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Now You Know Who Hong Oak Yun Is

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Hong Oak Yun is a person who is over three inches tall. And now you know who Hong Oak Yun is. For if someone were to ask you ‘Who is Hong Oak Yun?’, you could answer that Hong Oak Yun is a person who is over three inches tall, and you would know what you were saying. So you know an answer to the question ‘Who is Hong Oak Yun?’, and that is sufficient for knowing who Hong Oak Yun is. Getting to know who a person is may be easier than you think.

I begin below with a discussion of questions and answers, leading to the conclusion that ‘Hong Oak Yun is a person who is over three inches tall’ is an answer to the question ‘Who is Hong Oak Yun?’. I then present an analysis of knowing-who, and use it to argue that you know who Hong Oak Yun is. I finally criticize the (unfortunately rather widespread) view that knowing-who is interest-relative.¹

1. Questions and Answers: Some Distinctions

The term ‘question’ is commonly used for three distinct types of entity: sentences,

¹This paper has been extracted from a longer work-in-progress on questions, answers, knowing-who, and related topics.

semantic contents, and speech acts.² For example, the sentence ‘Where is Cologne?’ is a question, of one sort. I shall use *interrogative sentence* or *interrogative* for this type of question. The semantic content of this interrogative sentence is a question of another sort, one that can be semantically expressed by other interrogative sentences, such as the German sentence ‘Wo ist Köln?’. Let us call these entities simply *questions*, or *semantic questions* when we wish to emphasize their non-linguistic nature.³ Finally, a person who utters an interrogative sentence with the right intention asks a question, and this sort of speech act is itself a question of another sort. Let us say that these speech acts are *interrogative acts* or *acts of asking* (or *posing*) *questions*. Semantic questions are the things that are asked and posed in interrogative speech acts. They also are among the objects of various cognitive relations, such as considering (‘John considered the question of where Cologne is’), wondering (‘John wondered where Cologne is’), remembering, and knowing.

Wh-interrogative sentences are interrogative sentences containing wh-words or phrases, such as ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘where’, ‘when’, ‘why’, ‘how’, and ‘which’. The interrogatives I discuss will be wh-interrogatives.

The term ‘answer’ is also used for at least three different types of entity, namely

²Jeroen Groenendijk and Martin Stokhof (1997, p. 1057) make the same three-way distinction.

³Many semanticists (e.g., James Higginbotham [1996], Groenendijk and Stokhof [1997], and Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson [2001]) think that an interrogative’s semantic content is (roughly) a function that picks out its true, exhaustively complete propositional answer at each possible world. I think that this view is incorrect and distorts much theorizing about questions and answers, but in this paper I remain neutral about the semantic contents of interrogatives. An interrogative sentence that contains an indexical, such as ‘Who was that masked man?’, semantically expresses different contents in different contexts. I ignore such context-sensitivity until section 8 (but see note 4).

sentences, semantic contents, and speech acts. For instance, the declarative sentence ‘Cologne is in Germany’ is an answer to the interrogative sentence ‘Where is Cologne?’. Let us call such sentences *linguistic answers*.⁴ The proposition that Cologne is in Germany is an answer to the semantic question of where Cologne is. This answer can be expressed in English with ‘Cologne is in Germany’ and in German with ‘Köln ist in Deutschland’. Let us say that these semantic contents are *propositional answers*, or simply *answers*, to semantic questions. Finally, some *acts* of responding with linguistic and propositional answers to interrogative acts are answers. Let us call these *acts of answering an interrogative act*.

Not all objects that answer questions are themselves answers, for *agents* sometimes answer questions, but are never themselves answers. Thus below we will often be concerned with the answering *relation* rather than with answers or the (relational) property of being an answer.

2. Answering Questions

Entities of various types can stand in the answering relation, but there is a sense in which propositions’ answering semantic questions is fundamental. For instance, the declarative sentence ‘Cologne is in Germany’ answers the interrogative sentence ‘Where is Cologne?’ because the former semantically expresses the proposition that Cologne is in Germany and the latter semantically expresses the question of where Cologne is. If the sentences had semantically

⁴Strictly speaking, the notion of a linguistic answer should be relativized not only to an interrogative sentence (which it answers), but also to a pair of contexts that determine the semantic contents of the linguistic answer and the interrogative sentence. I ignore context-sensitivity till section 8.

expressed different contents, then they might not have stood in the answering relation.

Whether a response answers an interrogative act also crucially depends on whether certain propositions answer certain semantic questions. Roughly speaking, a response R to an interrogative act I answers I iff R includes an act of asserting a proposition that answers the semantic question that is posed in I .

Agents can answer both interrogative acts and semantic questions by asserting propositions. In exchange (1), agent B answers A's act of asking the question of who was President of the USA in 1996.

