4</sup> Grimm, “On Intellectualism in Epistemology,” 707.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Ludlow, “Contextualism and the New Linguistic Turn in Epistemology,” in *Contextualism in Philosophy*, eds. G. Preyer and G. Peters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 17.

Fantl and McGrath regard contextualism as a foil to their pragmatist conceptions of knowledge, and accordingly each provides arguments against contextualism. My plan in this paper, in elaboration of standards contextualism, is in section 2 to defend it from objections raised by Stanley, and in section 3 to defend it from objections raised by Fantl and McGrath. I then examine and respond to two further objections to standards contextualism in the final section. Overall, I hope to show that standards contextualism is a viable alternative to practicalism.

## 2. Stanley Versus Contextualism

Stanley provides a critique of contextualism from three vantage-points which we examine in turn. He considers, first, the bank cases and argues that contextualism fails to get the right answer with a certain version of these cases. Second, he introduces various ‘linguistic’ considerations and argues that, with contextualism, we wrongly conclude that knowledge ascriptions are gradable and that certain anomalous speech-act reports and anaphora are acceptable. Lastly, he takes aim at Ludlow’s unique brand of standards contextualism which he believes wrongly assigns a position for standards in all kinds of predications, not just in epistemic ones (i.e., knowledge ascriptions). We examine and respond to each of these criticisms.

### 2.1 The Ignorant High Stakes Bank Case

In *Knowledge and Practical Interests* Stanley examines five versions of the bank cases. In all these versions, the situation concerns an agent who is deliberating about whether to stand in line at a bank on a Friday to deposit a cheque or wait to deposit the cheque the next day. The question is whether she can be said to know the proposition, “the bank will be open tomorrow (Saturday).” The common view is that whether the agent knows the proposition depends on what’s at stake for the agent should her belief be mistaken. In one case, called ‘Low Stakes,’ there is little at risk for the agent since she has no impending bills due, and as such the evidential facts are sufficient for her to be said to know that the bank will be open on Saturday. By comparison, in the ‘High Stakes’ case, there is much at risk for the agent if she is mistaken (say, she has a bill coming due and the money needs to be in her account by Monday morning), and so with the same evidential facts she is said not to possess knowledge. According to Stanley, contextualism effectively handles these sorts of cases.<sup>10</sup> But the situation is different for the case called ‘Ignorant High Stakes.’ In this case someone thinks she is in a low stakes situation

---

<sup>10</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 24.

Robert Hudson

but is actually in a high stakes situation, and so wrongly ascribes to herself knowledge. It is Stanley's opinion that contextualism gives the wrong result in this sort of case because it incorporates the following claim:

what determines the semantic value of instances of 'knows that *p*', relative to a context of use, is some collection of facts about the intentions and beliefs of the conversational participants in that context of use.<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly, because in Ignorant High Stakes the agent (wrongly) believes that the stakes are low, the agent expresses a knowledge claim using epistemic standards that are themselves low. Thus, if the semantic value of this knowledge claim is set by these low standards (presumably as per standards contextualism) the agent can be said to possess knowledge.

Motivated by the intuition that the agent lacks knowledge in Ignorant High Stakes, Stanley proposes a theory of knowledge in which the meaning of 'knows that *p*' does not vary with the context ('invariantism') and that whether an agent knows that *p* varies with whether *p* is a serious practical question for the agent (knowledge is 'interest-relative'). A "serious practical question," for Stanley, is a "proposition that one must take into account in decision making," where one's obligation to take a proposition into account varies with how the truth of this proposition affects the warranted expected utility of the actions at one's disposal.<sup>12</sup> As he further explains, one makes use of warranted expected utilities, and not alternatively 'subjective credences,' "because the agent might not be aware of what is in her own best interest."<sup>13</sup> That is, the warranted expected utility of an action is an objective quantity, but may not even be objective enough for Stanley. He comments:

warranted expected utility is probably not sufficiently impersonal of a notion to do the required work. There may be facts relevant to the utility calculation that the agent is not epistemically responsible for knowing. So a more impersonal notion of utility may be required to capture the notion of a serious practical question.<sup>14</sup>

The upshot is that an agent may be unaware that a proposition is a serious practical question for her, and so is mistaken in thinking she knows a claim. This is the sort of situation Stanley asserts we have in Ignorant High Stakes.

A standards contextualist can respond to this problem in the following way. She can suggest that the agent is in a position to know the relevant claim in

---

<sup>11</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 94.

<sup>13</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 95.

<sup>14</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 95.

Ignorant High Stakes, given her low (but not unreasonable) standards. Accordingly, if she were to bring about a belief in the claim, and assuming the claim is true, she could be said to know the claim. However, given the practical situation, the standards contextualist can further suggest that, practically speaking (though not necessarily epistemically speaking), the agent should be using higher standards if there is a severe cost should the claim be false. Moreover, with the adoption of these higher standards, it may be that the agent isn't in a position to know the claim, after all. The standards contextualist may then recommend that the agent not bring the belief about, given the costs in being wrong, with the result that she doesn't know the claim (even) in the low stakes situation since she doesn't believe the claim.

This is in fact the sort of approach to Ignorant High Stakes that I suggest we should take, and which I develop more fully later on. It is an approach that asks us to distinguish between the decision that, under certain evidential circumstances, we should believe a proposition (though not necessarily bring the belief about), and the decision that, where further practical considerations are taken into account, we should go further and actually bring about a belief in this proposition. In order to motivate this approach, let us look at some potential concerns with Stanley's practicalist approach to Ignorant High Stakes.

To begin with, what makes a proposition a serious practical question for Stanley is an objective matter, one that is determined independently of what an agent is even 'epistemically responsible for knowing.' But it isn't, nor could it be, exclusively an objective matter, a point Stanley seems to acknowledge. Consider the proposition that you have an odd number of hairs. Stanley says,

given that I do not care about the number of hairs you have, whether or not you have an odd number of hairs will not make a difference to the warranted expected utilities of retaining or discarding my belief. So, the proposition that you have an odd number of hairs is not a serious practical question for me.<sup>15</sup>

Going back to Ignorant High Stakes, then, it might well be the case that the agent doesn't care about the practical matter at hand – specifically, as the case is described, about whether a certain impending bill is coming due.<sup>16</sup> As such, because the agent doesn't care, she will possess knowledge after all for Stanley since it will become a low stakes situation for her. Of course, the scope of things people care about is changeable, and the agent may change her mind periodically about whether pending bills are a concern. It follows that whether the agent knows, or not, fluctuates with whether she cares about impending bills, and these

---

<sup>15</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 96.

