In *Bamboozled by our own words*, Keith DeRose gives a defence of epistemological contextualism, the position that the semantic content of the word ‘know’ varies with the context in which it is uttered. This defence is made by attempting to dismiss four different objections to contextualism. In this paper I will present and evaluate DeRose’s defence.

The theory of epistemological contextualism interests philosophers of language because, if proven to be true, it also proves the position known as linguistic contextualism. This position claims that the semantic content of many words (that is: more words than just the basic indexicals) vary with the context in which they are uttered. If the word ‘know’ does, this would prove linguistic contextualism to be true.

In section I, I present the first two objections to contextualism DeRose outlines, together with his answers to them. In section II, I present the objection from so-called belief reports, and argue that DeRose’s reply fails. In section III I will look at the concept of single scoreboard semantics, and argue that the concept is implausible.

I will not discuss the fourth objection, Schiffer’s objection to contextualist solutions to skepticism. I believe that this objection does not constitute an attack on contextualism as such, like the other objections do. Although an evaluation of DeRose’s defence certainly would be interesting, it falls outside the scope of this article.

I The objections from truth-value confusion

The first two objections stem from our intuitions of what is true and false concerning the word ‘know’. DeRose resolve them in much the same way. There are important differences between the reasons why DeRose dismiss the objections, but they share one common feature: they are more sophisticated than mere appeal to semantic blindness. Semantic blindness is the position that language-users are unaware of some or all of the semantic content they are expressing.

In both of the objections from truth-value differences, we meet two subjects ($S_H$ and $S_L$), who are in two different contexts. $S_H$ is in $H$, where the epistemic standards are high. Such high standards mean that the amount of evidence needed to ‘know’ some proposition is large. $S_L$ is in $L$, where it is easier to claim knowledge about a proposition. Then both utter a sentence:

(1)  $S_L$: I know that $p$

(2)  $S_H$: $S_L$ does not know that $p$

The first objection is that from judgements of comparative content. There seems to be a contradiction between (1) and (2). But contextualism is (naively) understood to
claim that $S_H$’s ‘know’ has a different semantic content than $S_L$’s. But then both $S_H$ 
and $S_L$ could be right in saying what they are saying, and the contradiction disappears.
This is a problem to contextualism because it is unintuitive. It seems to suggest that 
language users who see a contradiction here do not know that the word ‘know’ is 
context-sensitive—they are blind to the semantics of the words they use. (DeRose 
2005a, p. 2)

DeRose is eager to avoid semantic blindness, and begins by noting that the 
contextualist can maintain that there is a contradiction. In DeRose’s contextualism, 
there is a single (or common) scoreboard of semantics for all participants in a 
discussion. This means that in a discussion, ‘know’ can only have one semantic content. 
The claims do contradict each other, and the contextualist is spared from the 
embarrassment of semantic blindness. But who is right, and who is wrong? It seems to 
depend on how the single scoreboard works. I will return to that in section III, but I 
note here that DeRose claims that neither of the claims are true. This seems to call for 
a new defence against another unintuitive result.

But there is no such contradiction, claims DeRose, unless they are actively engaging 
each other in an argument. If they are not, they are making compatible claims because 
the semantic content of ‘know’ differs between the two contexts, and they have their 
own scoreboard. And in this case, our intuition that they are contradicting each other is 
weaker. (DeRose 2005a, p. 4)

So, when $S_L$ and $S_H$ are in truly different contexts and conversations, and assert 
some surface-contradictory claims about knowledge (like (1) and (2)), they are not 
contradicting each other. DeRose is very careful to stress that the standards of $H$ are 
not necessarily those of philosophical epistemology, but heightened due to some 
practical reason, for instance a police investigation. Nevertheless, when the standards 
are significantly different, and $S_L$ will claim to know a lot more than $S_H$ will. In this 
situation, they are both correct, and according to DeRose our intuition of a 
contradiction is weaker than the objection presumes.

The latter part of DeRose’s argument is as convincing as the original objection was. 
They both appeal to our intuition, and I think DeRose manages to show that our 
intuition is not as clear-cut as the objection states. The first part of the argument, on 
the other hand, rests entirely on the theory of single scoreboard semantics. I will return 
to this in section III.

The second objection is that from metalinguistic claims. We are still using our 
previous example with utterances (1) and (2). The objection is then based on the
observation that our subjects would be willing to state the following:

(3) \(S_L: \) (2) is false

(4) \(S_H: \) (1) is false

This is a problem for contextualism, because according to contextualism, both (3) and (4) are wrong, and it seems unlikely that language works in a way that makes people utter falsehoods routinely. (DeRose 2005a, p. 8)

As in the case with the comparative judgement, DeRose stresses that the intuition of a problem only seems to arise when considering the wrong cases; the cases where \(S_H\) and \(S_L\) are arguing with each other. Therefore, we primarily look at those cases.

