Pluralistic Skepticism: Advertisement for Speech Act Pluralism

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Even though the lines of thought that support skepticism are extremely compelling, we're inclined to look for ways of blocking them because it appears to be an impossible view to accept, both for intellectual and practical reasons. One goal of this paper is to show that when skepticism is packaged right, it has few problematic implications (or at least fewer than is often assumed). It is, for example, compatible with all the following claims (when these are correctly interpreted):

- We can say something true by uttering sentences of the form "S knows that p"; that is, our ordinary, reflective, intuitions about the truth-value of knowledge attributions can be respected.
- The beliefs expressed by utterances of sentences of the form "S knows that p" can be true.
- Knowledge is the norm of assertion.

Skepticism is compatible with these claims when combined with a view I call Speech Act Pluralism. Speech Act Pluralism is a theory about the content of speech acts -- it's a general theory about the relationship between semantic content and speech act content. It's motivated by considerations that have nothing specifically to do with skepticism or epistemology. In other words, this is not an ad hoc solution to problems involved in accepting skepticism. It is, rather, a theory that anyone who thinks about the nature of linguistic content should adopt. It just so happens that it lends support to skepticism.

A wide range of philosophical arguments in all areas of philosophy appeal to the intuitions that competent speakers have about the content of sentences, what's said by utterances of sentences, and the truth-conditions of such utterances. Proponents of Speech Act Pluralism claim that many such arguments are fundamentally flawed because they are based on mistaken assumptions about the nature of speech act content (i.e. the nature of what's said, asserted, claimed, etc by utterances) and the relation between speech act content and semantic content. Much work done in epistemology (especially the debates that focus on the semantics for "know") provides a good illustration of this contention. Many of the central arguments against skepticism appeal to intuitions we allegedly have about what's said and asserted by utterances of knowledge attributions. If Speech Act Pluralism is correct, these arguments uniformly fail.

There's a lot that I'm not doing. In particular:

- **I don't** provide new arguments for skepticism -- I take familiar skeptical arguments at face value, i.e. as showing that skepticism is true. I then defend that view from various objections. Of course, indirectly, this is an argument for skepticism because if I'm right, some of the central obstacles to accepting skepticism are removed.

- **I don't** present direct arguments against alternative semantics for "know". In particular, I don't present all the data that show that "know" is not a context sensitive term. [1] However, indirectly I provide an argument against contextualism because if I'm right, all the evidence that's alleged to support contextualism is better explained by my version of skepticism.

- **I don't** defend Speech Act Pluralism. I present the view, provide some illustrations, and refer the reader to the various places where the arguments for it are developed in greater detail. The goal here is to illustrate the philosophical significance and usefulness of Speech Act Pluralism, not to present all the arguments for it.

The paper has three parts. Part One presents Pluralistic Skepticism in more detail. Part Two shows how it can account for speakers intuitions about sentences containing "know". Part Three is about the relationship between Pluralistic Skepticism and the knowledge account of assertion.

1. Pluralistic Skepticism

Pluralistic Skepticism (PS) has three central components:

a. Semantic invariantism: the view that the semantic value of "know" is invariant between contexts of utterance.

b. Skepticism: the view that it is extremely hard to know anything. The semantic content of utterances of sentences of the form "S knows that p" are almost never true. We don't know most of what we take ourselves to know. We stand in the knowledge relation to few, if any, propositions.

c. Speech Act Pluralism: the view that in uttering a sentence one (literally) asserts indefinitely many propositions (only one of which is the proposition semantically expressed.) As a result, it doesn't follow from a. and b. that one can't (literally) say something true by uttering a sentence of the form "A knows that p".

Before I present this view in more detail, I'll give a brief overview of how it is related to some other positions one might hold about the semantics for "know".

First, PS is opposed to **traditional versions of skepticism**[2]. According to this view, skeptical arguments reveal that what's literally said by utterances of sentences of the form "A knows that p" is always (or almost always) false. Our intuitions to the effect

that such utterances are true are explained away either as a mistake (i.e. as the result of being mistaken about how hard it is to obtain knowledge) or as the result of confusing warranted assertability with true assertion (i.e. confusing the truth of an assertion with its warranted assertability.)

It is the (c) component of PS that distinguishes PS from this kind of skepticism. According to PS, our intuitions about the truth-value of utterances of sentences (relative to circumstances of evaluations) are intuitions about what's saliently asserted by those utterances. When what's saliently asserted by an utterance of "S knows that p" is not the proposition semantically expressed (and typically it isn't), we will have the correct intuition that this utterance said something true (even though the semantic content is false.)

Second, PS is opposed to **contextualism** about "know".[3] According to contextualists, the semantic value of "know" shifts from one context of utterance to another -- know belongs in the same semantic category as "she", "that", and "you". The primary motivation for contextualism is the kinds of intuitions we have about variability of what's said (and the truth-values of what's said) by utterances of knowledge attributions. According to PS this is best explained, not as semantic variability, but by variability in what's saliently asserted from one context of utterance to another (and from one context of interpretation to another.)

Third, PS is opposed to various versions of **non-skeptical invariantism**[4]. The non-skeptical invariantists agree with PS that the semantic value of "know" is invariant between contexts of utterance. They differ from PS'ists in claiming that the semantic content of utterances of "S knows that p" is true (in (most of) the cases where we intuitively think it is true). The non-skeptical invariantists try to find a stable semantic value for "know" that doesn't make all knowledge attributions false. They do that (at least in part) because they try to respect our intuitions about what speakers say (and the truth-value of what they say) when they utter sentences containing "know". Again, this is, according to PS, a mistaken strategy -- it is an attempt to give a semantic account of variability in speech act content.[5]

Note that there is something the last two opponents of PS agree on: there's data about our intuitions about what's said by utterances of knowledge attributions that it seems difficult for a skeptic to account for. That's one reason why both the contextualist and non-skeptical invariantist go to great lengths fixing up the semantic value of 'know' (the former by making it context sensitive, the latter by making it, for example, subject sensitive.). A central thesis of this paper is that the contextualist and the non-skeptical invariantist make the same mistake: they try to account for variability in speech act content by tinkering with the semantics.

Before showing how PS deals with the kind of data that makes contextualists and non-skeptical invariantists opposed to skepticism, I need to say a bit more about two components the version of skepticism I'm defending: the skepticism part and the speech act pluralism part.

