Interest Relativism
Handout 2
Jason Stanley, Knowledge – Action Seminar

In recent years, analytic epistemology has been roiled by the view that knowledge depends upon practical interests. In their 2002 paper, Fantl and McGrath reject the thesis they call evidentialism, instead advocating the view that propositions about knowledge (and justification) are dependent for their truth in part upon what is stake for the putative knower. For Fantl and McGrath, knowledge depends in part on how much is at stake for knowers; since stakes depend upon practical interests, knowledge is dependent upon practical interests. Hawthorne (2004, p. 176) also argues that we must allow “what we might call ‘practical environment’ to make a difference to what is known”. Finally, Stanley (2005) accepts evidentialism, but does so only because he accepts a similar thesis about evidence, that it too is dependent upon stakes (and hence practical interests).

What is at stake for a knower in a situation depends upon their interests, and their practical position that situates them relative to their goal of pursuing those interests. Out of habit, I typed the word “practical” here. Speaking of an agent’s practical position evokes the kind of dry and artificial problem cases one sees in Fantl and McGrath (2002, 2009), Hawthorne (2004) and Stanley (2005). But it is more accurate to say that one’s interests, together with one’s social and political location in a society determine how much is at stake in acting on something one believes. The mundane practical quandaries in which we find ourselves are enough to bring out the ways in which knowledge depends on stakes; examples of banks, train schedules, airports suffice in this regard. But the important applications of interest relativism occur when thinking about political structures. As I argue in Chapter 6 of How Propaganda Works, the theory gives an elegant explanation of why poorly situated social and political location, and lack of political power, is an epistemic harm. One’s social position causally affects the interests one has, the likelihood one has of satisfying those interests, and therefore, if interest-relativism is correct, the knowledge one can straightforwardly acquire.

The motivation behind this relatively broad outpouring of support for a controversial view about the dependence of the epistemological on the practical is, in all three cases, to preserve conceptual connections between knowledge and action; the knowledge – action principles that are the topic of the seminar. The knowledge – action principles also lend themselves to political interpretation. Just as Williamson describes the knowledge norms for assertion as giving assertion its authority, so knowledge gives action its power.

Knowledge - action principles are neither necessary nor sufficient for interest-relativity about knowledge.¹ But it is natural to combine them. Whether it is proper to take p as a reason for acting seems dependent on what is at stake in acting on p. If knowledge is the norm for action, then it does naturally follow that knowledge is dependent on what is at stake. My focus here is however not on the argument for interest-relativity, and so not on

¹ In “Defending Interest-Relative Invariantism”, Brian Weatherson (2011) argues for the interest-relativity of knowledge independently of these principles. And Williamson and
the relation between knowledge—action principles and interest-relativity. I'm rather going to spend today clarifying the thesis of interest-relativity itself. I will situate it along two other theses about interest-relativity (or dependence). The first is the thesis famous from feminist epistemology that knowledge depends upon social location, and in particular, gender. This may sound like interest-relativity, but I will argue that it is not; the sense of dependence in question is much weaker. The second is a thesis that emerges from Delia Graff Fara’s work on vagueness, which is that the truth of almost any empirical proposition depends upon interests. Here, the sense of dependence is the same, and the scope of the claim of interest-relativity is considerably larger. So, I will be arguing that epistemic interest-relativity is considerably more controversial than the first thesis, and somewhat less controversial than the second. At the end of the exercise, I am hoping we have a firm grasp of the contours of the view.

Plan for the seminar

Section 1: I compare and contrast the commitments of situated knower theories in feminist epistemology as well as feminist standpoint views with the commitments of interest-relative views about knowledge.

Section 2: I compare and contrast interest-relative views about knowledge with interest-relative views about empirical propositions generally (specifically, the interest-relative theory of vagueness introduced in Fara (2000) and defended in Fara (2008)).

I. Direct versus Indirect Dependence on Interests

Feminist epistemologists have often been taken to argue for the relevance of practical interests to epistemic facts. They are not motivated by knowledge-action principles, the desire to explain bank or train or airport cases, or the knowledge first program in epistemology. Rather, for the most part, feminist epistemologists are committed to the epistemic significance of gender-interests. In “Feminist Epistemology as Local Epistemology”, Helen Longino writes, “Feminist standpoint theorists have emphasized the differences in the situations and knowledge/beliefs consequently produced by men and women or by individuals occupying gendered positions, such as factory foreman, managerial bureaucrat, housewife, or secretary.” For the feminist standpoint theorist, the interests that emerge from one’s gender role affect the production of knowledge. That feminist epistemology seems to take interests and social location as epistemologically relevant has been a source of strident criticism of the project (most famously by Susan Haack).