<sup>16</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 5.

two matters seem totally unrelated to one another. It may even seem ‘mad’, as Fantl and McGrath – admitted practicalists – confess: “what is mad is the idea that whether you are in a position to know could be affected by stakes. But that is precisely what the pragmatist approach requires.”<sup>17</sup> If one wants to gain knowledge, it seems one need only strive to not care about the truth of the claim one is considering.

In order to restore some order as regards what one knows, to make what one knows less dependent on one’s changeable set of values, one may decide to seek some normative standards that regulate a prospective knower’s values. For instance, in Ignorant High Stakes, it may be that the agent is foolish in not caring about impending bills: she should care about them given how they may impact her life. Comparatively, the number of hairs someone has is obviously, and objectively irrelevant to one’s practical concerns (assuming a normal circumstance), and it may be that this is Stanley’s point in introducing this case. But the issue of what values one should have is not a straightforward, meta-ethical matter. There is plenty of debate about what things deserve to be valued, and this is certainly a matter that epistemologists should not feel the obligation to express an opinion about. The situation is further complicated by the fact that people often have values that run in different directions. In Ignorant High Stakes, the agent may care about impending bills, and so lack knowledge from that perspective, while also greatly value the appearance of being someone who knows things, and so from that perspective possesses knowledge. What then should a practicalist say about a situation where a knowledge ascription has both positive and negative practical implications? One can imagine many similar cases where an agent’s values pull the agent in opposite directions, where there is ambiguity (from a practicalist perspective) on the question of whether an agent knows. Indeed, the ambiguity here becomes more complicated once one considers that an agent may have even more values that pull in yet other directions. One lesson here is that we should be cautious about using cases that are over-simplified. In the original bank cases, the matter turns solely on whether the agent has impending bills due or not, and if so whether she should put off or not going to the bank on Saturday. But practical decisions can get very complicated – a person’s value set can contain many diverse elements. The important point is that these valuational complications can have crucial epistemic implications for a practicalist like Stanley, no matter what they are and no matter how trivial they seem, and that this seems to take us beyond what should be the proper ambit of epistemology.

---

<sup>17</sup> Fantl and McGrath, *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*, 27.

To further illustrate how unnecessarily complicated matters can become, consider once more High Stakes, the case in which there is much at stake if the agent is mistaken. The case seems straightforward for the practicalist: there's lots at stake so the agent has to be sure her belief is correct, and so despite the fact that with the very same evidence she can be said to know in the low stakes case, she may not know when the stakes are high. But the same thing may happen in this case as we find in Ignorant High Stakes – the agent may be mistaken about the stakes and so we have a parallel Ignorant Low Stakes case in which the stakes are low, though the agent thinks they are high. What this means is that in any particular situation, since an agent may be mistaken about the stakes, she might be mistaken as well about whether she knows. So with practicalism we have the somewhat puzzling predicament that, despite the constancy of the evidence, it remains unclear whether an agent knows a claim if there is uncertainty about the practical situation. An agent knows or doesn't know, unbeknownst to her, dependent on what the hidden stakes are, without any changes in the evidence, in the truth of the claim, or in the agent's state of belief. To paraphrase Stanley, the practicalist can handle this situation “only at the cost of advancing a rather dramatic claim about the potential [epistemic] effects of non-psychological facts about extralinguistic [stakes].”<sup>18</sup>

So our general conclusion about the Ignorant High Stakes case is this: whereas Stanley maintains that Ignorant High Stakes is a case the contextualist has trouble with, we have argued that the case poses just as much, if not more trouble for Interest-Relative Invariantism. So having then defused this potential, practical problem for (standards) contextualism, let us now look at the linguistic critiques Stanley offers against contextualism.

## 2.2 Stanley's First Linguistic Critique: Knowledge Ascriptions are Not Gradable

Stanley notes that for contextualists such as Stewart Cohen and Keith DeRose, “knowledge ascriptions come in varying degrees of strength,” that is, “they are intuitively gradable.”<sup>19</sup> This is what we would expect from standards contextualism where the standards that modify knowledge ascriptions could be high (more demanding) or low (less demanding). As such, if (standards) contextualism were true, we'd expect linguistic expressions of knowledge to pass two tests: (1) they should allow for modifiers, and (2) be amenable to comparative constructions. Stanley asserts that since knowledge ascriptions fail both tests, they

---

<sup>18</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 26.

<sup>19</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 35.

are not gradable after all, and so (standards) contextualism is false.<sup>20</sup> In looking at these tests in more detail I plan to show that, properly understood, knowledge ascriptions pass these tests.

Consider first the use of modifiers. Stanley uses as paradigm examples of acceptable modifications of gradable expressions “Michigan is flat, but not really flat”<sup>21</sup> and “I don’t like Bill very much.”<sup>22</sup> Can the word ‘know’ be used in analogous expressions? Stanley thinks not. Consider the sentence, “John knows that the bank is open, but doesn’t really know that the bank is open,” which Stanley finds extremely odd. Similarly, consider “I don’t know very much that Bush is president,” which also sounds peculiar. A possible diagnosis for why these expressions sound odd is that knowing mundane facts, such as whether the bank is open or whether Bush is president, is a ‘yes/no’ sort of issue – either you know it or you don’t –, and in fact all of Stanley’s examples are of this kind. But there are areas of inquiry where states of knowledge are more nuanced, such as in the sciences. For example, a student might say, “I know that atoms have orbitals (say, well enough to pass the test), but I don’t really know that atoms have orbitals.” What the student is saying is that she is aware of the basic fact of orbitals, but cannot provide the fine details of orbital theory, which would require a deeper understanding of atomic physics. That is, on a lower standard (the standard used in assessing students), she knows that atoms have orbitals, but on a higher standard (the standard used by professional physicists), she doesn’t (really) know this claim. Here is a less technical example: someone with a stuffy nose and a sore throat says, “I know I have a cold, but I don’t really know I have a cold.” For the purposes of day-to-day discourse, telling people that one has a cold is sufficient (say, to distinguish one’s ailment from allergies), but not adequate if one were to seek medical precision. For example, although a cold is similar to the flu it is in fact much different, and so to know on a more rigorous standard that one has a cold one needs to recognize how it differs from the flu. Again, one may have actually gotten rid of a cold, yet the symptoms may be lingering, leading one to think that one still has a cold. Because of these complications, one may know one has a cold on a looser evidential standard, but not *really* know one has a cold if one adopts a more rigorous standard. Nevertheless, loose standards as regards one’s state of knowledge may be completely appropriate, such as when one enters the office in the morning and is making light conversation. Sniffing and sneezing, one

---

<sup>20</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 36-45.