1. A: "Who was President of the USA in 1996?"
B: "Bill Clinton was President of the USA in 1996."

Agent B also answers the *semantic question* that A poses in his interrogative act. Roughly speaking, an agent A answers an interrogative act I iff A responds to I by answering the semantic question posed by I , and A answers semantic question Q iff A responds to some act of posing Q by asserting a proposition that answers Q . Thus, whether an agent answers a semantic question or interrogative act depends, in part, on a proposition's answering a semantic question.

Whether a proposition P answers a semantic question Q does not depend on whether anyone has considered P or Q , or whether anyone has ever posed Q and answered with P . It does not even depend on the existence of agents or speech acts. Just as one proposition may entail another though no agent ever considers or asserts the propositions, or considers the fact that one entails the other, so a proposition may answer a semantic question, though no agent ever considers the proposition or the semantic question, or ever poses the question or answers it by asserting the proposition. This agent-independent notion of answering is deeply embedded in our

ordinary thinking about questions and answers. A speaker who considers a question typically assumes that it has an answer, even if she thinks that no one has ever before considered, posed, or answered it. Ordinary thinkers assume that a person can know an answer to a question that he has never considered. Common sense strongly suggests that there are questions, and answers to those questions, that no one will ever entertain. For example, for every past, present, and future tree, there is the semantic question of what that tree's height is. Each such question exists even if no one ever poses it or considers it. For each such question, there is a proposition that answers it (one that describes the tree's height), even if no one ever asserts or considers it.

3. Analyzing Answering

Under what conditions does a proposition answer a semantic question? We can approach this issue by considering the following idea: *to answer a question is to provide information about the subject matter of the question.*⁵ An inquirer who poses a question typically wants some information concerning the subject matter of the question. When he poses his question, he wants his auditor to give him such information.⁶ A knowledgeable and cooperative auditor will typically provide such information by asserting a proposition that concerns that subject matter. For instance, an inquirer who utters 'Where is Cologne?' typically wants information concerning the location of Cologne. A respondent might assertively utter 'Cologne is in Germany', and if

⁵My starting point is inspired by the main thesis of David Lewis's (1986) account of causal explanation: to explain an event is to provide some information about its causal history. Some of what follows is also influenced by sections V and VI of that essay.

⁶Many theorists think of queries as requests for information: see Lennart Åqvist 1965, Jaakko Hintikka 1976, and Groenendijk and Stokhof 1997, p. 1057.

the inquirer understands the response, then the inquirer will possess information concerning Cologne's location. A respondent who utters 'Some pelicans eat fish' does not provide information concerning the subject matter of the question and so does not answer the question.

The preceding principle concerns questions of all sorts, including speech acts, but it has a natural mate that strictly concerns semantic questions and propositions: *a proposition answers a semantic question iff it provides information about the question's subject matter*. Call this the *Information Provision* analysis, or 'IP analysis'.⁷ The IP analysis accords well with our intuitions about many particular cases. Both intuition and the IP analysis say that the propositions expressed by (2b)-(2c) answer the semantic question expressed by (2a).

- 2a. Who did George W. Bush kiss?
- 2b. George W. Bush kissed Laura Bush.
- 2c. George W. Bush kissed his wife.

Similarly for the semantic question that (3a) expresses and the propositions that (3b)-(3e) express.

- 3a. Who is Mark Twain?
- 3b. Mark Twain is the author of *Huckleberry Finn*.
- 3c. Mark Twain is a famous American author.
- 3d. Mark Twain is a famous author.

⁷The subject matter of a question is the question's queried property or relation. For example, the subject matter of 'Who did Bush kiss?' is the property of being a thing that Bush kissed, and the subject matter of 'Where is Cologne?' is (not Cologne, but) the property of being a location of Cologne. I here count misinformation (about a topic) as information, so I allow the IP analysis to count false propositions as answers. Those who object to false answers can accept the IP analysis, but disallow false information. I think our pre-theoretic intuitions are mixed. In all my examples below, the (alleged) answers will be true.

3e. Mark Twain is an author.⁸

In what follows I shall often point out that the IP analysis entails that a candidate answer is a genuine answer. But I shall not rely on the IP analysis *alone* to establish that an item is an answer.

4. Answering Questions, Satisfying Inquirers, and Cooperatively Answering Questions

When an agent answers an interrogative act, he asserts a proposition that answers the semantic question that the querier poses. But the act of answering may nevertheless be unsatisfactory in various ways. For instance, the answerer may mumble, or speak too softly, or use technical terminology that the inquirer does not understand. Less trivially, a genuine answer may be unsatisfactory when it fails to give the inquirer the sort of information she desires, as in the following exchange.

4. Andrea: “Where is Cologne?”
Bertha: “Cologne is in Germany.”
Andrea: “Yes, but which part of Germany is it in? Southeast? Northwest?
How far is it from Berlin and Frankfurt?”