It can seem, from much of the literature in support of and against feminist epistemology, that it is strongly committed to an interest-laden ontology of the epistemic domain. In Elizabeth Anderson’s 1995 paper, “Feminist Epistemology: An Interpretation and a Defense” Anderson describes feminist epistemology as “the branch of social epistemology that investigates the influence of socially constructed conceptions and norms of gender and gender-specific interests and experiences on the production of
knowledge”. Feminist epistemology’s focus on the situated knower can sound like the claim at the core of interest-relative theories in epistemology, that epistemological facts supervene on the practical interests that are linked to one’s social location.

The construal of feminist epistemology as committed to this kind of non-standard ontology of the epistemic domain, has been a major source of critique. Work in feminist epistemology gave rise to what Elizabeth Anderson has called “hysteria about value inquiry”. And as Rebecca Kukla has recently noted, interest-relativism has given rise to a similar “moral panic”, suggesting a similar source. In her 1995 paper, “Knowledge, Human Interests, and Objectivity in Feminist Epistemology”, Elizabeth Anderson identifies as the key premise in arguments against Feminist Epistemology, the claim that “whether a theory is justified depends only on features indicative of its truth, not its significance”. Interest-relative views about knowledge and justification clearly deny this claim. If interest-relativism is correct, all inquiry is strongly value laden. So feminist standpoint epistemology and interest-relativism appear to be claims with a similar controversial epistemological ontology.

Let’s distinguish between direct dependence on interests and indirect dependence on interests. The arguments for interest-relativity are arguments for the direct dependence of epistemological facts on interests and social location. The knowledge – action principles that underlie support the thesis that one can act on what one knows. And for any mundane example of ordinary contingent empirical knowledge (or even knowledge of complex logical or mathematical truths), one can envisage a situation in which one is offered a bet at very high stakes on its truth. To avoid the conclusion that one can permissibly take such bets, that one can bet one’s life on where one’s car is parked, the interest-relativist argues that this kind of practical situation undermines one’s knowledge, because knowledge directly depends on how much is at stake, which is determined by one’s interests (e.g. one’s interest not being killed). This is direct dependence.

One of the main ways epistemologists have argued against interest-relativism is by arguing that in the examples at issue, knowledge is only indirectly dependent on stakes, and hence on interests. According to one classic response to the view, being placed in a high stakes situation tends to undermine the confidence one has in a belief. Since knowledge requires full belief, confidence undermining also undermines knowledge. But this is an indirect effect of interests on knowledge.

Indirect effects raise no controversial concerns at all for the ontology of the epistemic. It is utterly clear that interests have indirect effects on justification and knowledge. If I don’t care about a topic, my judgments about it will tend to be less reliable. I will likely have less background knowledge about it. I will likely have devoted less time to acquiring the relevant skills the domain requires for mastery. And I will be less motivated to put in the work to acquire the knowledge. All of this will make my judgments less reliable. These are mundane claims and raise no controversial epistemological issues.

Let’s now turn to the literature on feminist epistemology. Do feminist epistemologists mean to demonstrate the direct effect of interests, social location, or value on knowledge?
Or is the feminist epistemologist only committed to *indirect* effects of these features? There are many distinct views that fall under the umbrella of feminist epistemology. I will focus on those that prima facie sound closest to a commitment to interest relativity, which happen also to be the most prominent; the “situated knower” of feminist epistemology, and feminist standpoint epistemology.

In a 1981 paper, Lorraine Code argues that the sex of the knower is epistemologically relevant. But the aim of her arguments is not to produce a case in which two people of different genders have available to them the same information about features of indicative of the truth of a claim, and despite equal confidence, because of differing gender interests end up with different epistemic attitudes. She rather argues that epistemological facts are indirectly dependent on the social roles imposed by gender difference. In describing psychological research that purports to show that women have better verbal skills than men, better fine coordination, and ability to make more rapid decisions, and men better spatial skills. Code points out that if this research is correct, it would entail that the sex of a knower is epistemologically relevant in the sense relevant for her. But this research has no bearing at all on the direct dependence of the epistemological on interests and social location. If it had been borne out, it would show only that knowledge is indirectly dependent on social location. It would show that gender has an effect on the reliability of one’s judgments in different domains. Epistemological facts would only be directly dependent upon reliability.