1.1. Skepticism

The arguments for skepticism are familiar, but two points are important to emphasize in order to prepare the defense of PS: the effects of skeptical arguments and the relationship between skepticism and semantic competence. I discuss these in turn.

The Effects of Arguments for Skepticism

One way to think about skepticism is as the view that the semantic value of "know" is such that extremely high standards must be met in order for the proposition semantically expressed by a positive knowledge ascription to be true. According to this view, the propositions semantically expressed by all (or almost all[6]) utterances of sentences of the form "A knows that p" are false. The arguments for this are old and familiar; they typically involve evil demons, brains in vats, or so-called lottery propositions. Here's an illustration of the latter:

> I think I know that there's a computer in my office at the University of Oslo. However, when I ask myself (sitting at home) whether I know that no one has broken into my office the last 20 minutes and stolen my computer, I'm inclined to say that I don't know. UiO is a relatively safe campus, but burglaries do happen, and I can't rule out that today I was the unlucky one. This leads me to think that I don't stand in the knowledge relation to the proposition *that no one has broken into my office in the last 20 min and stolen my computer* (call this proposition 'the lottery proposition') The proposition that I know that there's a computer in my office, entails the lottery proposition. Realization that I don't know the lottery proposition leads me towards the conclusion that I don't know what I thought I knew, i.e. that I don't know that there's a computer in my office.

Two points about this kind of argument are important for what follows:

a. Skeptical arguments of this kind intuitively generalize in three important ways:

   i. They make me conclude not just that I don't know that there's a computer in my office (right now), but more generally, that I know very little of what I though I knew. As Hawthorne puts it:

      "These considerations generate a powerful pressure towards a skepticism that claims that we know little of what we ordinarily claim to know. For when confronted with the data, we philosophers feel a strong inclination to stick to our judgment about the lottery proposition and retract our original judgment about the ordinary proposition" (Hawthorne, (2004), p. 6)[7]

   ii. They make me draw conclusions about my epistemic state at other times. I don't just conclude that I know very little now -- I conclude that I never did.

   iii. Finally, they make me conclude that others who claim that I have knowledge are wrong. I don't draw conclusions just about my own self-ascriptions -- anyone who says about me that I know that p (where p is one the propositions I now have figured out that I don't know) is wrong.

b. Skeptical arguments are accompanied by a sense of discovery -- by a sense of having understood something new about our epistemic condition. A theory of knowledge should account for this sense of discovery that accompanies skeptical arguments. Below I argue (what might seem obvious) that no non-skeptic theory can do that.

I take (a) and (b) to be data about the effects skeptical arguments have on people when they first encounter them. An adequate theory should explain why those arguments have those effects and that can be done in one of two way: either explain these reactions away as some sort of confusion, or take them at face value and adjust your theory of knowledge accordingly. The skeptic pursues the latter option.

Skepticism and Understanding of "know"

According to PS, non-philosophical speakers don't know that skepticism is true -- it is not a necessary condition on understanding "know" that speakers know that the semantic content of utterances of sentences containing "know" typically are false. That's something they find out by thinking about philosophical arguments. This is connected to point (b) above: Skeptical arguments wouldn't be accompanied by a sense of discovery if linguistic competence with "know" required knowledge of the truth of skepticism.

This is not a surprising feature of the verb "know". For any term F, there will be important truths of the form something is F just in case G, knowledge of which is not required for understanding F. An analogy might clarify this point: There are many truths of the form A loves B only if … knowledge of which are not required in order to understand and be a competent user of the term "love". No sensible semanticist would assume that the semantics for English must include all such truths -- the semantics for English will not include a theory of love (or, for that matter, of power or justice.) And that's fortunate, for if it did, none of us would be competent English speakers. The same goes for "know": you don't need to know a theory of knowledge in order to understand English -- in particular, you don't need to know that skepticism is true.[8] [9]

1.2. Speech Act Pluralism (SPAP)

The most distinctive part of PS (what distinguishes it from other versions of skepticism) is that it incorporates Speech Act Pluralism (SPAP). SPAP is not a view that most philosophers are familiar with, so I need to go into some detail to present its main components. As mentioned above I will not present detailed arguments for the view here.[10] In stead, I'll present three components of SPAP that will be of importance in explaining how PS accounts for allegedly anti-skeptical data.

SPAP Elaboration 1: Pluralism

SPAP is the view that any utterance of a sentence S in a context C says (asserts, claims) many propositions other than the semantic content of S relative to C. An

important corollary is that it is not the case that if an utterance of S in a context C says (asserts, claims) that p, then p is the semantic content of S relative to C.

Two Illustrations:

Illustration #1: The Dresser: (from Cappelen and Lepore (1997): Imagine an utterance of (3).

> 3. A: At around 11 p.m., I put on a white shirt, a blue suit, dark socks and my brown Bruno Magli shoes. I then got into a waiting limousine and drove off into heavy traffic to the airport, where I just made my midnight flight to Chicago.

According to SPAP, (4)-(6) are all true descriptions of what's said by an utterance of (3) (note that 4-6 are all different propositions):

> 4. A said that he dressed around 11 p.m., went to the airport and took the midnight flight to Chicago.
>
> 5. A said that he dressed before he went to the airport.
>
> 6. A said that he put on some really fancy shoes before he went to the airport.

The extent to which 4-6 will seem natural will depend on the circumstance of the report, so arguments for SPAP are accompanied by small stories that describe the context for the report. Having argued that these reports are literally true (not just appropriate or warranted), SPAP proponents conclude that in uttering 3. A (literally) said the complement clause of 4-6. And that's just a tiny sample of what was said in uttering 3.

Illustration #2: The Terrorist: Here's a similar example from Scott Soames (2002):

> "A terrorist has planted a small nuclear device in a crowded stadium downtown. There is no time to evacuate the building or the surrounding area. In speaking to the negotiator, he says "I will detonate the bomb if my demands are not met," knowing that it is obvious that if he does so, thousands of people will die, and intending to communicate precisely that. The negotiator reports to his superior that the terrorist said that he will kill thousands of people if his demands are not met."[11]

Our intuition is that all of 7, 8-8.2 are true (these are my elaborations):

> 7. He says that he will kill thousands of people if his demands are not met.
>
> 8. He says that he will detonate the bomb if his demands are not met.
>
> 8.1. He says says that he will create mayhem downtown if his demands are not met.