<sup>21</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 37.

<sup>22</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 38.

is asked whether the source might be allergies, to which, “I know I have a cold. It’s not just allergy, so you’d better keep your distance,” is a perfectly reasonable comment, despite one’s ignorance of the differences between a cold and the flu. But then if pressed about the difference between a cold and the flu, one might confess, “I know I have a cold, but (ok) I don’t *really* know I have a cold, now that you insist on the difference between a cold and the flu.”

“I don’t know very much that Bush is president” is an unusual sentence, but that may be because of the current state of English and not a reflection of the non-gradability of knowledge claims. More sensible sounding is, “About the claim that Bush is president, I don’t know very much.” Still, it is an awkward comment because there is not much to know about the claim that Bush is president: either he is president or not, and either one knows this or not. But take instead a more nuanced claim, such as the one we used above: “About the claim that atoms have orbitals, I don’t know very much.” This claim would be true if one’s knowledge that atoms have orbitals is simplistic and meets the lowest of standards, such as if one just believes this on the basis of one’s faint recollection of a high school chemistry book. On the other hand, if one is a chemistry professor, one would need to know well that atoms have orbitals. A chemistry professor would very much know that atoms have orbitals in that she understands orbital theory, and particularly understands the evidential basis to this theory. Indeed, an indicator of how well one knows this claim could be one’s ability to defend this claim from critique. Similarly, one would very much know that one had a cold if one understood its viral nature and thus its insensitivity to antibiotics. One would know less well that one had a cold if one thought one could be cured by taking antibiotics.

One may nevertheless resist these arguments on the basis of the awkwardness of the resultant expressions. It may seem that I am trying to force the English language to comply with the dictates of standards contextualism. Of course, all languages, including English, are changeable, and new grammatical, stylistic constructions are now the norm with the fluidity and expansion of technologically-enhanced means of communication. What were once awkward expressions can subsequently become highly acceptable. This has, in fact, already happened in epistemology. For example, Bayesians talk about ‘degrees of belief,’ where one can strongly believe a claim (i.e., assign it a high probability) or weakly believe it (i.e., assign it a low probability). Thus, one would say, “I believe that I have a cold with a probability of .9,” which is about as awkward a sentence as one would ever find. But that infelicity has not hampered Bayesianism as a viable epistemology, and for some it is even a favoured, normative theory of belief.

What about the use of 'know' in comparative constructions? A comparative construction involving the gradable verb 'like' that Stanley regards as acceptable is, "John likes Bill more than Mary does." An analogous construction with the verb 'know' does not sound at all acceptable: "John knows that Bush is president better than Mary does."<sup>23</sup> Stanley then argues, "if the semantics of 'know' did involve scales of epistemic strength, then there should be uncontroversial examples of non-idiomatic comparison and modifications,"<sup>24</sup> and since there are not, knowledge ascriptions are not gradable. But just as we can find acceptable expressions using modified uses of the verb 'know,' so we can find some uncontroversial comparative constructions involving 'know.' Here's one: "Professor X knows that atoms have orbitals better than her students do." Again, the example involving Bush sounds odd because knowing that Bush is president is an uncomplicated 'yes/no' matter. On the other hand, more sophisticated claims can be known with more or less intellectual rigour. It sounds reasonable to say that Professor X's knowledge of atomic orbitals is better than her students' knowledge in that she has an awareness of the evidential basis to this claim and how this claim fits into the overall explanatory structure of atomic theory. Students, by comparison, would simply know this claim by rote. Note that the sense in which the professor knows better than atoms have orbitals is not simply that she possesses more facts about atomic orbitals. It may be that John knows more facts about Bush and about his presidency than Mary does, but still does not know better than Mary that Bush is president. The difference with the question of Bush's presidency is that the evidential basis to knowing that Bush is president is straightforward and uncomplicated, not requiring the use of sophisticated, experimental apparatus. Moreover, possessing this knowledge doesn't require a lot of theoretical complexity: simply, the presidential office is the highest executive office in the land, and Bush occupies the post. One knows just as well that Bush is president regardless of one's comprehension of the details of the American political system or of how one acquires this knowledge through media sources. To take another mundane claim, one knows that something is a car regardless of one's understanding of the internal combustion engine, the makes and models of cars built by major automobile companies, and so on. Thus, it sounds awkward to say that someone knows better than another that something is a car. By comparison, one could know better that one has a cold than another person if one is aware of the subtle symptomatic differences between a cold and the flu that allows one to distinguish them. So, to summarize what's been argued in this section, with

---

<sup>23</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 40.

<sup>24</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 40.

(standards) contextualism we'd expect the word 'know' to be gradable in that one can know a claim to a greater or lesser degree. As such, we'd expect linguistic expressions of knowledge to allow for modifiers, and be amenable to comparative constructions. Although we concede that knowledge expressions of the more mundane, unsophisticated sort typically do fail gradability (in not allowing for modifiers and not being amenable to comparative constructions), this is not the case with more complex assertions of knowledge, such as those found in the sciences. With these more complex matters, one can know claims to a greater or lesser degree, depending on one's awareness of the evidential basis to these claims and one's understanding of the explanatory theories that underlie them. As the sciences are commonly held to be our prime repository for first-class knowledge claims, the gradability of scientific knowledge claims speaks on behalf of standards contextualism.