True to this example, in the paper, Code’s arguments are uniformly that gender roles lead to the acquisition of different skills and sensitivity to different evidence. Even if we think that women have more “subjective” reactions than men to events, it would follow that there is certain evidence to which women were attuned and men would not be. Nor is it plausible that such “subjective categories” of evidence, including phenomenological evidence and evidence presented in indexical or demonstrative terms, is not evidence is in the sense relevant for knowledge. If we were only restricted to evidence that could be presented in non-indexical terms, we would have much less knowledge than we ordinarily take ourselves to have. But all of these arguments of Code’s are arguments only for the indirect dependence of knowledge on gender.

In *Black Feminist Thought* (p. 24), Patricia Hill Collins emphasizes the “distinctive consciousness” that US Black women have thanks to a life lived in a “different world” than whites. Quoting Ruth Shays, a Black inner-city resident, on the topic of “how variations in men’s and women’s experiences lead to differences in perspective” (p. 25), “[t]he mind of the man and the mind of the woman is the same” she notes, “but this business of living makes women use their minds in ways that men don’t even have to think about”. Collins also gives examples of how interests affect knowledge, for example Ida B. Well’s close connection with people who had been the victims of lynching led her to question the dominant narrative and ultimately to much better understanding of the actual causes of lynching. But these too are all indirect effects of interest on knowledge.

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2 “Is the Sex of the Knower Epistemologically Relevant?”, Lorraine Code, *Metaphilosophy*. 
That these most prominent strands of feminist epistemology are committed only to the indirect effects of interests on knowledge is made even more salient by the debate between advocates of situated knowledge and standpoint epistemologists. Standpoint epistemologists argue that it is not just occupying an oppressed social location, but also active political commitment to the cause of those in that location, that leads to greater knowledge. In “Why Standpoint Matters”, Alison Wylie writes, “…it is the political commitment that feminists bring to diverse fields that motivates them to focus attention on lines of evidence others have not sought out or found important; to discern patterns others have ignored; to question androcentric or sexist framework assumptions that have gone unchallenged…” In short, political commitment leads to better knowledge, because one’s motivation to pursue such knowledge is greater. Closer inspection of the literature therefore reveals that the shared goal of feminist epistemology is to emphasize the ways in which knowledge indirectly depends upon gender. Standpoint theorists’ emphasize critical engagement and political commitment, because such commitment will have a large epistemological effect, albeit only an indirect one.

Feminist epistemologists argues that social location affects the kind of evidence to which one has access, by affecting their experiences, their skills, and their conceptual resources. This has an epistemological effect, only because knowledge does depend on experience, skill, and conceptual resources. Different skills, different resources, and different experiences will yield bases for knowledge claims. This is as thoroughly uncontroversial a claim in epistemology as it is possible to make. The controversy appeals to the “situated knower” and standpoint epistemology have engendered is therefore puzzling. It is certainly not due to any controversial feature of their claims. In contrast, the moral panic directed against interest-relativism is more justified.

In response to the question “how could knowledge depend upon gender roles?”, feminist epistemologists describe at length the ways in which occupying a gender role (especially with a critical conscience) is likely to result in better epistemic practices and novel epistemic resources. But in response to the question, “how could knowledge depend upon interests?”, advocates of interest-relativism about knowledge do not respond in this way at all, because to admit that an explanation of this sort is required is to abandon the view. The advocate of interest-relativism holds that knowledge depends directly upon interests; not indirectly via the acquisition of better practices and additional epistemic resources. It would be giving away the game to try to find some intermediary like practices or resources that would mediate between interests and knowledge.

The claim that epistemological facts are constituted in part by facts about interests is controversial. But since evidence is in any case constituted at least in part by mental states, including knowledge, and interests are mental states, direct interest-dependence in epistemology should be considerably less controversial than a general interest-dependence thesis about empirical propositions. It is surprising to be told that the claim that Hannah knows that a certain mountain is tall directly depends (in part) on Hannah’s interests and goals. But it would be considerably more surprising to be told that the proposition, about that mountain, that it is tall, depends upon Hannah’s interests and goals.
I want now to turn to a theory that argues for this much stronger and more controversial claim of interest dependence. It is a claim about the interest-dependence of ordinary empirical propositions. The claim is made by Delia Graff Fara in the presentation and defense of her interest-relative theory of vagueness. Fara's theory is an interest-relative theory of the properties expressed by vague terms. It is bold, because it has consequences for almost the entire ordinary range of the everyday truth-predicate (after all, almost every expression is vague). Reflecting on the various issues raised by Fara’s views will help illuminate the prospects for the more modest interest-relative metaphysical proposals in epistemology.