> 8.2. He says that he inflict great damage on our community if we don't do as he says.

Cappelen and Lepore (1997) summarizes these point as follows: "...indirect reports are sensitive to innumerable non-semantic features of reported utterances and even on the context of the report itself. As a result, typically there will be indefinitely many correct indirect reports of any particular utterance." (Cappelen and Lepore (1997), p. 291). Soames draws a related conclusion:

> **[**The phenomenon of many propositions being expressed by an utterance of a sentence] "…is an extremely general one that has nothing special to do with proper names, indexicals or any of the semantically contentious issues that are of special concern here. On the contrary, the phenomenon of asserting more than the semantic content of the sentence one utters in a context is all but ubiquitous. … what an assertive utterance of a sentence s counts as asserting depends not only on the semantic content of s, but also on the obvious background assumptions in the conversation and the speaker's intention about how the speaker's remarks is to be interpreted in the light of them." (Soames, 2002 pp. 76-78)[12]

SPAP can be developed in many different ways. Two issues are particularly important for how one thinks about the semantics for "know": The various kinds of contextual variability that affects <u>what is said</u> and the role of semantic content. I discuss these in turn.

<u>SPAP Elaboration 2: Contextual Variability of Speech Act Content</u>

According to SPAP, three kinds of contextual variability affect speech act content:

V1 <u>Variability in what is asserted / said by an utterance of S from one context of utterance to another</u>: All versions of SPAP agree that the set of propositions asserted by an utterance of a sentence, S, can vary from one context of utterance to another. The set of propositions said and asserted by utterances of, for example "A will detonate the bomb if his demands are not met" will vary from one context to another.[13]

V2 <u>Variability in what is said / asserted by an utterance of a sentence from one context of interpretation to another.</u> A more radical version of SPAP claims that what's said by an utterance u of a sentence S in a context of utterance C, will vary between contexts of interpretation. On this version of SPAP, what's said by utterance, u of S in C, relative to a context of interpretation C', might be different from what's said by u relative to another context of interpretation C". This is the view endorsed by Cappelen and Lepore (1997) and considered, but not endorsed, by Soames (2002) and Cappelen and Lepore (2005).

V3 <u>Variability in what is saliently said / asserted from one context of interpretation to another</u>: Not all proponents of SPAP agree to the kind of content relativism described

in V2 above. However, all versions of SPAP would agree that what is saliently asserted by an utterance u (in a context of utterance C) relative to one context of interpretation CI might be different from what's saliently asserted by u from relative to another context of interpretation, CI*. Any version of SPAP will need a theory about how one part of the speech act content becomes salient in a context of interpretation. According to SPAP an utterance asserts many propositions. One (maybe several) of these will be more salient than the others to the speaker and interpreter. Whether or not a SPAP proponent accepts V2, she will accept the view that the saliently asserted proposition might vary from one context of interpretation to another.

One of the main objections to skepticism is that it can't account for intuitions we have about what speakers say and the ways these intuitions vary between contexts of utterance. In responding to those kinds of objections appeals to V1-V3 will prove useful (more about that below.)

SPAP Elaboration 3: Role of Semantic Content

According to some versions of SPAP, any utterance of a sentence, S, says/asserts the semantic content of S (even though that proposition might not be saliently asserted relative to all contexts of interpretation.) According to other versions of SPAP this is not the case -- there are utterances of S that do not assert the semantic content of S. In what follows, I'll assume that the semantic content is always asserted.

Summary: SPAP and "know"

Applied to sentences of the form "S knows that p" these three elaborations of SPAP have the following implications: Let u be an utterance of a sentence of the form "S knows that p" in a context of utterance C. According to PS:

a) One proposition said / asserted by u is the proposition semantically expressed (call this proposition p). p is false (that's the implication of endorsing skepticism).

b) u might assert many propositions, $p_1 \ldots p_n$ in addition to p.

c) If you endorse V2 above, $p_1 \ldots p_n$ will vary with the context of interpretation: i.e. interpreted from context of interpretation CI the set of propositions asserted by u might be different from the set of propositions asserted relative to another context of interpretation, CI*.

d) Even for those who don't endorse V2 above, it follows from V3 that the salient component of the speech act content will vary from one context of interpretation to another, i.e. which one of p and $p_1 \ldots p_n$ is salient will depend on the context u is interpreted from.

I've gone into this much detail about the SPAP component of PS because it is an unfamiliar view and because it is at the center of the defense of skepticism presented below. In what follows, I first respond to the charge that skepticism implies some kind of

error theory about intuitions about the semantic content of our views. In the last part of the paper I respond to the charge that skepticism is incompatible with the knowledge account of assertion.

2. Pluralistic Skepticism, Linguistic Intuitions, and Contextual Variability

Our linguistic behavior, our intuitions about what speakers say and our intuitions about the truth-value of what they say seem to be sensitive to contextually variable features in a way that might seem difficult for a skeptic to explain. Derose says:

> "In some contexts, "S knows that P" requires that S have a true belief that P and also be in a very strong epistemic position with respect to P, while in other contexts, the same sentence may require for its truth, in addition to S's having a true belief that P, only that S meet some lower epistemic standards" (Derose (2001), p.182.)

What makes for this difference? In the examples favored by the contextualist it is various practical factors (such as what is practically <u>at stake</u>) that vary between contexts of utterance. In other words, this sensitivity to contextual standards is not just brought out when thinking about skeptical possibilities -- it is not just when speakers are in philosophical contexts that their standards shift. As Derose points out:

> "To make the relevant intuitions as strong as possible, the contextualist will choose a "high standards" case that is not as ethereal as a typical philosophical discussion of radical skepticism … it makes the relevant intuitions more stable if the introduction of the more moderate skeptical hypothesis and the resulting raise in epistemic standards are tied to a very practical concern, and thus seem reasonable given the situation." (Derose (2002), p. 191.)