### 2.3 Stanley's Second Linguistic Critique: Unusual Speech-Act Reports and Anaphora

Stanley's second critique of contextualism involves some sample conversations people would have if contextualism were true, conversations Stanley finds to be highly problematic. In the first conversation, A and B are looking at a zebra in a zoo and A asserts, "I know that is a zebra." B points out that the animal is indistinguishable (for A) from a cleverly painted mule, which A concedes. B then second-guesses A's pronouncement that she knows it is a zebra, to which A responds, "I didn't say I [knew it was a zebra]."<sup>25</sup> Stanley finds this speech act report to be "very strange" (indeed, "well-nigh incoherent"<sup>26</sup>), though it sounds "perfectly reasonable" to the contextualist.<sup>27</sup> In the second example, someone is reflecting on whether she knows that she has hands. "If I have hands, then I know I have hands," she says to herself. She then considers the skeptical possibility that she is a brain in a vat, and in the midst of seriously considering this possibility comes to the conclusion that, even if she has hands, she doesn't know that she does. Nevertheless, she concedes, "what I said earlier is still true," where 'what I said earlier' anaphorically connects to "if I have hands, then I know I have hands." Stanley finds such an anaphor "very difficult to grasp,"<sup>28</sup> even though a contextualist would find it unproblematic.

---

<sup>25</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 52.

<sup>26</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 56.

<sup>27</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 52.

<sup>28</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 54.

Stanley is frank that these sorts of discourses are perfectly sensible with other sorts of contextually sensitive terminology, such as with ‘possibility’<sup>29</sup> and ‘wealth.’<sup>30</sup> What is not made clear by him is why the word ‘know’ is ineligible for such context-sensitivity. My suspicion is that, whereas the examples Stanley provides illustrating the context-sensitivity of ‘possibility’ and ‘wealth’ are familiar to everyday speakers, the examples relating to the word ‘know’ describe skeptical possibilities that many people find fanciful, if not ludicrous. The possibilities that zoos are populated with zebra pens filled with cleverly painted mules (as though mules look at all like zebras), or that we might be brains in vats, are not terribly serious. No one is going to doubt their knowledge that they’re seeing zebras or that they have hands solely on such bases. So to test Stanley’s intuitions about the failure of context-sensitivity as regards knowledge claims, we need to find an example that does not trade in extraordinary skeptical scenarios. Here is one such case.

As is well known, crocodile and alligators are quite similar. In fact, most people do not know how to tell them apart. For those of us who don’t live in areas where these animals are endemic, or who are not biologists, the words are likely interchangeable: a ‘crocodile’ is a ‘crocodile or alligator.’ Now suppose A and B are again at the zoo, this time near the crocodile pool, and A asserts about a crocodile, “I know that is a crocodile.” B points out that the animal is indistinguishable (for A) from an alligator, which A again concedes. B then second-guesses A’s pronouncement that she knows it is a crocodile, to which A responds, “I didn’t say I knew it was a crocodile.” Is A’s speech act report ‘very strange’ and ‘well-nigh incoherent’? I would say it is perfectly reasonable. In essence, A’s initial pronouncement is uttered on the basis of the low standards appropriate to those for whom crocodiles are indistinguishable from alligators (but quite distinguishable from snakes, frogs and so on). B is then pointing out that A’s categorization is too loose, and that because she doesn’t know the difference between crocodiles and alligators, she doesn’t really know – using higher, more scientific standards – that the animal she is looking at is a crocodile. A’s speech act report, then, amounts to the admission that she wasn’t using these higher standards in saying that the animal is a crocodile.

The anaphoric case is dealt with similarly. Suppose someone is reflecting on whether she knows that an animal is a crocodile. She thinks, “If that is a crocodile, then I know it is a crocodile.” She then considers the non-skeptical possibility that the animal is actually an alligator, and in the midst of seriously considering this

---

<sup>29</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 53.

<sup>30</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 56.

possibility comes to the conclusion that, even if it is a crocodile, she doesn't know that it is. Nevertheless, she concedes, "what I said earlier is still true," where 'what I said earlier' anaphorically connects to "if that is a crocodile, then I know it is a crocodile." Is such an anaphor 'very difficult to grasp'? Not at all, once we see her earlier pronouncement as uttered in the context of the lower standards people sometimes adopt as regards what counts as a crocodile, where on such lower standards crocodiles and alligators are essentially the same kind of animals. In effect, she recognizes that on a more rigorous standard her claim to know that the animal is a crocodile is disputable, but affirms nevertheless that she could still be said to know on a common, looser standard.

So far we have examined, and responded to Stanley's objections to contextualism on the basis of contextualism's alleged failure to generate the right result in Ignorant High Stakes, as well as its tendency to produce awkward linguistic constructions. We now look at one further criticism of contextualism, specifically, Stanley's misgivings about the sort of contextualism we are advocating here, 'standards' contextualism. Stanley's focus is standards contextualism as advanced by Peter Ludlow,<sup>31</sup> to which we now turn.

#### 2.4 Ludlow's Standards Contextualism

As Stanley recounts, Ludlow highlights the fact that references to standards are common in scientific discourse. To illustrate, Stanley cites the following examples:

- 1) John doesn't know that water is a liquid by the standards of chemistry.
- 2) Copernicus didn't know that the sun was at the centre of the solar system by today's standards of knowledge.<sup>32</sup>

Now it's worth pointing out that these examples are somewhat unclear. First, one doesn't really need to make reference to the standards of chemistry in affirming that water is a liquid, as this fact is quite visible. Secondly, someone's knowledge today that the sun is at the centre of the solar system likely makes no reference to (scientific) standards – it is simply a logical truth (a 'solar system' is a 'sun-centred system'). Moreover, Copernicus didn't believe so much that the sun is at the centre of the solar system, rather that it is the centre of the universe, and so he lacks knowledge not so much because of our higher standards today but simply because of his overall fundamental confusion about the structure of the universe.

Nevertheless, these critical points need not distract us from the basic insight, that in science – for many the best place to look for knowledge – one

---

<sup>31</sup> Peter Ludlow, "Contextualism and the New Linguistic Turn in Epistemology."

<sup>32</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 69.