II. Interest-Relativism about ordinary empirical propositions

There is now a large literature on Fara’s view. But I would like to focus just on that part of the literature about the controversial semantical and metaphysical aspects of her view that are the result of direct interest-relativity. Looking at the long discussion of the semantics and metaphysics of Fara's considerably more sweeping interest-relativist thesis places into perspective the force of the analogous worries that arise for more modest interest-relative theses, such as the interest-dependence of knowledge.

Here is the sketch of our discussion of Fara’s theory:

i. bare bones sketch of Delia Graff Fara’s interest-relative theory of vagueness.
ii. Exposition of the epistemic and metaphysical objections I have given to her theory in Stanley (2003).
iii. Discussion of the response in Fara (2008) to the epistemic objection.
iv. Discussion of the literature that has arisen in response to this back and forth about the epistemic objection to Fara’s view (including Armstrong and Stanley (2011) and King (2015).
v. Discussion of modal objections to interest-relative views generally, both Fara’s and interest-relativism about knowledge.

(i) Fara’s interest-relative theory of vagueness

According to Fara, squarely facing up to the problem of vagueness forces us to accept a pervasive dependence of truth on interests. Let me explain how Graff Fara is led to this conclusion by her account of the Sorites Paradox.

Sorites Paradox
(a) Fa
(b)For x and y (if Fx and Rxy then Fy)
(c)There are b1…bn (Rab1 & Rb1b2 & Rb2b3….Rbnz)
(d) ~Fz

Fara usefully distinguishes three different questions that someone who denies the Sorites premise (b) must answer:
(1) The Semantic Question
   If the universal generalization in (b) is false, what is to be said its classical
equivalent, the ‘sharp boundaries’ claim that there is something that is Fx and Rxy
but not Fy?
(2) The Epistemological Question
   If the universal generalization is false, why are we unable to identify its false
instances?
(3) The Psychological Question
   Why are we so inclined to believe the Sorites premise, if it is false?

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

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

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

“John is tall” gets analyzed as “John has significantly more height than is typical”

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


In 2003, I published a paper responding to “Shifting Sands”, “Context, Interest-Relativity, and the Sorites”, arguing that Fara’s view essentially required too much subjectivity. But it did not seem much of a stretch to apply her ideas to the case of knowledge. While I thought it was too much to say that the property of being a mountain was dependent on interests, the view that knowledge depends on interests has at least a familiar pragmatist heritage.

I’m going to run through my arguments against Fara’s theory. One argument is epistemic and the other is metaphysical. I will say briefly why I thought neither argument is a problem for an interest-relative view of knowledge, and also (briefly) why I was at least partially wrong (there are analogous concerns about the modal profile of interest-relative epistemic contents, as Michael Blome-Tillman has nicely brought out). Then I turn to Fara’s 2008 response, “Profiling Interest-Relativity”, which helps us think through the modal profile issues raised by an interest-relative view of a domain.

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

It is instructive to see why Graff needs to relativize the relation expressed by ‘significantly greater than’ to persons. If she did not, then the proposition expressed by “that mountain is tall for a mountain” would be that that mountain is significantly greater than the typical height of mountains. But then no truth value for this proposition would be determined given a time and world. For a time and a world pair is too large to determine what is significant. Relative to this universe now, there are simply too many conversations occurring to fix on a unique set of interests. So Graff’s theory is not an entirely interest-relative account. There is still some context-sensitivity associated with a vague expression. But once one fixes upon a person or persons whose interests are at stake, subsequent uses of the vague expression all express the same property (significant for that person). – KaPI, pp. 171-2

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

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

The epistemic worry about Fara’s account is that it seems to entail that sentences containing vague expressions (that is, virtually every sentence) uniformly express propositions about particular people. So, an utterance of “that mountain is tall” expresses a proposition about a person, whose interests at the time help determine the extension of “tall”. But then one cannot understand an utterance of a sentence containing a vague expression unless one is acquainted with the person about whose interests it is. And it seems clear that all one can understand an utterance of “that mountain is tall” without having any sense of whose interests are at stake (or “that is a heap”, etc.). That is the epistemic objection to Fara’s account.

The second objection involves the modal profiles of propositions containing interest-relative properties. According to Fara’s interest-relative account, most propositions are about specific people and their interests. It seems to follow that these propositions would not exist, if those people and their interests failed to exist. And yet the proposition that a particular mountain is tall does not seem to possess this kind of modal fragility, this kind of dependence on the existence of people. One would want to say that even if no persons existed, tall mountains would still be tall. And yet it’s unclear how Fara’s theory can license such a robustly realist conclusion. Fara’s theory suggests that virtually any proposition we would be interested in communicating depends for its existence on persons or least their interests.