There are two kinds of variability that the skeptic is asked to account for:

i. Let S be the sentence "A knows that p (at t)", and let u and u' be two utterance of S in C1 and C2, respectively. Let C1 be a so-called <u>low standard context</u> and C2 a <u>high standard context</u>. According to the contextualist our intuitions about the truth-values of u and u' might differ. We can, for example, have the intuition that u is true while u' is false. This can't be explained by a change in A's epistemic position (both utterances are about A at time t). The relevant difference, according to the contextualist, is can be found in the attributors' practical situation. The only relevant difference between the contexts might be, for example, that the speakers have different practical concerns, no philosophizing or strange skeptical possibilities need enter into the story.

ii. Our intuitions about <u>what is said</u> by utterances u and u' of S can varies (let S, u and u' be as in (i) above). Our intuition might tell us that u' says <u>that S has a true belief that p and is in a very strong epistemic position with respect to p</u>, while u says <u>that S has a true belief that p and is in a less strong epistemic position with</u>

respect to p[14]. Again, the only difference between the contexts is that the speakers have different practical concerns.

The problem for the skeptic is supposed to be this: If the semantic content of "know" invokes a super-high standard and this is invariant between contexts of utterance, the semantics will provide no explanation of the variability in (i) and (ii). And, it is assumed, these are the kinds of intuitions that a semantic theory for English should account for.

2.1. Reply: How PS Deals with Contextual Variability

Not only can PS easily explain this kind of data, but it can do so better than any alternative theory. The assumption has been that the skeptic has to say that these intuitions are, somehow, mistaken, i.e. has to defend some kind of large-scale error theory about speakers' intuitions. A skeptic who endorses PS, however, is not committed to an error theory. According to PS, we assert many different propositions when we utter sentences of the form "A knows that p". We do not just assert the proposition semantically expressed. So a proponent of PS will hold that some of the propositions asserted (said, claimed, etc) by an utterance of a positive knowledge attribution can be true even though the proposition semantically expressed is false. She will also hold that the totality of asserted propositions can vary from one context of utterance to another, and from one context of interpretation to another. So there are plenty of resources in PS to account for the kind of variability appealed to by contextualists. PS, by virtue of incorporating SPAP, predicts exactly this kind of variability.

Before going into more detail about how PS accounts for (i) and (ii), one important methodological remark: If SPAP is correct, it's a dangerous simplification to talk simply about the intuitions we have about what's said by an utterance, u in a context C (or about our intuitions about the truth-value of what was said by an utterance u in a context C.) All such intuitions must be relativized to a context of interpretation. We should always talk about our intuitions about u from a context of interpretation C. Not doing so gives the impression there's some neutral and (possibly) privileged semanticist's point of view from which we can have intuitions about utterances. If SPAP is correct, there is no such privileged standpoint.

To see how PS deals with these kinds of cases, I distinguish (as the contextualist does) between three kinds of epistemic standards that can be invoked: low-standards (LS), ordinary-high standards (OHS) (not the super-high philosophical standards, but the kinds of standards that, according to contextualists, are invoked by raising of ordinary non-philosophical / practical stakes), and Super-High standards (SHS) (the kinds of standards triggered by skeptical arguments.)

The challenge is to explain why our intuitions vary between contexts in the way described by (i) and (ii). Here are some schematic explanations, using the resources of PS -- in all the cases below let S be the sentence "K knows that p (at time t)".

- Intuitions about utterances in LS-context of utterance from LS-context of Interpretation: Let u be an utterance of S by A in an LS-context C. Assume B interprets u from a similarly LS context of interpretation C'. Suppose B has the intuition that what A said in uttering u was true. PS will explain this as follows: Relative to C', A saliently asserted a proposition that's true. We can assume, for example, that relative to C', A asserted the proposition that K knows that p relative to a low standard.[15] This proposition is true. Of course, in uttering u the speaker also asserted the proposition semantically expressed (and it is false), but it was not saliently asserted in C', so it does not affect our intuitions about u from C'.

- Intuitions about utterances in OHS-Context Utterance from OHS-contexts of Interpretation: Let u be an utterance of S by A in a OHS-context of utterance. B interprets u from a similarly OHS-context of interpretation, C'. Suppose that B has the intuition that what A said in uttering u was false. PS-Explanation: Relative to C' A saliently asserted a proposition that's false. For example, relative to C', A asserted the proposition that K knows that p relative to a high (but not super-high) standard. This proposition is false. Of course, in uttering u the speaker has also asserted the proposition semantically expressed, but it is not saliently asserted relative to C' and it is not the proposition our intuitions track from C'.

- Intuitions about any utterance from a SHS-Contexts of interpretation: Let u be an utterance of S by A in any kind of context (low, ordinary-high or super-high). If B interprets u from a SHS context of interpretation C', she'll have the intuition that what S said in uttering u was false. PS-explanation: In a SHS context of interpretation it is the proposition semantically expressed that's salient. This proposition is false. SHS standards make us focus on the proposition semantically expressed (and it is expressed by all utterance of positive knowledge attributions from all contexts of interpretation.) In SHS contexts, the proposition semantically expressed by all utterances of all sentences of the form "S knows that p" is salient. That is why skeptical arguments generalize as described in section 1.1. above.

In general, the strategy is this: If an informed observer in a context of interpretation C has an intuition to the effect that an utterance u (by A of sentence S in a context of utterance C1) said something true (or false), we should take that as evidence that A in uttering u in C1 saliently asserted a proposition that's true relative to C.

PS and Warranted Assertability Maneuvers

Derose and Stanley[16] assume that someone who denies the semantic import of the kinds of intuitions discussed above will have to appeal to what Derose calls a warranted-assertability-maneuver (WAM's). Here's what Derose says about WAMs:

> "Such a maneuver involves explaining why an assertion can seem false (or at least not true) in certain circumstances in which it is in fact true by appeal to the fact that the utterance would be improper or unwarranted in the circumstances in question. Going the other way, an intuition that an assertion is true can be

> explained away by means of the claim that the assertion, while false, is warranted, and we mistake this warranted assertability for truth." (Derose (1999), p. 201)

Derose argues that misuse of such maneuvers will make semantics impossible:

> "It's an instance of a general scheme that, if allowed, could be used to far too easily explain away the counterexamples marshaled against any theory about the truth conditions of sentence forms in natural language. Whenever you face an apparent counterexample --where your theory says that what seems false is true, or when it says that what seems true is false-- you can very easily just ascribe the apparent truth (falsehood) to the warranted (unwarranted) assertability of the sentence in the circumstances problematic to your theory. If we allow such maneuvers, we'll completely lose our ability to profitably test theories against examples. By undermining the data for semantic theory, this kind of strategy threatens to undermine the semantic project." (1999, p. 198)[17]

The essence of what Derose calls a 'WAM' is an appeal to the distinction between, on the one hand, <u>being warranted in asserting p</u> (even though p isn't true) and on the other hand, <u>truly asserting that p</u>. It should be clear by now that PS does not appeal to any such maneuver: According to PS something true has been said and asserted, for example, in the low standard context of utterance (from the point of view of a low standard context of interpertation.) Something false has been saliently asserted in the high standard context (from the point of view of a high standard context). Our intuitions to the effect that something true has been (literally) said and asserted are correct. PS does not explain away these intuitions as somehow erroneous (i.e. as confusing warranted assertability with true assertions).