Bertha’s response answers the semantic question that Andrea poses, but fails to provide Andrea with the sort of information she wants, and so Andrea remains unsatisfied. Say that an agent

⁸Some might doubt that (3c)-(3e) answer (3) because they do not provide information about Twain that uniquely identifies him. I suspect that such doubts are due to Twain’s familiarity. Many people, upon hearing the name ‘György Ligeti’ for the first time and asking who he or she is, will be satisfied with the reply ‘Ligeti is a twentieth-century Hungarian composer’. The reply seems to answer the question, though it does not provide information that uniquely identifies Ligeti.

answers an interrogative act *in a way that satisfies the person who performed the interrogative act* iff the agent answers the semantic question posed in the interrogative act and the agent's response leaves the querier satisfied.

The above exchange illustrates a common way in which a genuine answer can fail to satisfy an inquirer. An inquirer wants information of a certain type, and specifies the type of information that she wants with the semantic question she poses, but the semantic question *under*-specifies the information she desires. Her auditor answers the semantic question posed without providing the unspecified type of information. Consequently, the inquirer remains unsatisfied.

Another way in which a genuine act of answering may be unsatisfactory is that a respondent may answer uncooperatively. For example, he may assert a proposition that answers the posed semantic question, but *deliberately* mumble or speak too softly. More interestingly, a respondent might answer but deliberately avoid providing the inquirer with the sort of information she seeks. Suppose Abby overhears someone use the name 'Cologne' in a description of his vacation. She infers that Cologne is a city, but does not hear the rest of the speaker's description of the vacation. Betty is nearby and the following dialogue ensues.

5. Abby: "Where is Cologne?"

Betty: "Cologne is located at 51 degrees latitude and 7 degrees longitude."

Abby wants Betty to give her the name of the country in which Cologne is located. Betty knows this, and knows that Abby will find a specification of longitude and latitude useless, but she wishes to flaunt her superior knowledge of geography and make Abby feel stupid. Betty clearly answers the semantic question that Abby poses, but she does not attempt to provide Abby with

the sort of information that she thinks Abby wants.

Smart-aleck answers are answering-acts in which the respondent answers a posed question, but deliberately fails to provide the inquirer with information of the sort she wants, by providing information the inquirer already knows (or believes). Suppose that a Mother and her Daughter argue, and afterwards the Mother sees her Daughter with her coat on, stomping towards the front door of their house, obviously about to leave the house.

6. Mother: “Where are you going?”

Daughter: “Out!”

The Daughter asserts that she is going out (of their home). She knows that her Mother already knows this. She is not trying to provide the Mother with the sort of information the Mother wants, and the Mother is unlikely to be satisfied with the information she provides.

Nevertheless, the Daughter answers the semantic question that the Mother poses—trying to satisfy an inquirer is not necessary for answering the semantic question posed in an interrogative act.

That is one reason why a smart-aleck reply is annoying: the reply fails to satisfy, but it seems incorrect to accuse the respondent of failing to answer the question.

To see that the Daughter does answer the semantic question that the Mother poses, we can first observe that the proposition the Daughter asserts concerns the subject matter of the Mother’s semantic question. The proposition is not logically true, and thus it provides genuine information about the subject matter. So, according to the IP analysis, that proposition answers the question. Further, we can imagine an alternative scene in which the same semantic question is posed and the same proposition is asserted in reply, but intuition very strongly suggests that the question was answered. Imagine that there has been no argument and that the Mother is blind

and hears her daughter walking through their home. The Mother is genuinely unsure whether the Daughter is leaving the house or going somewhere else inside the house. She asks ‘Where are you going?’, hoping either to learn that she is staying in or to learn that she is going out. The Daughter knows this and answers ‘Out’. Intuition here strongly suggests that the Daughter answers the Mother’s question. We can conclude that in this second case the proposition that the Daughter asserts answers the semantic question that the Mother posed. But whether a proposition answers a semantic question does not depend on agents’ speech acts. So the proposition that the Daughter asserted in the first case also answers the posed semantic question in that case.

5. Some Further Cases

Using the same type of reasoning as above, we can see that the propositions that B and C assert genuinely answer the semantic question that A poses.

7. A: “Who did George W. Bush kiss?”
- B: “George W. Bush kissed a right-handed human being.”
- C: “George W. Bush kissed a human being who is less than twenty feet tall.”

Virtually no actual inquirer would be satisfied with B’s and C’s replies, and only a smart aleck would reply to A’s interrogative act with B’s and C’s sentences. Nevertheless, the propositions that B and C assert are genuine answers. These propositions are not logically true, and they concern the subject matter of the question, so they are answers according to the IP analysis. Moreover, we can imagine an inquirer who would be satisfied with them, and a respondent who cooperatively asserts them. Suppose that the inquirer is a Martian who thinks that Bush kissed a

Neptunian. Further, the Martian is under the mis-impression that all human beings are well over twenty feet tall, and that none are right-handed. B and C know this, and reply as above, and the Martian is quite satisfied with their replies. Intuition strongly suggests that the respondents answer the Martian's question. We can infer that the propositions that B and C assert answer the semantic question posed by the Martian. But then B's and C's replies also answer the semantic question that A poses. Similar points go for the interrogative and declarative sentences in (8).