Returning to the case of knowledge, it seemed to me that an interest-relative theory of the knowledge relation inherits the virtues of Fara’s theory, but without its costs. The interest-relativist about knowledge holds that the propositions expressed by knowledge ascriptions depend for their truth on the interests and practical situation of the knower, in just the same way that Fara argues that the propositions expressed by sentences containing vague terms depend for their truth on the interests and practical situation of the salient person. But it is less dramatic and surprising to discover that the truth of knowledge claims depend on all sorts of practical factors about a subject in a situation than it would be to discover that virtually all the propositions we grasp depend for their truth on human interests. One claim is about knowledge, the other about truth.

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

Interest relativism about knowledge on the face of it may not seem to have an analogous modal profile problem. It is clear, for example, that the truth-value of knowledge ascriptions does depend on the existence of knowers. However, there are in fact concerns about the modal profile of interest-relativist relative propositions about knowledge. They are taken sufficiently seriously that they have been represented as the *main objection* to interest-relativism about knowledge (for example, by MacFarlane (2014)). They are not as dramatic as the ones facing Fara’s theory, but they must nevertheless be addressed. I will suggest in passing a semantic mechanism way to accommodate these modal worries. But more importantly, I will argue that the modal intuitions should hold little sway here. It also may be that when our interests are at stake, we are committed to not recognizing that. Let’s return to this issue about modal objections to interest relativist theories of knowledge after discussing the literature on the epistemic and modal profile problem for Fara’s bolder and broader interest relative position, starting with Fara’s 2008 paper, “Profiling Interest Relativity”.


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

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

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

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

(iv) Evaluation of the response in Fara (2008), and subsequent literature.

I am not sure that Fara is correct that possible worlds account of content are too coarse grained to allow a characterization of a de re propositions. In his paper “Belief Attribution and Context”, Stalnaker does say that on his account propositions do not come with a “strong acquaintance relation” towards particular objects. Nevertheless, he tries in these passages to make sense out of de re belief ascription in his framework. My contention is that the beliefs that would be attributed by sentences containing vague terms would all be de re beliefs, if Fara is correct. This is enough to resurrect the concern, because, counter-intuitively, virtually any belief ascription would attribute a de re belief about a usually not explicitly mentioned salient agent.

It is considerably more difficult to respond to Fara’s defense of her view against the epistemic objection, on a Russellian structured proposition view. Fara treats the element in the structure that depends on a contextually salient person as a high type operator, she concludes that there is no requirement of acquaintance. Fara therefore assumes, in her response to the epistemic objection, that epistemic relations of acquaintance correspond neatly to semantic categories. And this is certainly a standard assumption of those who employ Russelian contents. Responding to her argument therefore requires challenging the connection Russelians typically hold obtains between semantic categories and epistemological. This is a challenging task. In the end, it required an entire paper, which is my 2011 paper with Joshua Armstrong, “Singular Thoughts and Singular Propositions”.

Here is an initial thought Armstrong and I provide to place into question the kind of theoretical move Fara recommends to avoid an epistemic acquaintance requirement.
Suppose one introduced an operator, “Johnly”, which meant the same as “According to John”. Intuitively one might think that grasp of the operator meaning expressed by “Johnly” requires acquaintance with John. But Fara could argue, via the same reasoning she employs above, that grasp of the operator meaning expressed by “Johnly” does not require acquaintance with John, since an operator meaning is a kind of “high type function”, and not an object. Exploiting the assumption of a match between semantic categories and epistemological ones allows too easily exploitation of the Russellian framework to evade epistemic commitments.

In our paper, we provide two examples in detail to support the view that semantic categories should not neatly line up with epistemic ones, for the Russellian. The first involves Montague’s theory of proper names. We argue that one could have good semantic reasons for treating proper names as a certain kind of function from properties to truth-values (on Montague’s there, “Jason Stanley” denotes a function from properties I have to the true, and properties I lack to the false). And if one has good semantic reasons to treat proper names in this way, one would still need to retain the epistemic requirements for understanding for sentences containing proper names, which intuitively require acquaintance with the actual person in question, and not just the function. On this account, grasp of certain functions, the “singular” ones, would require acquaintance. Nevertheless, these functions would still be higher-type operators.

Our second argument concerns the word “actually”, as it occurs in philosopher English. We argue that any plausible syntax and semantics of philosopher English will treat “actually” as having an operator as its semantic value. But grasp of an occurrence of actually will always involve a requirement of acquaintance with the actual world state. So, grasp of an instance of ‘Actually p’ will require acquaintance with a world state (an object or a property, depending on one’s theory), even though the semantic content of “actually” on that occasion will not be just to contribute that world state, but rather a higher type operator. If so, the desired Russellian links between semantic categories and de re requirements will fail, and Fara’s response along with it.