Robert Hudson

usually finds references to epistemic standards in knowledge ascriptions. Following Ludlow, one might then anticipate that even “unembellished knowledge ascriptions, ones that do not contain explicit standards operators, nevertheless contain an unpronounced position for epistemic standards.”<sup>33</sup> It is this suggestion that Stanley finds particularly objectionable. The basis for his concern is the observation (which he attributes to David Lewis) that ‘standards talk’ occurs in all sorts of discourses, not just in epistemic ones. Here Stanley cites the examples of:

- 1) By strict standards, France is not hexagonal.
- 2) By loose standards, this table is square.
- 3) By the standards of chemistry, what is in the Hudson River isn’t water.<sup>34</sup>

He makes the point that, on the basis of the regularity with which ones finds these appended standards statements, one cannot “derive a conclusion about specifically epistemic context-sensitivity”<sup>35</sup> – and surely right about this, though this is not a derivation that Ludlow nor any standards contextualist needs to make. Rather, the relevant argument for the standards contextualist is normative: standards are regularly cited in scientific discourse, and since such discourse constitutes our best form of knowledge, standards should have a place in all forms of knowledge ascriptions. Be that as it may, one may follow Stanley’s worry that, as motivated by the scientific model, “one would need standards positions in the syntax for virtually every predication,”<sup>36</sup> whether epistemic or not, a situation he describes as “deeply implausible.” Moreover, he thinks the standards contextualist is committed to such an implausible conclusion, apparently because he sees the standards contextualist as arguing from the general ubiquity of standards discourse to its relevance to epistemic discourse – the argument we saw him also wrongly ascribing to standards contextualism above. But again this is not an argument a standards contextualist need subscribe to. There is no reason why standards contextualism should be committed to the claim that any sort of predication requires a standards position.

As Stanley describes the development of contextualism, starting with Fred Dretske’s relevant alternatives theory, through to Gail Stine’s contextualist improvement of Dretske’s theory, and arriving at the versions of contextualism

---

<sup>33</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 69, italics removed.

<sup>34</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 70.

<sup>35</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 70.

<sup>36</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 71, italics removed.

formulated by Stewart Cohen and Keith DeRose,<sup>37</sup> one of the main motivations for the theory was to explain how one can know that one has hands, but not know that one is not a brain in a vat – that is, to explain the failure of deductive closure for knowledge. With standards contextualism, the explanation is essentially that the premise (“I know that I have hands”) is understood to involve low standards for knowledge, whereas the conclusion (“I don’t know that I am not a brain in a vat”) involves high standards. Stanley submits that this contextualist interpretation of the case leaves its “oddity ... unexplained.”<sup>38</sup> But that is true only if one is committed to the failure of deductive closure in this case, and there is no reason why the contextualist should be so committed. There are in fact epistemologies that do require the failure of closure here, such as epistemologies that are committed to a sensitivity condition (i.e., one knows that *p* only if, were *p* not true, one would not believe *p*). But there is no necessity that contextualism be one of these epistemologies. Rather, a contextualist might suggest that the same low standards be used with both the premise and the conclusion, with the result that closure is preserved. So a contextualist can do better than explain the oddity – she can remove it.

This completes our responses on behalf of standards contextualism to the critiques offered in Stanley’s *Knowledge and Practical Interests*. In their *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*, the practicalists Fantl and McGrath also raise objections to contextualism. We examine their arguments next.

### 3. Fantl and McGrath versus Contextualism

For Fantl and McGrath, it is fallibilism about knowledge – the thesis that one can know that *p* even though (one is aware that) there is a chance that *p* is false – that orients their discussion of the comparative merits of contextualism and practicalism. Once one gets over the puzzling nature of fallibilism, which Fantl and McGrath describe as the ‘madness’ of fallibilism,<sup>39</sup> one is left with the more practical question of determining how likely it must be that *p* is false for one’s claim to knowledge to be withdrawn. In this regard they quote Laurence Bonjour, who comments that “it is ... unclear what sort of basis or rationale there might be for fixing [this likelihood] in a non-arbitrary way.”<sup>40</sup> Their answer to the problem

---

<sup>37</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 17-22.

<sup>38</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 72.

<sup>39</sup> Fantl and McGrath, *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*, 15.

<sup>40</sup> Laurence Bonjour, *Epistemology: Classic Problems and Contemporary Responses* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 43, quoted in Fantl and McGrath, *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*, 25.

of what could constitute such a 'basis or rationale' is to point to what is practically at stake: *p* is probable enough to be known if it is "probable enough to be properly put to work as a basis for belief and action."<sup>41</sup> Fantl and McGrath don't say a great deal about what it means for a proposition to be 'properly put to work as a basis for belief and action,' but here is a familiar case that perhaps captures what they have in mind. The case, drawn from Rudner's 1953 paper "The Scientist *qua* Scientist Makes Value Judgments," concerns a scientist who, given a set of evidence, is considering the safety of a drug, and Rudner's claim is that the degree of confirmation of the hypothesis, 'this drug is safe,' is a function both of the (conditional) probability of this hypothesis given the evidence and "the importance, in the typically ethical sense, of making a mistake in accepting or rejecting the hypothesis."<sup>42</sup> As such, 'this drug is safe' is probable enough to be accepted for Rudner if the potential for harm from using the drug is low enough to be ethically acceptable, and this is arguably what Fantl and McGrath mean when they say that a proposition is "probable enough to be properly put to work as a basis for belief and action."

But there is a different way to answer Bonjour's challenge and find an alternative, non-arbitrary criterion that tells us when the probability of a proposition is high enough for this proposition to be the subject of knowledge. Fantl and McGrath assert that there is, at least, a probability that is low enough to categorically rule out a claim to knowledge: "presumably," they say, "there can't be knowledge with probability 0, probability 1/2, or even probability 2/3."<sup>43</sup> And to be sure, a probability of 1 would be high enough to ground a claim to knowledge. Given that we are stuck with fallibilism, is there then a probability less than 1 that can assuredly meet the challenge of knowledge? My suspicion is that reference to probabilities in an assessment of the evidential support for a hypothesis is unnecessary. Consider, for example, a piece of mundane perceptual knowledge, such as when someone knows that she sees a hand. In such a case, does a knower need to be aware of the probability of the truth of her belief given the available evidence? Typically, when someone knows that she has a hand, she will have no precise idea at all of how probable the truth of her belief is, short of its being 'high enough.' Rather, she will ground her knowledge on a variety of factors, such as the coherence of her belief with other beliefs she has, the evidence that her perceptual system is functioning properly (e.g., that she is not subject to

---

<sup>41</sup> Fantl and McGrath, *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*, 25.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Rudner, "The Scientist *qua* Scientist Makes Value Judgments", *Philosophy of Science* 20 (1953): 2.