As a result, none of the objections contextualists and non-skeptical invariantists run against WAM's apply to PS. In order to respond to PS, one would have to refute SPAP in general, i.e. as a general account of the relationship between speech act content and semantic content, not just as applied to knowledge ascriptions.

From the point of view of someone who accepts SPAP, the threat to semantic theory comes from the other direction: If you think of your task as that of accounting for our intuitions about what's asserted / said within a semantic theory, semantics will be impossible. You will, for example, find we have intuitions about what is said by utterances of sentences containing "know" that can't be part of the stable semantic content of "know", and isn't an implicature (since it is part of what was strictly, literally said); so you're left trying out various tortured strategies for creating semantics that can accommodate all these variable intuitions (hence the attempt to make "know" context sensitive or subject sensitive).

<u>Context Sensitivity Only PS can Account For</u>

Not only can PS account for all our context shifty intuitions, but it can do so better than any of the competing theories. PS predict that there is more contextual variability in our intuitions about what is said than contextualism or non-skeptical

invariantists predict. Here is the kind of case I have in mind: Consider an utterance, u, of "I know that p" by A in a context of utterance, C. PS predicts the following: there could be a context of interpretation C' in which an utterance, u', of "That's true" is true, and another utterance, u", in another context of interpretation C", in which "That's true" is false. This would happen if what u saliently said/asserted relative to C' is different from what u saliently asserted relative to C". Intuitively, there are such cases. Let, for example, C be a LS-context of utterance, let C' be LS-context of interpretation and let C" be a SHS-context of interpretation. In such a case, u' is true and u" is false.

Notice that these are cases where the speakers in C' and C" don't even utter the verb "know". The speakers simply demonstrate what was said by the utterance of S in C. As a result, no fancy semantic footwork of the kind contextualists and non-skeptical invariantists like to engage in will do any explanatory work (because that is all about the semantics for 'know"). So theories that do not endorse SPAP will have to develop some kind of error theory for these cases. I take it to be an advantage of PS that provides an explanation without appeal to error.[18]

Summary: PS and The Explanation of Intuitions about Content

I conclude that PS can explain all the intuitions about content that motivates non-skeptical theories. It is, contrary to what's often assumed, the non-skeptical theories that are in need of an error theory about speakers' intuitions. This is so for two reasons:

1. Non-skeptical theories have a hard time explaining the reaction speakers have to skeptical arguments. In particular, they have a hard time accounting for how such arguments generalize (see section 1.1. above) and how they give rise to a sense of discovery.

2. Non-skeptical theories can't account for the context sensitivity that arises as a result of relativization to contexts of interpretation. They try to explain all our intuitions about variability in what is said within the semantics (that, after all, is the motivation for these theories). Semantic values are not relativized to contexts of interpretation. So the alternatives to PS will have to find some way to explain why the intuitions that indicate variability from one context of interpretation to another are wrong.

2.2. Some Follow up Questions to the Reply

In the light of this reply, some additional questions naturally arise. I address three of these below -- the replies also serve to elaborate on how PS explains linguistic usage.

Follow up Question #1: How is Speech Act Content Generated?

It is easy to say that speech act contents are generated in context and relativized to contexts of interpretation -- but does PS come with an account of how they are generated in context and how one part of the speech act content becomes salient in a context of interpretation?

Reply

In short, the answer is "No". SPAP doesn't come with a general theory of how speech act content is generated and how it varies between contexts of interpretations and contexts of utterance. I'm inclined towards the view that there might not be a theory that for every context, C and context of interpretation C' predicts what an utterance of an arbitrary sentence S in C will say (or assert or claim) relative to C' (see chapter 13 Cappelen and Lepore (2005).)

Even if that turns out to be wrong, I don't think it cuts either way with respect to defending PS. To see why, distinguish between foundational and descriptive theories concerning speech act content: we can agree that certain propositions intuitively are said or asserted by an utterance relative to a context of interpretation. We can descriptively take it as our data that a certain proposition intuitively is said or asserted by an utterance relative to a context of interpretation (assuming that this intuition is widely shared etc.). We can then go on to use this data to explain various other features of communication. To do so does not require that we solve the foundational question of why (or how) that proposition became part of the speech act content, i.e. does not require that we specify the mechanism through which this proposition was said or asserted. Note that none of the participants in this debate has a solution to these foundational questions. Contextualists constantly talk about the standards for knowledge that "govern the truth-conditions of my use of "knows" and its cognates", or "that are in use" or are 'in play" in a context.[19] So, contextualist must come up with an account of how and why certain standards are 'in play' in a certain context. As it happens, no contextualist has even attempted to present a full-fledged theory of this. They just take the idea of a standard being 'in play for granted -- just as I suggest a PS'ist should do with respect to speech act content.

Suppose, however, that some genius came up with a solution to the foundational question. The contextualist would use that as an account of how a context sensitive term gets its semantic value (how an epistemic standard is contextually fixed); the proponents of non-skeptical invariantism will use it as an account of how their fancy semantic values are fixed (i.e. how the relevant practical interests are determined), and the PS proponent will use it as an account of how speech act content is generated and becomes salient. So at this stage at least, the lack of a foundational theory doesn't cut either way with respect to the debate between these competing theories.

These remarks will seem alien to those who think that semantics is in the business of explaining or accounting for speech act content. Semantics is a systematic enterprise, and if one task of semantics is to fix speech act content, there must be a systematic theory of speech act content. However, that is exactly the view you'll have to give up if you accept SPAP. Semantics is not in the business of explaining (or predicting or accounting for) speech act content of utterances (or of sentences relative to contexts[20]).

Follow-Up Question #2: Why Assert the Semantic Content?

The proposition semantically expressed by positive knowledge attributions is always false. Why do speakers assert it? Why keep that in there as part of the speech act content?