In his 2015 paper, “Acquaintance, Singular Thought, and Propositional Constituency”, Jeffrey King quite vigorously challenges the arguments in Armstrong and Stanley (2011), in effect providing a defense of Fara’s 2008 response to the epistemic objection. Let’s consider King’s responses to both of the previous points.

Following our 2011 exposition, let’s use “singular thought” for the epistemic category and “singular proposition” for the metaphysical one. Our argument is that there are singular thoughts whose Russellian contents are not singular propositions. If there are good semantic reasons to accept Montague’s semantics for proper names, then the proposition expressed by “Jason Stanley is tired” would be an example. Sentences containing “actually” are another example (though as King rightly points out here, what is at issue on most theories of possible worlds would be epistemic acquaintance requirements about properties; this point is however not dialectically relevant).

In his response to our first point, King grants for the sake of argument that Montague is right about names, and argues that it would still not follow that grasp of the propositions
expressed by sentences containing proper names would require having singular thoughts. King runs through some examples of functions, and argues in these cases that grasp of the function is possible just by knowing some of its values for some arguments. He then argues, mutatis mutandis, that grasp of functions from properties to truth-values, e.g. the Montagovian semantic value of “Jason Stanley”, could be grasped in a similar way, just by being told some of the values of the this function for some arguments (e.g. it takes the property of being overwhelmed to the true, the property of being from Syracuse, NY to the true, and the property of being unflappable to the false). So no acquaintance with Jason would be required to grasp this proposition and hence no singular thought.

King’s argument is question begging. The assumption that all entities of the same model-theoretical type correspond to a uniform epistemic category, e.g. de dicto thought or de re thought, is precisely what is at issue. King simply assumes this thesis in responding to our argument.

Moreover, his response reveals a failure to understand the dialectic at issue. It is a common assumption to all parties that grasp of ordinary proper names imposes an acquaintance requirement. Armstrong and I argue that there could be non-epistemic, semantic grounds that would lead us to accept Montague’s theory of proper names as a semantic theory. In other words, we are saying it is (epistemically) possible to adopt the Montague semantics purely on semantic grounds. The possibility we envisage is precisely one in which the semantics is Montagovian, but the epistemology is de re. We are in other words claiming that it is possible to imagine grounds to reject the isomorphism between semantic categories and epistemic ones. In other words, it is possible to imagine two semantic values of the same type being associated with different epistemic categories. King claims to grant our assumption, namely that one can accept Montague’s theory of proper names on purely semantic grounds. But then he turns around and employs the inconsistent assumption, the one at issue in the debate, that there is an isomorphism between semantic categories and epistemic ones. So his argument is not coherent.

King begins his discussion by complaining that we do not defend the possibility we say is conceivable. We just say it is possible to conceive of purely semantic reasons to accept Montague’s theory of proper names, while retaining the assumption that grasp of ordinary proper names requires acquaintance with the objects they name. In contrast the criticisms he goes on to give, this point is correct. King should have stopped here and said he rejects the epistemic possibility we describe. This then would be a stand-off.

Let’s now turn to King’s second argument, concerning our discussion of “actually” in the semantics of philosopher English. There is much that is not dialectically central in King’s response. The ultimate point of Armstrong and Stanley (2011) is to challenge the standard Russellian assumption that there is a correspondence between semantic categories and epistemic requirements. King spends a great many pages arguing that possible worlds are properties and not objects, according to the theorists we criticize. But this is irrelevant. We argue that whatever possible worlds are, the semantic content of an occurrence of “actually” is not simply a possible world, but some more complex model theoretic type. Our aim is to show that grasp of that more complex model theoretic type
nevertheless requires acquaintance with the actual world state. So let’s turn to the part of King’s discussion that is dialectically relevant.

Here is King’s argument that grasp of a proposition containing the denotation of an occurrence of “actually”, which is a function of the actual world state on his semantics (as it should be on any semantics), nevertheless does not require grasp of the actual world state. “Ac@” denotes the semantic value of an occurrence of “actually” relative to a context c and a world of that context @; this semantic value varies as a function of @. King takes “Ac@”, that is, the Kaplanian character of “actually” given the inputs of a context c and a context world @, to be a function such that for any proposition intension (function from worlds to truth-values) I, Ac@(I) = T iff I(@) = T. He then writes:

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

King’s argument is perplexing. He assumes that the conditions for grasping what is expressed by an occurrence of “actually” at a context world w just involves grasping a function that maps proposition intensions that are true to true and the others to false. In other words, it is sufficient to grasp the semantic content of an occurrence of “actually” at a context c just to grasp the function expressed by the univocal truth-predicate, and nothing about c-w, the world of the context. But these epistemic requirements on grasping the semantic content of an occurrence of “actually” are far too weak. Nothing licenses King’s assumptions that grasp of the semantic content of “actually” on an occasion is this epistemically cost free. But more can be said that just that King’s claim about the epistemic requirements on acquaintance here are simply stipulated, rather than argued for.