Here we need not introduce single scoreboard semantics: Contextualism says exactly that \(S_L\) is allowed to assert his claim (1) without expressing a falsehood, because ‘know’ is context-sensitive. But yet the intuition is strong that \(S_H\) could say (4). Given contextualism, \(S_H\) would be wrong when asserting (4), yet it seems to be likely that \(S_H\) would say it. Does this mean that people in general do not know what they say, and can we make sense of a language where rules of truth exist independently of usage?

The first two objections share much of the same essential problem. With a certain interpretation of contextualism (a naïve one, maybe), the rules of the language differ demonstrably from the rules the language-users seem to subscribe to. DeRose attempts to show that this is not true in every case, but he admits that the case of disagreement in a conversation has this problem. On the other hand, invariantism leads to the same problems the other way around.

DeRose’s defence is offensive on this objection. He shows how also invariantism must admit some ‘semantic blindness’ in other cases involving metalinguistic claims, and that language-users’ intuitions are unclear on matters involving this kind of metalinguistic claims. Therefore, this is not a problem for contextualism alone. There is something else than contextualism or invariantism that causes this confusion. I believe DeRose’s argument is sound on this matter, unless someone can provide an epistemological theory which does not share these problems.

II Belief reports

The third objection is the objection from belief reports. The objection states that if a certain schema of disquotation is correct, it is a problem for contextualism because it shows how the verb ‘know’ can be used across different contexts, and therefore across different epistemological standards.
The particular schema is from John Hawthorne (Hawthorne 2004, p. 101), and is known as the disquotational schema of ‘know’ (DSK, for short). DeRose has modified the formulation of the schema slightly, and the modification makes its application slightly simpler to use in our discussion. DeRose’s schema is formulated like this:¹

If a speaker $S_1$ sincerely utters a sentence of the form ‘$A$ knows that $p$’, and the sentence in the that-clause means that $p$, and ‘$A$’ is a name or an indexical that refers to $a$, then a speaker $S_2$, also using ‘$A$’ to refer to $a$ and using the that-clause to mean that $p$, can truthfully state that $S_1$ “believes that $A$ knows that $p$”.

(DeRose 2005a, p. 10)

Although DeRose’s modified formulation of the principle is meant to make the consequent meta-linguistic, he fails to do so correctly. The last part of the last period should read “…, can truthfully state that ‘$S_1$ believes that $A$ knows that $p$’”.

The problem to contextualism appears when $S_1$ and $S_2$ are in different contexts, and those contexts assign different semantic values to ‘know’. If contextualism is correct, there are cases where $S_2$ would not be truthful when stating that $S_1$ believes that $A$ knows that $p$, even after hearing $S_1$ utter ‘$A$ knows that $p$’. $S_2$ can only state the following: “$S_1$ said ‘$A$ knows that $p$’”. But if the DSK is correct, there are no such cases. Therefore, contextualism must be wrong.

This objection rests entirely on the correctness of the disquotational schema, and DeRose presents an argument for its incorrectness. His argument is an example where we apparently would not disquote in the way the schema allows us to.²

The example has two contexts, a bar (LOW) and a police interview (HIGH). A person ($S_2$) overhears another person ($S_1$) making some claim in the bar. The claim has the form of $S_1$ knows that $p_1$, for instance “I know that Jim was at the office today”. Immediately afterwards, $S_2$ is interviewed by the police, who explain that a serious crime has been committed and then ask whether $S_1$ knows where Jim was today.

If the disquotational schema is correct, $S_2$ will always truthfully be able to report that $S_1$ believes that she knows that Jim was at the office. But DeRose argues that the amount of evidence needed to claim knowledge in LOW is very different from that in HIGH. For instance, DeRose says $S_1$ would say, while in LOW, that she knows Jim was at the office if the receptionist told her and she has seen his hat hanging in the hall. But $S_2$ wouldn’t tell the police that $S_1$ believes that she knows Jim was at the office.

¹I have modified the formatting in this citation by replacing underlined text with italicised and using subscripts and italicised text for variables.

²The word ‘would’ is of great importance here. It seems too strict to say that we ‘could not’ disquote (because we can do so just to prove it). Yet ‘would’ might be too sloppy. Another possibility is that we would not be correct if we disquote in the way the schema allows us, but this seems to lead attention away from the point DeRose is trying to make, because he appeals to our intuition of what would be ‘natural’ for the actors in our story.
based on this evidence. Because of this, the disquotational schema is incorrect and does not constitute a real objection to contextualism. Furthermore, DeRose suggests that the schema is used only when the epistemological standards are appropriately similar. Presumably it also applies when $S_2$ has a lower standard than $S_1$, but not the other way.