8. A: "Who is Mark Twain?"
 B: "Mark Twain is a right-handed human being."
 C: "Mark Twain is a human being who is less than twenty feet tall."

We can imagine a Martian who would be satisfied with B and C, and respondents who would know this about the Martian. The propositions expressed by sentences B and C answer the semantic question expressed by sentence A.⁹

Finally, we can return to the question with which we began.

- 9a. Who is Hong Oak Yun?
9b. Hong Oak Yun is a person who is over three inches tall.

It is very unlikely that any actual inquirer who posed the question expressed by (9a) would be satisfied with the proposition expressed by (9b), and only a smart aleck would respond with an assertion of the proposition expressed by (9b). Nevertheless, that proposition provides genuine information about the subject matter of (9a), so it is an answer according to the IP analysis.

Moreover, we can imagine an inquirer who would be satisfied with (9b). Imagine a Martian,

⁹I believe that 'Mark Twain is a person' also answers the question of who Twain is, but I will not go into this further here.

most of whose Martian acquaintances are well under three inches tall, and who is unaware that many persons are over three inches tall. Such an inquirer might well be satisfied with, and amazed by, (9b). But if (9b) would satisfy this inquirer, then this is excellent reason to think that (9b) is a genuine answer to (9a).

6. Knowing Who

Sentence (10a) is an example of a knows-what attribution. Its syntactic structure, in broad outline, is indicated by (10b).

10a. Karen knows what Larry bought.

10b. [[Karen] [knows [what Larry bought]]].

Thus the structure of (10a) is similar to that of the says-ascription (11a), indicated in broad outline by (11b).

11a. Karen said that Larry smokes.

11b. [[Karen] [said [that Larry smokes]]].

‘Said’ is a binary verb, which in (11a) takes ‘that Larry smokes’ as its object. Similarly, the verb ‘knows’ in (10a) is a binary verb that takes the phrase ‘what Larry bought’ as its object.¹⁰ The syntactic parallel strongly suggests a semantic parallel. (11a) expresses a proposition that says (roughly) that Karen stands in the saying relation to the referent of the ‘that’-clause. The referent of the ‘that’-clause is the semantic content of its embedded sentence, ‘Larry smokes’. Similarly, (10a) says that Karen stands in the knowing relation to the referent of the complement phrase

¹⁰On the above analysis, the ‘what’-phrase in (10a) is a complement-phrase (an S’ or CP, in many standard grammatical theories).

‘what Larry bought’. This phrase refers to the semantic content of its embedded phrase, namely ‘what Larry bought’.¹¹

Phrases such as ‘what Larry bought’ are commonly known as *indirect* or *embedded* questions. I shall call them *indirect interrogative sentences*. They are grammatically closely related to *direct* interrogative sentences, such as ‘What did Larry buy?’. Let us say that the latter is the *direct transform* of the former, and let us assume that every indirect interrogative sentence has exactly one such direct transform. Let us also assume that the semantic content of an indirect interrogative sentence is the same as that of its direct transform.

Putting all of this together, we reach the conclusion that there is a certain semantic question expressed by both ‘what Larry bought’ and ‘What did Larry buy?’, and sentence (10a) expresses a proposition that says (roughly) that Karen stands in the knowing relation to that question. (10a) is true iff she does stand in the knowing relation to this semantic question.

That is as far as syntax and semantics will take us. If we want a philosophically more informative description of the truth conditions of (10a), we must engage in metaphysical analysis. Fortunately, there is an obvious metaphysical analysis of (10a): Karen stands in the knowing relation to the semantic question expressed by ‘what Larry bought’ iff she *knows an answer* (a propositional answer) to the question of what Larry bought. For instance, suppose Karen knows one of the propositions expressed by (12)-(14).

12. Larry bought the car that Mike has been trying to sell for six months.

¹¹I am suppressing controversial syntactic details. On some syntactic theories, ‘what’ occupies the specifier position of the complement-phrase in (10a), while the remainder of the phrase is (roughly) ‘Larry bought *t*’, where ‘*t*’ is a trace left by ‘what’ when it moves to the specifier position. See, for instance, Haegeman 1991.

13. Larry bought a green car.
14. Larry bought a car.

These propositions answer the question expressed by ‘What did Larry buy?’. So this metaphysical analysis entails that Karen knows what Larry bought if she knows one of the propositions expressed by (12)-(14). (Of course, Karen knows these propositions only if they are true.)

Generalizing on this example, we arrive at the following metaphysical analysis of knowing a semantic question.