Consider the following sentences, involving philosophers’ English, and the philosophers’ English words, “actual” and “actually”:

(1) I didn’t eat lunch today. But had I eaten lunch today, I still would have believed that actually, it is nighttime.

(2) Had I met her at a different time of my life, I would still have deeply admired my actual partner.

(3) Had I met her at a different time of my life, I would still have believed that my actual
partner is a remarkable person.

My judgments about all three of (1) – (3) is that, in philosophers’ English, they are false. (1) is false because had things been different, I would have had a thought about the actual situation at all; similarly for (2) and (3). But King’s epistemic requirements on grasp of “actually” contents are so weak that they do not generate these judgments. Given King’s epistemic requirements, I don’t see why all of the belief attributions in (1) – (3) aren’t true. This is just not an epistemology for philosophers’ English.

There is no doubt more to say about King’s argument, but I think I have said enough to shed doubt on his claims about the epistemic requirements for grasping the contents of occurrences of “actually”. Reflection on (1) – (3) suggest they are more demanding, and more demanding precisely because such grasp requires acquaintance with the actual world state.

I have now defended the epistemic objection to Fara’s view from all of the responses that have been proffered. It is still an open question whether her sweeping interest-relative view faces such an objection. However, pursuing responses and counter-responses to the epistemic objection will take us far to far afield of our purpose today. But no such concern arises for interest-relativism about knowledge, because grasping the proposition expressed by typical attributions of knowledge to specific persons does require the capacity to have a singular thought about the person on whose interests the knowledge claim partially depends, viz. the subject of the attribution.

(iv) Modal objections to interest-relative views

Fara focuses her 2008 paper on responding to the epistemic objection to her view. But not every interest-relative view faces even the risk of analogous problems; indeed this kind of worry seems to arise for reasons specific to interest-relative theories of vagueness. Since our aim is to address worries that arise generally for interest-relative views. So, the more important point for our purposes is Fara’s response to the modal objection, because parallel modal objections will arise for any interest-relative view, or rather any interest-relative view of any interest. This is because interest-relative views postulate non-obvious relativity to human interests. Modal objections arise to interest-relative views as a means to test the dependency claims to which such views are committed. The objector rejects the interest-relativity claim of the given domain, because it is inconsistent with our intuitions about counterfactuals that connect changes in interests to changes in facts about that domain.

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

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

Fara provides some interesting data supporting her claim, which we can discuss (the examples require some background context), such as the following kind of case:

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

I’m not sure I find the example very compelling. More seriously, I didn’t understand how the proposed rigidification on interests was supposed work. And finally, and perhaps most seriously, I am concerned about the fact that however the rigidification mechanism works, it must be associated with interest-relative words such as “surprising”.

One motivation for interest-relativity, present both in the literature in epistemology and in Fara’s work on vagueness, is that it evades the semantic commitments of contextualist views about the domain. But the view that there is a special mechanism that rigidifies interests and allows them to be relevant for the truth-conditions of modal claims (even those involving worlds in which the interests do not exist) relinquishes what I regard to be a great virtue of the view, which is that there is no special semantics for interest-relativity. Interest-relativity is a metaphysical hypothesis about certain properties and relations, rather than a semantic hypothesis, as contextualism is. But if we require special treatment of expressions that express interest-relative properties when they are embedded in counterfactuals, the view begins to look like it too involves special semantic commitments. Furthermore, these commitments more exotic than the ones incurred by the contextualists.

I am furthermore concerned that the proposal does not extend to the full range of problem cases. The problems do not just arise with modality, but also with tense. Here one could mimic modal rigidity by anchoring interests to the present time for certain examples. But I do not see how the strategy would generalize to a case like:

(2) When there were no people, Mount Everest was not tall, but by 1900, Mount Everest was tall.

Here, the two occurrences of “tall” fall within the scope of different temporal modifiers. It’s not clear how to “rigidify” at all, even temporally. For example, the most straightforward way would be to claim that the interests are the contextually salient ones. But this transforms the thesis into contextualism. So it is not clear why Fara’s view does not predict the truth of (2).