But it isn’t clear that $S_1$ actually would claim that she knows. At least my intuition is unclear on the matter. In DeRose’s example $S_1$ is arguing that she knows because of a $\$2$ bet. But there is a difference between saying that she knows and doing so truthfully: she might secretly have her doubts, and only say that she knows to win the bet. In fact, if she is asked “how do you know that?”, she could easily answer something like “well, I don’t actually know, but the receptionist told me”, or a shortcut like “the receptionist told me”. If that is the case, ‘know’ works more like a rhetorical shortcut (and way to win the bet) than actually expressing any knowledge-relation in $S_1$. Low has artificially low standards in this example, and DeRose’s claim that such a context exists seems dubious. A properly designed example should let its actors express essentially truthful statements about their mental states, and not position them in places where lies and rhetorical tricks are abundant.

A defender of the disquotational schema can simply point to the word ‘sincerely’ in the schema, and claim that DeRose has not shown it to be the case that we would not disquote if $S_1$ is sincere. By stressing this point, we are reducing the usability of the schema. How can $S_2$ know whether $S_1$ is sincere? A potential amendment to the schema could be to change $S_2$’s potential statement to: “To the degree that $S_1$ was sincere in saying so, $S_1$ believes that A knows that $p$”. Note that this amendment is not due to some inconsistency in the original schema, only that it requires the statement to be sincere. When this cannot be guaranteed, $S_2$ must make a disclaimer. And then it seems highly likely that $S_2$ will tell the police exactly what the disquotational schema allows her: “To the degree that $S_1$ was sincere in saying so, she believes that she knows Jim was in the office”. The reason $S_2$ won’t say anything about $S_1$’s beliefs in DeRose’s example is due to the very fact that she ($S_2$) doesn’t know that $S_1$ was sincere when she talked at the pub. But that is something altogether different from not disquoting because of the difference in epistemological standard. Maybe $S_2$ suspects that $S_1$ was involved as well, and telling the story on the pub to give Jim an alibi? $S_2$ might even know that $S_1$ is known to tell small lies from time to time? I believe it is this kind of uncertainty about sincerity that makes our intuition unclear in the example, not the difference in context.

Could we construct an example of a similar kind, that avoids the problems of insincerity? DeRose says that “the best cases for this general principle, DSK, are ones where the contextualist will think there is a marked difference in standards” (DeRose
2005a, p. 11). DeRose is also wary of using test cases where one of the actors is in a context with very tough standards, like an epistemological discussion. “It makes the relevant pro-contextualist intuitions stronger and more stable if the elevated epistemic standards in HIGH are tied to a pressing and very practical concern…” (DeRose 2005b, p. 176). Therefore, we opt for Cohen’s airport example. This is used by Cohen and DeRose elsewhere.³

Mary and John are at the L.A. airport contemplating taking a certain flight to New York. They want to know whether the flight has a layover in Chicago. They overhear someone ask a passenger Smith if he knows whether the flight stops in Chicago. Smith looks at the flight itinerary he got from the travel agent and responds, “Yes I know—it does stop in Chicago.” It turns out that Mary and John have a very important business contact they have to make at the Chicago airport. Mary says, “How reliable is that itinerary? It could contain a misprint. They could have changed the schedule at the last minute.” Mary and John agree that Smith doesn’t really know that the plane will stop in Chicago. They decide to check with the airline agent. (Cohen 1999, p. 58)

In this example, Smith is in a different context than Mary and John. Mary and John are in HIGH, and Smith is in LOW. To illustrate an example of the disquotational schema, we need some further dialogue. Let’s call the person who asks Smith the question Keith. Keith is our S₁. Mary or John plays S₂, and Smith is A. Would Mary say that “Keith believes that Smith knows that the flight stops in Chicago”? I think the answer is fairly clear: she would. This kind of example provides no attack on the schema, and the objection to contextualism stands.

I have shown that DeRose’s refutation of the belief report argument against contextualism is at best inconclusive. Nevertheless, there seems to be something strange about the concept of disquotation. It seems to force the epistemological standards of the disquotee onto the disquoter. I am not convinced that the DSK is correct, although DeRose’s objection to it does not prove it wrong.

This belief report argument reflects a general problem of contextualism about knowledge. Given contextualism, it seems to be impossible for two people to have knowledge about each others knowledge without being in the same context. Even if X knows p in context C₁, and Y knows p in context C₂, it is not possible for Z to say that “both X and Y know p”. There is apparently no way to compare knowledge between contexts, and this is at odds with the way we normally use the concept of knowledge.