15. *Knowing Q*: If Q is a semantic question, then X knows Q iff X knows a proposition that answers Q .¹²

For example, the propositions expressed by (16) and (17) answer the semantic questions expressed by the indirect interrogatives embedded in the knows-wh ascriptions (18) and (19).

16. Larry kicked Mary.
17. Larry lives in Minneapolis.
18. Karen knows who Larry kicked.
19. Karen knows where Larry lives.

The analysis entails that if Karen knows the propositions expressed by sentences (16) and (17),

¹²A knows-wh ascription, such as (10a), does not say, or even logically entail, that the agent knows a proposition. It merely says that the agent knows a certain semantic question. In that sense, this theory does *not* entail that knowing-wh is (a species of) propositional knowledge. Nevertheless, a metaphysically necessary and sufficient condition for knowing the question is knowing a proposition of a certain sort. I am unsure whether I am here disagreeing with Higginbotham (1996) and Stanley and Williamson (2001).

then (18) and (19) are true.¹³ Applying the analysis to knowing-who, we get the following generalization.

20. *Knowing Who Y Is: X knows who Y is iff X knows a proposition that answers the semantic question of who Y is.*

For example, the propositions expressed by (21)-(23) answer the semantic question of who Twain is.

21. Mark Twain is the person who arranged for publication of U.S. Grant's memoirs.
22. Mark Twain is the author of *Huckleberry Finn*.
23. Mark Twain is a famous author.

Therefore, if Karen knows any of the propositions expressed by (21)-(23), then Karen knows who Twain is.

We can now turn to the instance of knowing-who with which we began. I wrote at the beginning of this paper that Hong Oak Yun is a person who is over three inches tall. That proposition is true, and after reading the first sentence of this paper, you came to know it. We saw earlier that this proposition answers the semantic question of who Hong Oak Yun is.

Therefore, you came to know an answer to that question. So at that point you knew who Hong Oak Yun is.

¹³The words 'who' and 'where' are used to ask questions about people and locations, respectively. Thus I am sometimes inclined to think that knowing-who and knowing-where require knowledge that people and locations are involved. Suppose, for instance, that Karen knows Larry kicked Mary, but does not know that Mary is a person (she thinks Mary is a car). I am sometimes inclined to think that, in this case, Karen knows *what* Larry kicked, but does not know *who* he kicked. I ignore this complication here and in what follows below.

7. Attributing Knowledge-Who

I hope that you are now convinced that you know who Hong Oak Yun is. However, you probably initially resisted attributing such knowledge to yourself (and to others who read the beginning of this paper). Why? Probably because you (understandably) failed to make certain distinctions in this case.

Very few inquirers who ask ‘Who is Hong Oak Yun?’ would be satisfied with the answer ‘Hong Oak Hun is a person who is over three inches tall’. Most speakers who are asked the former want to be cooperative and will not utter the latter in response. This leads most speakers to deny that the latter answers the former. They are mistaken, but their mistake is understandable. They can distinguish between answering a question and cooperatively satisfying an inquirer, but so few inquirers would be satisfied with this reply that there is little practical reason to note the distinction in this case. Therefore, speakers are inclined to deny that someone who knows that Hong Oak Yun is a person who is over three inches tall thereby knows an answer to the question of who Hong Oak Yun is. So typical speakers are inclined to think the following: a person who knows nothing more about Hong Oak Yun than this proposition fails to know who Hong Oak Yun is.

Such a speaker will even deny knowledge-who to himself or herself. For instance, you read the name ‘Hong Oak Yun’ in the title of this paper. You probably then asked yourself who Hong Oak Yun is. You perhaps inferred that Hong Oak Yun is a person, and a human being, and guessed that he or she is of Asian descent. But you probably were not satisfied with that information. You might have wanted to know the sort of information that you usually learn when you first hear of a person, for instance, that person’s occupation. Or you might have

wanted to learn some non-trivial information about Hong Oak Yun's relationship with me. You then read that Hong Oak Yun is a person who is over three inches tall. You, quite reasonably, remained unsatisfied. So you (perhaps) judged that you still did not know an answer to your question, and therefore that you still did not know who Hong Oak Yun is. But you did. You were merely unsatisfied with the answer you knew. An unusual reader might have been satisfied with the answer, and he would probably have judged that he knew who Hong Oak Yun is.

We can roughly summarize as follows. A typical cooperative speaker *S* will tend to say and think, at time *t*, that *X* knows who *Y* is only if: *S* thinks that *X* knows an answer to the question of who *Y* is that satisfies an inquirer who, at time *t*, is both salient to *S* and asking or wondering about that question (e.g., *S* himself).¹⁴

You might object that I am ignoring an alternative explanation that claims that knowing-who is interest-relative. I address this alternative view below.