<sup>43</sup> Fantl and McGrath, *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*, 25.

hallucinations, that her eyes are not diseased, and so on), and other matters whose impact on the justification of her belief is substantive, but cannot be usefully quantified. Once those factors have been settled upon and it is determined that they justify a belief, a knower may suggest that her belief has a strong likelihood of being true, without giving this likelihood a precise quantitative value. That is, probability assignments used in the justification of a claim are really just afterthoughts: they are ways of summarizing the quality of non-quantitative evidence. I think this is what we find in scientific contexts as well, with the exception being cases where statistical analysis is the core methodology.

What this means, then, is that Bonjour's challenge misconstrues the process of justification. Justifying a claim is not a matter of continually attempting to bump up the probability one attaches to this claim until a 'threshold' is reached. Such quantitative precision is usually not meaningfully attainable. And so the process of ascribing to oneself knowledge should not be viewed as a matter of deciding that one's belief is, in the first instance, 'probable enough' and on that basis justified. Typically the process is reversed: one ascribes to oneself knowledge and then asserts that one's belief has a high probability of being true (e.g., "I know that  $p$ , so it's probably true that  $p$ "). It follows that Fantl and McGrath themselves misconstrue the challenge facing the intellectualist, or as they call her, the 'purist.' They comment:

the fallibilist who recoils at the thought of denying purism or allowing pragmatic encroachment should bear in mind her tasks: to explain away the apparent madness of fallibilism and to give us some idea of what it takes for a probability to be 'knowledge-level.' To retain purism (and deny pragmatic encroachment) she must perform these tasks without appealing to a conception of significant chances of error that allows stakes to play a role – that allows significance to vary without corresponding variance in your strength of epistemic position with respect to  $p$ .<sup>44</sup>

Fantl and McGrath are here contending that the purist, to cope with fallibilism, will need to find a probability level at which she can be said to know a proposition, and explain why this probability level has such an effect without making reference to practical matters. Moreover, since the strength of epistemic position is assumed to be fixed, she will not be able to explain the ability of this probability level to generate knowledge by pointing to a greater preponderance of evidence. This is a challenge that Fantl and McGrath do not think the purist can meet.

---

<sup>44</sup> Fantl and McGrath, *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*, 29.

But there is a conception of ‘significant chances of error’ that allows this significance to vary, without a corresponding variance in how much evidence the agent possesses. This is by means of a change in the epistemic standards that govern knowledge ascriptions. We should point out initially that by an ‘epistemic standard’ we do not mean that, in order to know a proposition, the probability that this proposition is true must reach a certain level. Again, epistemic standards primarily involve other matters than the probability that a proposition is true, since an agent typically lacks a well-grounded idea of the probability of a proposition (a key exception, again, are those sciences that make essential use of statistical methodologies). Rather, standards involve matters such as those mentioned above – e.g., the overall coherence of one’s belief system and the well-functioning of one’s perceptual apparatus – and a variety of other considerations that in many cases are unique to the subject matter. For instance, in the bank cases where the proposition of concern is “the bank will be open tomorrow (Saturday),” a fairly modest standard on the basis of which the agent could generate convincing evidence that the bank would be open tomorrow is whether the agent noticed that the bank was open the previous Saturday. By comparison, a more rigorous standard would require something like access to official bank policy detailing precise opening hours. Generally speaking, the modest standard works fine for normal day-to-day contexts, both where the practical stakes are low, but also where the practical stakes are not at all relevant. That is, where someone has no stake in the matter whether the bank is open (not just a low stake) the lower standard is perfectly acceptable in grounding a claim to knowledge. On the other hand, if the agent is a bank employee and she were asked whether the bank is open tomorrow, she would then be subject to a higher standard by virtue of her role. As such, it would be entirely unacceptable for her to make reference simply to the fact that the bank was open the previous Saturday in justifying the claim that the bank will be open tomorrow. Rather, she would need to make explicit reference to bank policy. Note that this need for a higher standard is not a result of the agent having higher stakes. There may in fact be nothing practically at stake for her in not using the higher standard, such as the threat of job loss. It’s just that, as a bank employee, she should know better.

Ludlow’s introduction of the notion of standards into a contextualist epistemology was motivated by scientific examples, and it is these examples that work best in illustrating how standards contextualism succeeds at answering the problem Fantl and McGrath pose for purism. Suppose we are asked, “Do we know that this table is brown?” Using the lower standards usual for quotidian life, one would look at the table under acceptable lighting, making sure one was not

examining only a covering for the table, and upon seeing a brown colour confidently ascribe to oneself knowledge that the table is brown. But of course fallibilism is true and one may be mistaken. For example, one may be subject to perceptual illusions where it can appear that a table is brown, though in fact it is not. The question Fantl and McGrath raise is, “When is the chance of error significant enough for one to retract one’s (self-)ascription of knowledge?”, to which they answer, “When the practical downside of being mistaken is high enough.” The problem they pose for purism, then, is to provide an account of a ‘significant chance of error’ that does not refer to practical matters (while keeping the strength of one’s epistemic position fixed), and here our answer is to suggest that in scientific contexts the standard for a table being brown is more rigorous than what we find in day-to-day contexts. In fact, strictly speaking, appearing to be brown is not good enough for a scientist to conclude that a table is brown since the appearance of brown is a product of one’s psychology and not necessarily, truly representative of the colours of physical objects. Indeed, for a scientist, tables may not be brown nor any other colour for that matter (*qua* conglomerates of colourless atoms and molecules). So with a scientific standard, the claim to know that a table is brown is attended with a significant chance of error, and this conclusion is arrived at independently of any reference to practical stakes, and without having varied the strength of one’s epistemic position (i.e., one perceptual evidence for the brownness of the table remains the same).