³Although DeRose has re-written it to a discussion on the opening hours of a bank. I find this peculiar, because the intuition of not knowing in HIGH is significantly weaker in DeRose’s example, due to the relative trustworthiness of a bank.
III  Single scoreboard semantics

If I am correct in asserting that the DeRose’s defence of contextualism rests on his theory of single scoreboard semantics, it is interesting to look at this premise as well. In this section, I argue that the concept of single scoreboard semantics is dubious and far from proven to be plausible. If this is the case, DeRose’s defence of contextualism is equally weak.

In *Single Scoreboard Semantics* (DeRose 2004), DeRose presents his theory of score-keeping in a conversation. The metaphor of score-keeping is adapted from Lewis (Lewis 1979), but there seems to be important differences between DeRose’s and Lewis’s scoreboards. In an interesting note in *Single Scoreboard Semantics*, DeRose seems to suggest that his scoreboard exists outside of the minds of the speakers:

> Here my use of the metaphor “scoreboard” differs from Lewis’s. For Lewis, there is a scoreboard “in the head” of each of these participants, and what the score is can be a function in part of what all these different scoreboards say the score is. As I use “scoreboard” here, it by definition gives the right score. (DeRose 2004, p. 19)

Even though DeRose declares his use of “scoreboard” to be a metaphor, it seems unclear what this is a metaphor for. In Lewis’s case, it is fairly obvious that the scoreboard is a metaphor for the participants’ internal states of mind. In DeRose’s case, we get to know that it by definition gives the right ‘score’—which is the correct tally of semantic content for the sentences in a conversation. It is also clear that DeRose’s contextualism requires this metaphor to be sound, and for a metaphor to be sound it must refer to something that actually exists. The question then becomes what the metaphor of a single, common scoreboard refers to in the context of a conversation.

It is tempting to begin with Lewis’s scoreboards. A single, common scoreboard could possibly be shown to be a metaphor for a set of individual scoreboards + a set of rules or functions governing the combination of these scoreboards. If these rules or functions are constructed the right way, it could be possible to reduce the metaphor into mental states, and therefore reduce DeRose’s scoreboard to Lewis’s scoreboards. But DeRose explicitly obstructs this straightforward manner of reduction, and I will therefore not attempt to perform it. We must look elsewhere.

Another attempt could be a metaphysical one. We could postulate the actual existence of a “scoreboard”—a real entity that somehow keeps track of the semantic content of utterances in conversations. Whether participants in the conversation are allowed to tap into this entity to get an update on the score is not important. This would obviously solve DeRose’s problem, but seems to be grossly implausible. Such an entity has never been observed, and based on all the rest of our knowledge of the world
it seems unlikely that we will discover it soon. Yet, one such entity could be God, and if DeRose is willing to make that claim, we would have to leave the matter there.

The most forgiving interpretation is that DeRose objects to Lewis's claim that each participant has a scoreboard, period. Therefore, he constructs his metaphor of a common scoreboard, which is meant to be a metaphor of the linguistic practice employed by the participants. In other words, the single scoreboard is a set of inference rules, functions and/or just conventions used to infer the semantic content from what was said. This gives the right score—in other words the correct semantic content—by definition, simply because the definition of semantic content is what the participants’ practice rules it to be.

If this interpretation is correct, it seems to be completely without explanatory power. Taken together with DeRose's argument that the semantic content of utterances made by participants in the same conversation is fixed through the use of the same semantic scoreboard, this constitutes a completely trivial claim. Inserting our interpretation into the argument gives us "the semantic content of sentences made by participants in the same conversation is fixed through the use of the inference rules, functions or conventions used to infer the semantic content from what was said". This is probably true, but it doesn’t provide us with much of a defence of contextualism.

The appeal of the single scoreboard seems to be a lot stronger when kept as a metaphor instead of being explained fully, in much the same way as the metaphor of a "nervous stock market" is apparently stronger than its expansion: "nervous stock brokers".

Single scoreboard semantics, instead of being proven through its existence, is being proven through its effects. To infer from effect to cause leaves one at risk of epiphenomenalism. The effects of DeRose’s single scoreboard might well be explained otherwise: for instance by discarding contextualism as such. If only indexicals are context-sensitive, there seems to be little need for a scoreboard to settle semantic value.

In this article, I have shown how DeRose’s defence of contextualism leaves new questions to be answered. In the first objection (that from judgements of comparative content), DeRose’s defence rests on the notion of single scoreboard semantics, which I argue is a less than plausible position. In the second objection, DeRose argues that contextualism is only struck by this objection if invariantism is, and therefore it constitutes no argument against contextualism only. In the matter of the objections from belief reports, I have shown how DeRose's defence fails to dismiss the disquotational schema. As far as I'm concerned, two out of three objections to contextualism still stand.
References