8. Contextualism About 'Knows Who'

Many philosophers have held that knowing-who, or 'knowing who', is interest-relative and in some way context-dependent.¹⁵ Utterances of 'Karen knows who Mark Twain is' vary in truth value from context to context, depending on the interests of the speakers and hearers in those contexts. Relative to some interests, Karen knows who Mark Twain is, because she knows

¹⁴If there is no salient inquirer asking or wondering about the question, then *S* will tend to think that *X* knows who *Y* is only if *S* believes that *X* knows an answer that will satisfy a *typical* inquirer.

¹⁵For instance, Stephen Boër and William Lycan (1975, 1986), W. V. Quine (1981), Igal Kvard (1982), and Nathan Salmon (1987).

(for instance) that he is an author. Relative to other interests, she does not know who Mark Twain is, because (for instance) she does not know that he wrote *Huckleberry Finn*.

The view comes in different flavors. Some views attribute context-sensitivity to certain linguistic expressions, for instance, to ‘know’ (when it appears in knows-who ascriptions) or to indirect interrogative sentences (such as ‘who Twain is’). Call these views ‘contextualist’. Others deny context-sensitivity, but say that ‘know’ (in knows-who ascriptions) expresses a ternary relation between an agent, a question, and an interest, and that the relevant interest is usually not explicitly stated, but rather “supplied by context”. Call these views ‘ternarist’. These are genuinely different views, but space prevents me from discussing them separately.¹⁶ I concentrate below on a sort of generalized contextualist view.

Let us say that *Contextualism* is the view that (a) phrases of the form “knows *Q*”, where *Q* is an indirect interrogative sentence, are context-sensitive, and (b) contextual variations in the phrase’s semantic content are due to contextual variations in the interests of speakers or hearers. I will often say that Contextualism says that ‘knowing who’ is context-sensitive, though this is not, strictly speaking, a correct description of the view.

The primary evidence in favor of Contextualism is the fact that our judgments about the truth-value of sentences of the form “*A* knows *Q*” vary from context to context. In some contexts, we might think that ‘Karen knows who Mark Twain is’ is true because she knows that Mark Twain is an author. In other contexts, we might judge that it is not true because she does not know that Mark Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*. Contextualists hold that these sentences

¹⁶These theories may also disagree about whether ‘know’ is ambiguous between a “knows-that” meaning and a “knows-wh” meaning. Groenendijk and Stokhof (1997) and Stanley and Williamson (2001) argue against ambiguity, correctly in my view.

genuinely do vary in truth-value (and semantic content) from context to context.

Some philosophers might appeal to Contextualism to soften the blow of my conclusion that you know who Hong Oak Yun is. Suppose that Tricia knows that Hong Oak Yun is a person who is over three inches tall. Some contextualists might admit that ‘Tricia knows who Hong Oak Yun is’ expresses a true proposition *in my context*, in which my unusual interests prevail. But they may say that this sentence expresses a false proposition with respect to contexts in which the speakers have more standard interests.

A Contextualist who admits that there are contexts in which ‘Tricia knows who Hong Oak Yun is’ is true, given what Tricia knows about Hong Oak Yun, makes a large concession to the view I have presented here. But not large enough. Contextualism should be rejected in favor of the non-contextual, non-interest-relative theory that I advocate. I argue below that the evidence usually cited in favor of Contextualism does not support it any more strongly than the theory presented here. I also present reasons to reject Contextualism.

Contextualism might seem familiar, for it strongly parallels the well-known view that ‘knows’, when it appears in ‘knows that’ attributions, expresses different relations between agents and true propositions in different contexts, depending on the epistemic standards that prevail in those contexts. There is a voluminous and growing literature that argues in favor of ‘knows that’ contextualism (or its cousin, ‘knows that’ ternarism), and a voluminous and growing literature that criticizes it (or its cousin).¹⁷ Strangely, there is no literature that criticizes

¹⁷Lewis (1979) briefly presents ‘knows that’ contextualism; Lewis (1996) argues for it in much more detail. Peter Unger (1984) presents, but does not endorse, it. Stewart Cohen (1988, 1999), Keith DeRose (1992, 2002), and Ludlow (forthcoming) argue in favor of it (or its ternarist cousin). The following papers criticize contextualism (or ternarism): Stephen Schiffer (1996), Richard Feldman (1999, 2001, 2003), Patrick Rysiew (2001), Herman Cappelen and Ernest

‘knows who’ contextualism, though it pre-dates ‘knows that’ contextualism by at least ten years. Some of my criticisms of ‘knows who’ contextualism will parallel what I take to be some strong criticisms of ‘knows that’ contextualism.¹⁸ Advocates of ‘knows that’ contextualism have replies to those criticisms, and there are parallel replies to my criticisms of ‘knows who’ contextualism. Unfortunately, I cannot take space to consider those replies. The following section is best viewed as an initial excursion into criticisms of ‘knows who’ contextualism.