Reply

In some sense the reply is trivial: speakers assert the proposition semantically expressed because they can't help doing so: they are using an English sentence and they are stuck with its semantic value. In the case of positive knowledge attributions, that happens to be a proposition that is false.

At first glance, this reply will seem unsatisfactory. After all, if PS is true, speakers go around making false claims constantly -- every time they utter a sentence of the form "A knows that p" one of the propositions they assert is false. This grand, collective illusion requires an explanation. One is inclined to ask: Why is that the semantic value? How did they end up semantically expressing a proposition that's false?

But that's a peculiar question -- in general we have very little idea how a term ended up with the semantic value it has. It is certainly not a question semanticists have any good basis for answering. We have things to say about why the proposition is false (appeal to closure principles combined with skeptical possibilities), but that is not what's being asked for here. So my sense is that this is a question a PS proponent doesn't have to answer (after all, no other semantics for "know" comes with a story about how "know" ended up having the semantic value it has.)

Follow-Up Question #3: What's the Evidence for Semantic Content?

How do we know that "know" has such a 'demanding' semantic value? What's the evidence for that?

Reply

It is important to point out that PS itself doesn't have anything particularly original or interesting to say in reply. The evidence is the reaction we have to skeptical arguments -- or rather the skeptical arguments themselves. They make me think I don't know, didn't know, and that other don't know what we typically take ourselves to know. That reaction requires an explanation. The one provided by PS is that the proposition semantically expressed by PS is false. In a sense, you can take the defense of PS in this paper to be conditional: If that's how you explain our reaction to the skeptical arguments, then here's how to develop that view in such a way that it avoids some of the main reasons philosophers have for trying to avoid skepticism.

To show that the skeptical arguments are sufficient to establish that the semantic content of utterances of "S knows that p" are as described by PS, would require a separate paper -- it would require a general theory of what semantic content is and how we distinguish semantic content from other parts of speech act content. None of the main

alternative to PS comes with that kind of elaborate theoretical background (contextualists, for example, do not present us with a general theory of semantic content, nor do non-skeptical invariantists). So, again, it wouldn't be fair to ask this from the skeptic.

That said, the version of SPAP I have argued for elsewhere comes with an account of semantic content and that account does fit skepticism particularly well. The versions of SPAP proposed in Cappelen and Lepore (1997), (2005), and Soames (2002) construes the semantic content of S as that which is asserted by all (sincere) utterances of S -- it's the stable content --, that which does not vary between contexts of utterance. This sits well with one important feature of the skeptical arguments: These arguments have inter-contextual effects, i.e. they make us inclined towards the view that all utterances of "S knows that p" say something false. It doesn't matter which context it is uttered in, who uttered it or when. If semantic content is that which is stable between contexts, it is ideally suited to provide an explanation for these inter-contextual effects.[21]

3. Knowledge and Assertion

I turn now to two arguments to the effect that there is a tension between skepticism and the Knowledge Account of Assertion (KA). In response, I show how KA must be modified in light of SPAP, and how, when properly formulated, there's no such tension.

3.1. Hawthorne and Derose on KA and Skepticism

According to John Hawthorne, if the knowledge account of assertion is true, skepticism ends up being weakly self-defeating. A theory is weakly self-defeating it if follows from that theory that the theory should not be asserted. According to the knowledge account of assertion, knowledge is the norm of assertion. In Williamson's formulation[22]:

KA: You must: assert p only if you know p

If skepticism is true, we know nothing, so should assert nothing, in particular, we should not assert PS. I.e. PS is weakly self-defeating.

Keith Derose has argued, from a different direction, that the Knowledge Account of Assertion yields contextualism about "know", i.e. that it is incompatible with invariantism. He says:

> "The knowledge account of assertion provides a powerful argument for contextualism: If the standards for when one is in a position to warrantedly assert that P are the same as those that comprise a truth-condition for “I know that P,” then if the former vary with context, so do the latter. In short: The knowledge account of assertion together with the context-sensitivity of assertability yields contextualism about knowledge. (Derose (2002), p.175)

According to Derose, the standards for when you are in a position to warrantedly assert that P vary with context. Assume that the conditions under which you are warranted in

asserting that p are identical to the truth-conditions for "I know that p" (this is how Derose understands KA). It follows, according to Derose, that the truth conditions for "I know that p" are contextually variable, i.e. some version of contextualism follows.

3.2. Skepticism, SPAP and the Knowledge Account of Assertion

Both Hawthorne's and Derose's arguments are considerably more subtle than the outline above might give the impression of, but those subtleties won't matter in what follows. The goal here is not to evaluate the soundness of these arguments as they stand. What I do in-stead is develop a version of KA that's compatible with SPAP and show that this reformulated version of KA is compatible with PS. I.e. this new version of KA does not make PS weakly self-defeating nor does it provide support for contextualism.

SPAP, KA and KA*

For a proponent of SPAP, KA raises a number of interesting questions -- among them Q1-Q3. The answers I provide to these questions will supply the resources for a SPAP adjusted version of KA (and, I'll argue, this new version of KA is immune to the kinds of objections run by Hawthorne and Derose.)

Q1. According to SPAP, in uttering a sentence, S, you typically assert many propositions. Suppose that in uttering S, you assert p and q and that the speaker knows that p, but doesn't know that q. What to do if you're sympathetic to something like KA? Three options spring to mind

i. KA requires that we know the proposition saliently asserted.
ii. KA requires that we know all the propositions we assert in assertively uttering a sentence.
iii. KA requires that we know only the proposition semantically expressed (this is, remember, always asserted).

The version of KA formulated below incorporates (i). If I'm asserting S in order to saliently assert p, and at the same time assert some other propositions $q_1 \ldots q_n$, it is sufficient that I know that p. The only argument I'll give for that here is that when combined with some other modifications to KA, it leads to an explanatorily powerful version of KA.

Q2. According to SPAP, what you saliently assert by uttering a sentence S in a context C is relativized to a context of interpretation. So the assertion of p that's mentioned in the formulation of KA must be relative to some context of interpretation. Which? Two options spring to mind:

i. KA requires that when uttering a sentence the speaker should know that which is saliently asserted by that utterance relative to the context of utterance (i.e. let the relevant context of interpretation be the context of utterance.)
ii. KA requires that when uttering a sentence the speaker should know that which is saliently asserted by the utterance relative to all contexts of interpretation[23].