The situation in the bank cases is one where the agent knows that the bank will be open on Saturday when the stakes are low, but she lacks that knowledge when the stakes are high. It is assumed by most, contextualists and practicalists alike, that this is intuitively the correct interpretation of the situation. However, there is a sense in which this situation is somewhat problematic epistemically speaking, given that the strength of the agent’s evidential position does not change in moving between the high and low stakes cases, given that she still believes the claim either way, and given that the truth value of the claim has not changed either. The general contextualist strategy is to suggest that the meaning of ‘knows’ varies in the two situations, and that it is this change of meaning that accounts for the differing epistemic assessments in the two cases. Yet as Stanley suggests,<sup>45</sup> and as echoed by Fantl and McGrath,<sup>46</sup> such a semantic strategy seems a bit too easy. Apart from the fact that changing the meaning of ‘knows’ can account for our intuitions in the bank cases, Stanley argues that “there is no further evidence that knowledge ascriptions are context-sensitive in a distinctively epistemological

---

<sup>45</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 155.

<sup>46</sup> Fantl and McGrath, *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*, 30.

way.”<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Fantl and McGrath assert that in order for contextualism “to be plausible we need some independent evidence that the content of knowledge attributions can vary with speech context in ordinary non-philosophical contexts.”<sup>48</sup> For them, as for Stanley, the capacity of contextualism simply to offer an interpretation of the bank cases is not enough to render contextualism convincing.

It is here that the reference to epistemic standards can make an important difference. It is sometimes claimed that scientific knowledge is the best form of knowledge one can obtain. The reason for this acclaim is the rigour with which scientists test their hypotheses. When a scientist tests a hypothesis using empirical evidence, strict standards are in place to ensure the accuracy of the empirical evidence as well as the cogency of the inductive step one takes from the evidence to the hypothesis under test. Thus, when a standards contextualist makes the point that knowledge ascriptions are context-sensitive in that they are relative to the standards in place in a particular context, there is in fact evidence that such ascriptions are context-sensitive in this distinctively epistemological way, evidence drawn from an observation of how knowledge claims are made in the sciences. Moreover, for the same reason, we thereby have independent evidence that the content of knowledge attributions do vary with speech context in ordinary non-philosophical contexts, specifically, when one moves from an everyday speech context to a scientific speech context where, as a norm of scientific discourse, one makes reference to higher epistemic standards in defending knowledge claims.

Having then responded to both Stanley’s and Fantl and McGrath’s objections to contextualism, let us conclude by examining two further, potential problems for, specifically, standards contextualism.

#### **4. Two Problems for Standard Contextualism**

To begin with, although the standards themselves make no reference to practical issues, one might argue that one’s choice of standards is guided by practical matters, so there is no evading practicalism, after all. And in fact there is no doubt that practical issues can impel one to raise epistemic standards, such as in the Rudner case. However, one’s motivation to choose an epistemic standard need not make any reference to practical issues but only to the requirement that a knowledge claim have an increased chance of being true. For example, this is the motivation of a scientist who adopts a rigorous standard leading to the conclusion

---

<sup>47</sup> Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*, 33.

<sup>48</sup> Fantl and McGrath, *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*, 30-31.

that a table isn't brown (or any colour for that matter). It's simply that, if we take into consideration atomic physics and the psychology of perception, it becomes apparent that the colours of objects are more a product of our minds than of what properties an object really has. The question of whether that fact has some sort of practical benefit is simply irrelevant. The same can be said for a bank employee who is asked whether her bank is open on Saturday. Here she uses the higher standard of referencing company policy, not because there is some practical benefit in doing, but only because this is the better, official way of finding out the truth as regards a bank's opening hours. Of course, the bank employee and the scientist could adopt a practical motivation, if they wish, for the conclusions they derive. They simply don't need to, and moreover it wouldn't sound right for either of them to cite practical benefits in justifying the standards they adopt. The scientist who says that she refers to atomic theory and the psychology of perception in answering questions about the colour of physical objects because she can make a profit by doing so should probably be distrusted on scientific issues. One should also be skeptical about the bank employee who cites company policy because it gives her a feeling of power. What would she say if that feeling of power led her in a different direction?

The second concern with standards contextualism is how one should justify the use of a lower epistemic standard, if a higher standard is available. Shouldn't one always defer to a higher epistemic standard in assessing knowledge ascriptions, if one's objective is unremittingly epistemic? It is important that the gravity of this problem for standards contextualism not be underestimated, for one aspect of contextualism is an element of equality in the various meanings that can be attached to the word 'know.' This equality stems from the fact that, from a contextualist perspective, many epistemic issues boil down to semantics. For example, in the philosophy classroom, one often uses the word 'know' in a strict way that leads to skepticism, on the assumption that there could be such things as brains in vats or Evil Demons. On the other hand, outside the classroom, the meaning of 'know' is more liberal and one need not guard against such extreme skeptical possibilities. It follows that, if the choice of the meaning of 'know' is guided primarily by epistemic concerns, one should likely use the higher (skeptical) standard found in philosophy classrooms. This problem has an analog when we turn to the epistemic standards used in everyday life as compared to those adopted in scientific practice. If a rigorous scientific perspective informs us that physical objects are not really coloured, and that colours are simply psychological constructs, then epistemically speaking everyone should believe that objects aren't coloured since that's the result of adopting the highest epistemic

standard. Of course, this is an unintuitive result since we do believe, and think we know, that objects are coloured (that, for example, a table is brown) in the normal course of daily affairs, despite the fact that this knowledge is grounded in the use of a lower epistemic standard.

In this regard, it's worthwhile pointing out that this problem does not arise if we are practicalists. Where there is not much is at stake in a knowledge ascription, a practicalist will condone the use of a lower epistemic standard. For example, whether the brownness of a table really inheres in a table or is simply a psychic construct, or whether I am a brain in a vat or a real human being, makes no practical difference if one is using the table for day-to-day uses. Thus, the practicalist has no trouble claiming to know that "this table is (really) brown" and "I am not a brain in a vat." Here we have an illustration of why Fantl and McGrath think practicalism to be so "attractive and easy," to be so "extremely plausible."<sup>49</sup> For them, the plausibility of practicalism "doesn't depend on the particular epistemic standards in force in the speech context" but is instead a result of a principle they call '*Action*,' that "if you know something which is relevant to your choice situation then you are proper to act on it."<sup>50</sup> Clearly, in normal contexts, it is proper for one to act on "this table is (really) brown" and "I am not a brain in a vat."