9. The Weak Evidence For, and Two Arguments Against, Contextualism

As I said, the primary evidence in favor of Contextualism is the variability of our judgments about the truth-value of sentences the form “*A* knows *Q*”, for instance, “*A* knows who *N* is”. The Contextualist explains these judgments by supposing that the contents and truth values of such sentences vary from context to context. I have already (in effect) provided an alternative explanation. The semantic content of the attribution does not vary from context to context. But a cooperative speaker *S* tends to say and think, at time *t* (where *t* is the time of *S*’s context), that *X* knows who *Y* is only if *X* knows an answer to the question *of the sort that will satisfy an inquirer who is salient to S at t*, for instance, *S* herself, or her auditor. Since salient inquirers vary from context to context, *S* may (mistakenly) say and think that *X* knows who *Y* is in one context, but say and think the negation of this same proposition in another.

Lepore (2003, 2005), John Hawthorne (2004), Stanley (2004, 2005), and Kent Bach (forthcoming).

¹⁸Those who reject both (a) contextualism about ‘knows that’, and (b) the claim that ‘knows’ is ambiguous between a “knows-that” meaning and a “knows-wh” meaning, have good reason to deny some versions of ‘knows who’ contextualism.

Both theories explain contextual variability of judgments. Both attribute mistakes to speakers. Contextualism attributes ignorance of context-sensitivity. My theory attributes a (sometime) failure to distinguish between responses that are answers and responses that (also) satisfy the inquirer.

The evidence for Contextualism does not favor it over the non-contextual, non-interest-relative theory I advocate. For the remainder of this section, I provide two initial considerations against Contextualism.

Contextualism faces serious problems with attitude ascriptions containing embedded occurrences of ‘knows who’.¹⁹ To see this, let us first consider an example that does not involve ‘knows who’, such as (24).

24. Carol: “He is President of the USA” [said while pointing at George W. Bush].

Diane: “Carol said that he is President of the USA” [said while pointing at Tony Blair].

The embedded sentence in Diane’s says-ascription *echoes* (disquotes) Carol’s sentence. But Diane’s ascription is false because ‘he’ is context-sensitive, and the semantic content of her utterance of ‘he’ depends on the context in which she utters ‘he’. But ‘he’ has a different content in Diane’s context than in Carol’s. So Diane cannot simply echo Carol’s sentence in her ascription and be sure that her says-ascription is true. In general, one cannot simply echo a sentence that contains an indexical in a says-ascription and obtain a true says-ascription.

¹⁹Mark Richard (1990) considers a similar objection to his view that ‘believes’ is context-sensitive. See note 21. In a 1997 talk at the University of Rochester, John Hawthorne presented a contextualist theory of ‘acts freely’ (later published in Hawthorne 2001). During discussion, I presented an objection that used echoing and embedding. Hawthorne (2004) presents a similar objection to ‘knows that’ contextualism.

But echoing works perfectly well with says-ascriptions that contain ‘knows who’.

Consider the following example.

25. Max: “Karen knows who Mark Twain is”.

Nancy: “Max said that Karen knows who Mark Twain is”.

On the Contextualist theory, the expression ‘knows who Mark Twain is’ is context-sensitive. So on that view, if the factors that determine the content of that phrase in Nancy’s context differ from those that determine its content in Max’s context, then Nancy’s utterance of ‘Karen knows who Mark Twain is’ is likely to express a different proposition from the one that this sentence expresses in Max’s context. Thus Nancy’s utterance of the says-ascription is very likely to be false. If it is false, then an utterance by her of the *negation*, ‘Max did *not* say that Karen knows who Twain is’, is true. But, contrary to Contextualism, echoing works perfectly. There is no temptation to think that Nancy’s utterance of the says-ascription might be false due to differences in Nancy’s and Max’s contexts, and certainly no temptation to think that the *negation* of the says-ascription is true in Nancy’s context. On the anti-contextualist view that I advocate, says-ascriptions that echo ‘knows who’ attributions always succeed, if there are no standard indexicals in the sentence being echoed.

This is not a knock-down objection. The Contextualist might point out that similar problems with echoing arise with comparative and gradable adjectives, such as ‘tall’.²⁰ Yet many theorists think that these expressions are context-dependent (that is, context-sensitive or relative). The Contextualist might propose various fixes to the problem with ‘knows who’ and ‘tall’ that I

²⁰If ‘tall’ were context-sensitive, and Oscar uttered ‘Amy is tall’, then Peter might speak falsely when he says ‘Oscar said that Amy is tall’. But surely Peter would speak truly.

cannot discuss here.²¹

But there is a second problem that is peculiar to Contextualism about ‘knows who’: it virtually forces one to accept implausible views about the context-sensitivity of certain other expressions. Suppose that ‘knows who Twain is’ is context-sensitive, and let *C* be a context in which the prevailing interests (allegedly) require that anyone who satisfies ‘knows who Mark Twain is’ with respect to *C* knows, not only that Twain is a famous author, but also that Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*. Suppose that Helen knows that Twain is a famous author, but does not know that he wrote *Huckleberry Finn*. Now consider (26).