(i) seems the more reasonable option. If in some context of interpretation other than the one I'm in (say, a context I'm completely unaware of), I saliently assert q, it would seem peculiar to require of me that I know q if the goal of my utterance is to saliently assert p (i.e. if p is what's salient in the context of utterance).

Note that if we combine this reply to Q2 with the reply I suggested to Q1, what we have so far is that KA should say something like: You should: saliently assert p in C (relative to C), only if you know that p. We need, however, to address one more issue before we get a satisfactory version of KA.

Q3. If SPAP is correct, sentences containing "know" express many propositions in addition to the proposition semantically expressed. So when we think about knowledge attributions, we have to decide whether we're interested in what's semantically expressed by such attributions or what's saliently asserted (which might not be the semantic content.) I suggest that when we formulate KA we should focus on what's saliently asserted by a knowledge attribution (relative to the context of that attribution). In other words, what KA should require is that when a speaker in a context C saliently asserts p (relative to C), then what's saliently asserted by an utterance of "A knows that p" in C (relative to C) should be true.

If we add these modifications, the natural result is KA*:

KA*: You must: Saliently assert p in C (relative to C) just in case your utterance of "I know that p" (in C) saliently asserts something true (relative to C).

KA* and The Original Motivation for KA

Not only is KA* compatible with SPAP, but does as good a job as KA accounting for the original data that motivated the knowledge account of assertion. One central argument for KA appeals to the sense we have that something is wrong about an utterance of (2)[24]:

(2) Dogs bark, but I don't know that they do

KA can explain the infelicity: If knowledge is the norm of assertion, you would in asserting the first conjunct in (2) present yourself as knowing that p but take that back in the second conjunct. That KA can provide such an explanation has been taken by many as an argument in its favor. This is not, however, an advantage of KA over KA*. KA* explains the infelicity of (2) as follows: an utterance u of (2) saliently asserts p (relative to C) and then denies that what's saliently asserted by an utterance in C of "I know that p" (relative to C) is true. That's in direct conflict with KA*. I.e., KA* explains the infelicity of utterances of (2).

KA* and the two Objections to Skepticism

If KA* is the correct version of the knowledge account of assertion, the two objections to skepticism loose their force. First consider Derose's claim that KA undermines the invariantist component of PS. Derose moves from KA to contextualism via the assumption that the conditions for warranted assertability for P vary from one context to another. A proponent of PS can go along with that. Derose then takes from KA the premise that the standards for when one is in a position to warrantedly assert that p are the same as those that "comprise a truth-condition for "I know that p"". (Derose 2002, 175.) DeRose's interpretation of a truth condition for "I know that p" plays a central role in his argument. He interprets that to mean a semantic truth condition for "I know that p". That is to say, he assumes that KA allows him to equate the assertability conditions of p with the semantic truth conditions of "I know that p". KA* blocks that move. According to KA*, salient assertability of p co-varies with what's saliently asserted by "I know that p", but that is not, typically, the semantic content of "I know that p". In other words, KA* licenses no move from the warranted assertability of p to the semantic content of "I know that p". All KA* does is get you to the truth conditions what's saliently asserted by "I know that p". Nothing follows about the semantic content of "know".[25]

Hawthorne's concern is that KA would prevent the skeptic from asserting skepticism. Here the issues are trickier. Let p be the view I defend, i.e. PS. Suppose I want to (saliently) assert p. According to KA*, I can do that if what's saliently asserted by "I know that p" is true. I've argued that what's saliently asserted by knowledge claims could be true even though the semantic content isn't (because we don't always saliently assert the semantic content.) But of course, that move assumes that we are not in a context where we focus on the semantic content of the knowledge claim (which, according to PS, is always[26] false.) The problem is that when we assert the truth of skepticism, i.e. p in our example, we're typically thinking about epistemology and so are in a super high standard context, hence we should be focusing on the semantic content of knowledge claims. If so, what's saliently asserted by "I know that p", in a context where p = PS, should be false, according to PS. I.e. PS still seems to be weakly self-defeating.

So KA doesn't provide a simple solution to Hawthorne's problem. But it does provide partial relief. Here's how it goes: A PS proponent should grant that there's something peculiar about asserting a blanket version of skepticism. That's just a fact (and one the Pyrrhonic skeptic quite rightly made a big point out of.) If you know nothing, you don't know skepticism, and so how can you assert skepticism? Note, however, that this is a problem for the skeptic not for skepticism (i.e. for the person asserting the position, not for the position.). The skeptic will, in asserting skepticism, engage in behavior that, at a certain level, breaks with the norms of assertion (in some sense she's doing something she should not do.)[27]

There is, however, a trick that could be used by the skeptic to get around this problem (one I've made use of through out this paper.) Some skeptics, me for example, don't always do epistemology -- we don't always think about skeptical possibilities. Sometimes (in my case, most of the time) skeptics think about semantics and theories of speech act content. When we think about speech act content our epistemic standards aren't very high -- at least not as high as when we think about skepticism and skeptical

possibilities (we semanticists are not, for example, too worried about whether we are brains in vats or deceived by evil demons). When, qua semanticist, I describe the semantic content of "know" and the relationship between the semantic content of "know" and the speech act content, what's saliently asserted by an utterance of "I know that p" (where p = PS) need not be the semantic content, and hence could be true. In this sense, Lewis is right: Epistemology destroys knowledge, but only temporarily -- by doing some philosophy of language we can recover it again.[28]

Conclusion and Qualifications

I have argued that PS can be defended against certain kinds of objections -- objections that have to do with the compatibility of PS with various aspects of our linguistic practices. Those, of course, are not the only kinds of reason one might have for worrying about skepticism. There are other objections -- objections that are of an epistemological nature. Adding SPAP to skepticism won't alleviate those objections. Here's an example, from Williamson and Hawthorne, of the kind of objection that SPAP provides no response to: Skepticism, as construed here, demands that we be able to articulate a super-high epistemic standard. I have said nothing about how to do that. The natural way to do it appeals to the kind of evidence we need to have for a claim in order to know it (for the skeptic, the evidence must be very strong, e.g. entail what we claim to know). That seems to assume that our concept of evidence can be understood independently of our concept of knowledge. If Williamson (2000) is right, this assumption fails. So it becomes very hard to see how the skeptic can articulate the super-high standard required to get the skeptical arguments off the ground. This kind of objection requires an entirely different kind of reply from the skeptic, one I won't attempt here. What this indicates is that in order to refute skepticism, you have to do epistemology, not philosophy of language.[29]

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[1] For the kinds of reasons why I think contextualism fails, see Cappelen and Lepore (2004) and (2005).