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

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

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

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

Let’s suppose that interests were something that were kept fix in counterfactual evaluation. I am here not thinking of the more baroque proposal that some expression inside the scope of the counterfactual is subject to a rigidifying operation. I am rather thinking of a proposal according to which the similarity relation for the counterfactual may only connect to worlds in which, where possible, the interests of relevant parties were the same. For obvious reasons, Fara does not suggest this simpler option; the counterfactuals that pose problems for her view involve the consideration of worlds with no interests. But there are no correspondingly problematic counterfactuals for the interest-relative about knowledge. So it is an option worth exploring in this case.

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

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

On the face of it, the interest-relativity of knowledge predicts that (4) is true. If these judgments about such counterfactuals are robust, then our counterfactual judgments do
not pick up on the interest-relative metaphysics postulated by the thesis of interest-relative relativity of knowledge.3

For the sake of simplicity, let’s consider a Stalnaker selection function semantics for counterfactuals. The proposal I just suggested, inspired by Fara’s 2008 strategy (but distinct from her implementation of it), is to have the selection function take the antecedent world, and yield a consequent world in which Hannah’s interests are the same. In other words, counterfactual evaluation would not shift interests of relevant parties. Cases such as (4) involve counterfactuals the antecedents of which are attempts to shift interests. But given the stipulation about the selection function, it would fail to do so. Judgments about (4) would be judgments about possible situations in which Hannah had a check coming, but it didn’t affect her practical interests. The proposed meta-semantic claim (the proposed hypothesis about the choice of selection function) would render the correct intuitive judgment in cases such as (4), namely it would be false. As in the case of Fara’s proposed strategy, it would not follow that the proposition that is in the consequent of the counterfactual lacks an interest-relative metaphysics.

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

(5) If I wasn’t interested in going to the park, I would have told you so.

And of course we need a selection function that selects antecedent worlds with different interests to generate the right results here. So the suggestion could not be that no selection function is responsive to changes in interests. There would have to be some special pleading for a non-standard selection function for examples such as (4), and that would have to be motivated.

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

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

3 In his 2009 paper in PPR, “Contextualism, Subject-Sensitive Invariantism, and the Interaction of ‘Knowledge’ Ascriptions with Modal and Temporal Embeddings”, Michael Blome-Tillmann covers this terrain in admirable detail.
(2) Hannah didn’t know on Thursday that the bank would be open on Saturday, but she did know on Friday.

No solution specific to the counterfactual construction can help here. Nor is it clear that even temporal rigidification on “know” would help, because it is not clear what interests on which one should rigidify, the interests on Thursday or the interests on Friday.⁴

I am a bit dubious that there is a semantic solution to these problems. Fara concludes the 2008 paper by repudiating a more direct, non-modal version of the objection to her interest-relative metaphysics. The objection she considers is just an incredulous stare at the view that ordinary propositions, such as the proposition that Mt. Everest is tall, can only be true in worlds with interests. This objection is just a way of making public one’s commitment to the subject-independence of ordinary propositions, a way of making public a commitment to a form of metaphysical realism that Fara’s theory explicitly repudiates. Fara is right to say that this is just a “flat-out denial” of her view.

I have canvassed various interest-relative accounts of problematic counterfactuals such as (2), and found them wanting. But I am not certain it is a serious concern. I agree with Fara that flat-out denials are not arguments. I have also come to think that many flat out denials are masked as intuitions about cases. We should be no more respectful of them presented this way. Nevertheless, I am also not happy to dismiss the incredulous stare. What the defender of any surprising interest-relative account of a domain must ultimately provide is some account of why the correct metaphysics seems so surprising.

Since every view has costs, it may just be that there is no avoiding tallying them up and comparing. Contextualism is committed to the thesis that we are in some sense unaware of important semantic features of our language (the thesis with the unfortunate ableist name of “semantic blindness”). The advocate of the interest-relativity of knowledge has a similar explanatory burden, in this case explaining our reluctance to recognize the epistemic role interests play, the force of the intuition of epistemic purity. My vague gesture at such an account would appeal to our clear sense of the authority of knowledge, together with a mistaken ideology that the law, to be legitimately authoritative, must be fully impartial. The interest-relativity of knowledge is thus viscerally felt to conflict with its authority. Many conclude from this conflict that knowledge is not interest-relative. I am drawn in other direction, to reject the connection between authority and impartiality. Authority does not need impartiality for its legitimacy.

⁴ Of course, if one rigidified on the speaker’s interests, that is, the interests of the knowledge attributors, the view would, again, collapse into contextualism.