26. ‘Mark Twain is a famous author’ is an answer to the question ‘Who is Mark Twain?’, and Helen knows that Mark Twain is a famous author, and so she knows an answer to the question of who Mark Twain is, but she does not know who Mark Twain is.

It is peculiar to think that (26) is true in *C* or any other context. To avoid this result, the Contextualist might claim that ‘answer’ is context-sensitive, and that its content, in a context, is *yoked* to that of “knows who *N* is” in the following way: a person satisfies the property that “knows who *N* is” expresses in context *C* iff that person knows a proposition that stands in the relation that ‘answer’ expresses in *C* to the question to which “who *N* is” refers in *C*. Thus the first and third conjuncts of (26) are false in *C*, though they may be true in other contexts.

But this theory runs contrary to intuition. Imagine that Ione utters ‘Who is Mark Twain?’

²¹Some responses involve rather fundamental revisions to semantic theory. For discussion of ‘know’ and comparative adjectives, see Unger (1984), Lewis (1979, 1996), Cohen (1999), Hawthorne (2004), Cappelen and Lepore (2003, 2005), Stanley (2004, 2005), Ludlow (forthcoming), and Richard (2004, forthcoming). Richard (1990, forthcoming) responds to a similar problem with his theory of belief ascriptions. See also McFarlane (forthcoming).

and Jane responds with ‘Mark Twain is a famous author’, and Jane’s reply satisfies Ione. Ione goes so far as to utter (27) and (28).

27. Jane answered my question.

28. Jane provided an answer to the question that I posed.

Now suppose that long after the exchange ends, Max utters (27M) and (28M).

27M. Jane answered Ione’s question.

28M. Jane provided an answer to the question that Ione posed.

The above proposal entails that Max may speak falsely, even if Ione spoke truly. For if (27) and (28) are true in Ione’s context, then the proposition that Twain is a famous author stands in the relation that ‘answer’ expresses in her context to the question of who Twain is. So, given the proposed yoke between ‘knows who Twain is’ and ‘answer’, anyone who knows that Twain is a famous author satisfies the property that ‘knows who Twain is’ expresses in her context. But Max’s context may be one in which knowing that Twain is a famous author is *not* sufficient to satisfy the property that ‘knows who Twain is’ expresses. If so, then in Max’s context, the proposition that Twain is a famous author does not stand in the relation expressed by ‘answer’ to the question of who Twain is, and so Max speaks falsely when he utters (27M) and (28M). In fact, the *negations* of (27M) and (28M) are true in Max’s context. But this is counterintuitive. If (27) and (28) are true in Ione’s context, then there is no context in which (27M) and (28M) are false, and no context in which their negations are true.

Theories that say that ‘answer’ is context-sensitive also have problems with echoing. If Max utters ‘Harvey answered George’s question’ or ‘Helen knows an answer to the question of who Twain is’ or ‘The claim that George kissed Laura answers the question of who George

kissed’, then Nancy can be sure of producing a true says-ascription, in an entirely different context, simply by echoing Max, as in ‘Max said that Harvey answered George’s question’, ‘Max said that Helen knows an answer to the question of who Twain is’ and ‘Max said that the claim that George kissed Laura answers the question of who George kissed’. But this would not be so on theories that say that ‘answer’ is context-sensitive.

Similar difficulties arise for views that ascribe context-sensitivity to other expressions, such as indirect interrogative sentences or ‘question’. I conclude that none of the expressions appearing in (26) is context-sensitive.

So if the attribution ‘Tricia knows who Hong Oak Yun is’ is true in one context, then it is true in all. And if Tricia can come to know who Hong Oak Yun is by learning that Hong Oak Yun is a person who is over three inches tall, then everyone can. But you know that Hong Oak Yun is a person who is over three inches tall. Therefore, you now know who Hong Oak Yun is.²²

²²This paper is a descendant of a talk I prepared for a conference on *de re* belief at Queens University, Kingston, Ontario, in September 2004. Thanks to Arthur Sullivan and Adèle Mercier for organizing the conference, and to Ben Caplan for his insightful comments. Thanks also to John Bennett, Richard Feldman, Jean-Pierre Koenig, Gail Mauner, Lewis Powell, Jennifer Saul, and Theodore Sider for discussions and comments that provoked many important changes. Thanks to the members of the University of Sheffield philosophy department for their comments on a talk in which I presented an ancestor of this paper. Thanks also to the members of the Pragmatics Reading Group at the University of Rochester, including Greg Carlson, Christine Gunlogson, Elsi Kaiser, Deborah Rossen-Knill, Lenhart Schubert, and Christopher Tillman, for their comments on an earlier draft. Last, but not least, thanks to Hong Oak Yun for permission to mention her and her name. (No, I am not going to tell you anything more about her. You already know who she is.)

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