[2] I have in mind the kind of view developed by Barry Stroud in Chapter Two of Stroud (1984)

[3] See for example Lewis (1996); Cohen (1991), (1999), and (2000); DeRose (1995), (1999), (2000) and (2002).

[4] See for example Hawthorne (2004), Stanley (forthcoming).

[5] On this view, knowledge attributions are sensitive to the non-epistemic features of the situation in which the subject of the attribution finds herself (whether S knows that p, depends, in part, on practical facts about S' situation).

[6] The scope of this "every" is not all that important in what follows: there might be some exceptions. I remain neutral about the exact scope of skeptical arguments.

[7] See also Vogel (1990) for earlier elaboration on the importance of co-called lottery propositions.

[8] For further illustrations of this important point, see Hawthorne (2004) Chapter Three. Hawthorne uses vague terms and moral terms to illustrate the point.

[9] John Hawthorne characterizes this as the view that speakers are wrong about the semantic value of the term "know", hence he calls it an 'error theory' (Hawthorne (2004), pp.114-5). To the extent that this gives the impression that these speakers have made some kind of semantic mistake, it's an unfortunate characterization. They are no more mistaken in their understanding of "knows" than those who are mistaken about (or have in complete knowledge of) love, power, money, or nuclear waste are mistaken about the semantics for "love", "power", "money" or "nuclear waste". They are just mistaken or not fully informed about that which these terms refer to.

[10] See for example Cappelen and Lepore (1997), (1998), (2004) and (2005), Richard (1998), Salmon (2004), (2005), Soames (2002)).

[11] For many other examples of this kind see Cappelen and Lepore (1997), (1998), (2000), (2004), (2005). For very similar examples, see Chapter Three of Soames 2002.

[12] Similarly, Nathan Salmon says:

> "Frequently, routinely in fact, what we represent by means of a symbol deviates from the symbol's semantics. Most obviously this occurs with the sentences we utter, whereby we routinely assert something beyond what the sentence itself semantically expresses." (Salmon (2005), p.224.)

[13] Imagine the sentence uttered by a terrorist who has placed his nuclear device in the desert and intends to use it to destroy the habitat of an endangered bird species.

[14] In what follows I assume, for the sake of argument, that the contextualists' description of these examples is correct, i.e. that epistemic standards enter into the propositions expressed by knowledge attributions. That doesn't mean I endorse this view. The reply I give to the contextualist is not dependent on any detail of how these propositions are

construed. It's a general strategy for dealing with contextual variability, no matter how exactly one thinks that variability affects the propositions expressed. The point made below could, with minor modifications, be applied to other ways of making knowledge attributions context sensitive -- for example Lewis (1996), Ludlow (2005) and Schaffer (2004).

[15] See note 14 above.

[16] See DeRose (1999) and Stanley (forthcoming)

[17] See Stanley and King (2005) and Stanley (forthcoming) for an endorsement of the concern DeRose expresses in this passage.

[18] Hawthorne (2004) and Stanley (forthcoming) try to explain our intuitions about uses of "know" by appealing to the idea that the propositions that we express include references to the interests or practical concerns of the agent to whom the knowledge is attributed. PS could incorporate parts of that view: PS can accommodate the conviction that the propositions expressed by knowledge attributions include references to the subject's practical interests or stakes. PS leaves open the possibility that such propositions are part of the speech act content and that they are salient. In other words, a PS proponent need not take a stand on aspects of the debate between contextualists and so-called 'subject sensitive invariantists'. It's possible that both kinds of propositions enter into the speech act content. It is also possible that one kind of proposition is salient from one context of interpretation while the other kind is salient from another. So in a sense, PS can incorporate both sets of intuitions (both sets of data). Of course, what PS cannot incorporate is the idea that either of these constitutes the semantic content.

[19] These examples are taken from Derose (forthcoming), and similar locutions can be found in all the contextualist literature.

[20] See Cappelen and Lepore (1997), (2005) and Nathan Salmon's (2004) and (2005) for elaboration on these points.

[21] That said, I should emphasize again that the goal here is not to give a full-fledged semantic theory, but rather to show that if you take skeptical arguments at face value and as arguments to show that the semantic content of utterances of positive knowledge attributions require that extraordinary standards be met, then you can respond to many of the standard objections to skepticism by endorsing SPAP.

[22] See Williamson (2000), Chapter 11.

[23] A third possibility is this: call the context from which we evaluate whether an utterance is in accordance with the norm of assertion, the normative context. One possible view is this: in order to saliently assert p in context of utterance C, the speaker should know that which is asserted by "I know that p" relative to the normative context. One this view, a speaker might have acted in accordance with the norm of assertion relative to one normative context, but not another.

[24] See Moore (1962), p.277

[25] DeRose (2002, pp. 182-4) objects to the 'warranted assertability' version of KA. The central part of that criticism relies on the assumption that warranted assertability conditions for "A knows that p" are stricter than warranted assertability conditions for "p". Even if that's true (I'm not convinced that it is), nothing follows about KA*. KA* is not about the conditions under which it is warranted to assert "p" or "A knows that p"; it is about the truth of what's (saliently) asserted by these utterances. This, again, illustrates

how combining SPAP with skepticism undermines the strategies developed for dealing with traditional versions of skepticism.

[26] As mentioned in note six above, I take no stand on the exact scope of skepticism, so it's compatible with the view defended here that PS doesn't fall in under it -- but I'll leave that possibility unexplored.

[27] I won't discuss here how bad this is for the skeptic. One might wonder: How bad is it to break the norm of assertion, if one is doing so in the interest of truth?

[28] This removes another concern that Hawthorne has about skepticism -- that it undermines what he calls the practical reasoning constraint (see Hawthorne (2004), p.30 and pp. 132-35) The practical reasoning constraint says that one ought only to use that which one knows as a premise in ones practical reasoning. It looks like the skeptic will either be unable to engage in practical reasoning or fail to respect this constraint. PS can here appeal to KA* as the basis for an alternative version of the practical reasoning constraint: an agent A should only use p as a premise in practical reasoning in a context C, if an utterance of "A knows that p" in C saliently asserts something true. If this is the constraint, there's no barrier to the skeptic engaging in practical reasoning.

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