So, with standards contextualism, how do we justify the use of a lower epistemic standard, if a higher standard is available? The answer to this difficulty is to look more closely at how one goes about testing a hypothesis and, on the basis of these tests, judging that one is in a position to know the hypothesis. These tests will inevitably involve evidential reports regarding mundane observable objects whose existence and properties are largely taken for granted. That is, in assessing the reality of these mundane objects, a lower epistemic standard is taken and must be taken if the process of evaluating a hypothesis on the basis of a higher standard is to ever get started. One finds, paradoxically, such a preference occurring in the philosophy classroom, where philosophers debate the reality of mundane objects while feeling no awkwardness about taking the chairs they are sitting on and the pens they are using for granted. We also find this preference for lower standards in the psychology lab where the colours of objects are considered figmentary psychic constructs, but where researchers still calmly point out to each other apparently real colours of tables and chairs. In general terms, for an epistemic inquiry to proceed, one needs to work from a base of accepted claims, such as background assumptions and observational claims, whose evidential

---

<sup>49</sup> Fantl and McGrath, *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*, 51.

<sup>50</sup> Fantl and McGrath, *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*, 51.

support is held to a lower standard. This lower standard is needed so that the inquiry can gain deliberative traction: the philosophical discussion of skepticism needs to make commonplace assumptions about the world in order for the discussants to even communicate, and in the psychology lab if the researchers can't assume the intersubjective reality of the coloured, observed world, there would be no way for them to even discuss the psychic construction of the world. Thus even if we assume with contextualism that there is a preference for the use of higher standards regarding the use of the word 'know,' the practice of epistemic evaluation requires, nevertheless, a lower standard for the framing of evidential claims.

But one needs knowledge claims meeting lower standards not just for evidential assessments. Most knowledge claims are based on a background of other knowledge claims which must be accepted before the initial knowledge claim can itself be accepted. As an illustration, consider again the High Stakes bank case where there is much at risk for the agent if she fails to deposit her cheque on time. It is suggested that the agent doesn't know that the bank will be open on Saturday given the seriousness of missing a bill payment. Alternatively, the recommendation is that the agent should wait in the Friday line-up to deposit her cheque. But that recommendation holds only if there are other claims that we assume the agent knows in this case, claims that are relevant to her projected courses of action. For example, she may be mistaken about whether she's at the right bank, and so waiting in the Friday line-up could have disastrous results for her. Thus, the agent's reasoning, that she doesn't know that the bank will be open on Saturday and that she must go to the bank on Friday afternoon, relies on a previous knowledge claim that she knows this is the right bank. Now, the problem for the practicalist is this: given a high stakes, practical situation, it may be unreasonable to ascribe to the agent knowledge that she is at the right bank. In fact, given a high stakes, practical situation, it may be that the agent hardly knows anything at all relevant to the situation. So when arriving at the bank on Friday and seeing the long line-ups, what should the agent do? The analysis has now become highly complicated for the practicalist. With high enough stakes, the practicalist is soon driven to a practical and deliberative paralysis.

It is at this stage that standards contextualism shows its worth. As we have suggested, even where one has set high epistemic standards, the application of these standards requires the use of lower standards for knowledge claims that underpin the use of the higher standards. So lower standards will need to apply if we are to even get to use higher standards. But none of this makes sense for the practicalist: if practical circumstances compel one to retract one's knowledge

claims, even where the evidential support appears strong, then they will compel one to retract one's knowledge claims wherever they impact one's decision making. They do this because they force the agent to raise her epistemic standards both for knowledge claims under contention and for any relevant background knowledge claims: again, this is because the failure of any of these knowledge claims could have serious practical consequences. On the other hand, the procedure for the standards contextualist is to look to the standards themselves as a guide to whether one has knowledge. For any number of background claims and for a variety of evidential claims, one will adopt reduced standards simply as a way to move an investigation along. Now, even when a serious practical situation arises, these reduced standards will still apply, though the standard for the claim under contention may be heightened. This is because such claims will have wide application in a variety of areas of inquiry and decision making, and suspending them may be broadly disruptive. Nevertheless, there could be practical pressure to raise the standards for these claims and retract the presumption that one knows them to be true. At this stage, potential knowers will become conflicted: one knows these claims on a lower standard but doesn't know them on a higher standard. One finds this situation occurring in the philosophy classroom where skepticism is the topic of discussion and where, if we lack knowledge on anything at all, we lack knowledge that we're sitting in a philosophy classroom discussing skepticism. This conflict is resolved, as we all know, by abandoning the higher standard and allowing a lower standard. We do this to avert a practical and deliberative paralysis.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this paper my goal has been to defend standards contextualism from criticisms posed against it by Jason Stanley, Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath. Let me emphasize that in discussing epistemic standards, not just any standards will do. There are strict rules over what count as good epistemic standards, rules drawn from the quotidian norms on knowing and the heightened rules one finds in academia, science, professional fields and the like. I have not said much at all about what these particular standards are and how they are legitimated, only that they are directly relevant to the ascription of knowledge claims, and that practical matters have no bearing whatsoever on their legitimization. It has also been my contention that standards are not specifically designed to demand an increased probability for a claim to be warranted. Their use is usually much more qualitative than this. As such, the desire expressed by Bonjour and others to find a level of probability sufficient for knowledge is misconceived and even distracting. Finally,

we have with standards contextualism a reasonable and efficient analysis of the nature and legitimacy of skepticism: basically, skeptics are in the business of raising the standards on knowledge, an honorable and often worthwhile activity. Our response to skepticism is that, if we are not careful, standards will be raised to a point where epistemic investigation becomes impossible, and that situation is surely of not much practical benefit. Moreover, though it is good thing to know claims, one can often get along just fine (practically speaking) having only justified, true beliefs, or just true beliefs, or even just beliefs. For example, the agent in High Stakes may decide to wait in the Friday line-up after considering the risks of being wrong and wishing to be sure about her knowledge. But it may turn out that in doing this she is acting in an extremely impractical manner compared to a less cautious person who, despite her lack of knowledge, puts off the visit till the next day and finds the bank open with no line-ups.