

# A Defense of the Argument from Ignorance

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The purpose of this essay is to take up a defense of the skeptical Argument from Ignorance, hereafter AFI, against the critique of Keith DeRose in his article “Solving the Skeptical Problem.” AFI is an important argument from a skeptical viewpoint that posits that knowledge is, at best, difficult to demonstrate; at worst, knowledge cannot be obtained. DeRose sought to demonstrate that AFI is persuasive, why it is persuasive, and yet how it can be overcome. It is my intention to demonstrate that AFI withstands DeRose’s criticisms. I will provide a brief background on AFI, including Peter Unger’s original conception of AFI prior to any further considerations as well as furnish background information on various related terms and ideas. Following my introduction to and explanation of AFI, I will briefly summarize several arguments that DeRose considers from Lewis and Nozick, and then turn my focus on DeRose’ own arguments. Next, I will turn to a variety of considerations which I will use to attempt to refute DeRose’s solution followed by an analysis of each refutation. Finally, I’ll look at invariantism and the warranted assertability maneuver and how they relate to the raising and lowering of standards of knowledge.

To begin, AFI is an argument that claims that a person S cannot have knowledge of a proposition unless S can know that skeptical hypotheses do not obtain. This means that S would know that the skeptical hypothesis in question is false. For example, if a skeptical hypothesis were stated as S being an otherwise bodiless brain in a vat (BIV), then knowing that the skeptical hypothesis does not obtain means that S knows that she is not an otherwise bodiless BIV. Failing to know that skeptical hypotheses do not obtain

causes person S to fail to have knowledge of the proposition in question. Peter Unger, in his book *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism*, outlines AFI as what he calls the classical skeptical argument. His premises are as follows:

1. In respect of anything which might be known or believed (about the external world), say, that  $p$ , if someone knows that  $p$ , then, on the assumption of reasoning, the person can or could know, first, that he at least believes that  $p$  and, furthermore, that there is no evil scientist, a being other than himself, who is, by means of electrodes, deceiving him into falsely believing that  $p$ , and here finally, that his own experiences and mental states are not randomly related to any external things there may be but of such a nature that he falsely believes that  $p$ .<sup>1</sup>
2. In respect of anything which might be known or believed about the external world, say, that  $p$ , no one can or could know, first, that he at least believes that  $p$  and, furthermore, that there is no evil scientist, a being other than himself, who is, by means of electrodes, deceiving him into falsely believing that  $p$  and, here finally, that his own experiences and mental states are not only randomly related to any external thing there may be but of such a nature that he falsely believes that  $p$ , not even on the assumption of reasoning.<sup>2</sup>

Unger's two premises are quite lengthy, but have been succinctly pared down to their bare necessities by DeRose as:

1. S doesn't know that not-H.

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<sup>1</sup> Unger "A Case For Scepticism", pg 20.

<sup>2</sup> Unger "A Case For Scepticism", pg 21.

2. If S doesn't know that not-H, then S doesn't know that P.<sup>34</sup>

Unger concludes that, therefore, that no one can ever know P, and believes he has demonstrated that there is no knowledge:

3. In respect of anything which might be known or believed about the external world, say, that  $p$ , no one ever knows  $p$ .<sup>5</sup>

Once again, DeRose has sufficiently adapted this for the conclusion to the AFI as:

3. Therefore, S doesn't know that P.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to note that S, P, and H are all variables with only minor limitations. S must always represent a person, P always represents some proposition for knowledge, and H represents a skeptical hypothesis that is relevant to the proposition P. In this case, both Unger and DeRose are referring to the skeptical hypothesis that S is an otherwise bodiless brain in a vat being manipulated by an evil scientist by means of direct stimulation of the brain using electrodes, but the skeptical hypothesis H can be just as varied as P.

AFI has been used in different forms, as well. Nozick will use the same basic principle, but stated in a slightly different way that appears to show that knowledge is closed under known logical implication. Knowledge being closed under known logical implication consists of the idea that for S to know any proposition P, S must know that any logical implications of P – any skeptical hypothesis that is relevant to P – does not obtain. Failing to know that these logical implications of P do not obtain would lead to

<sup>3</sup> DeRose “Solving the Skeptical Problem”, pg 1.

<sup>4</sup> I should note here that Unger uses ‘ $p$ ’ to indicate the particular in question while DeRose uses ‘O’. For the sake of clarity, I have modified DeRose’s O as P. P stands for proposition, and I simply find it easier to work with P.

<sup>5</sup> Unger “A Case For Scepticism”, pg 21.

<sup>6</sup> DeRose “Solving the Skeptical Problem”, pg 1.

the concept of knowledge being closed to S. AFI can be restated so as to claim that knowledge is closed under known logical implication as:

1. If S knows P, then S knows not-H.
2. But, S doesn't know not-H.
3. Therefore, S doesn't know P.

Though stated in a slightly different manner, the outcome remains the same, with P being knowledge that appears to be unattainable so long as S is incapable of knowing not-H, where not-H is knowledge that the skeptical hypothesis doesn't obtain.

These variables can be readily substituted with any variety of skeptical hypotheses or knowledge claims such that Unger's more extensive claim that there is no knowledge, appears to be true. This is because for any proposition P, a skeptic can craft a relevant skeptical hypothesis so that for any claim to know S will not be in a position to overcome the skeptical hypothesis. DeRose offers the following examples to demonstrate the universality of AFI:

1. If S knows that he is now seeing zebras in the zebra cage at the zoo, then S knows that the animals that he is now observing are not cleverly painted mules.
2. But, S doesn't know that the animals that he is now observing are not cleverly painted mules.
3. Therefore S doesn't know that the animals that he is now observing are zebras.<sup>7</sup>

Another example that DeRose offers is:

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<sup>7</sup> DeRose "Solving the Skeptical Problem", pg. 11.

1. If I know that I have two hands, then I know that I'm not an otherwise  
bodiless brain in a vat (which would lack hands).
2. But, I don't know that I'm not an otherwise bodiless brain in a vat.
3. Therefore, I don't know that I have two hands.

It is easily seen how this argument can be readily adapted to any knowledge claim to demonstrate that there can be no knowledge of P. It is this adaptability to almost any knowledge claim that makes AFI such an intriguing problem, and why Nozick and DeRose have taken up varied positions against it.

DeRose takes up his critique of AFI from there. Rightfully, he points out the persuasiveness of AFI, as each individual premise appears to be true and plausible, but only the negation of the conclusion appears plausible. However, this represents a significant problem as an argument with all true and plausible premises cannot yield an implausible conclusion. DeRose sets about a task of explaining, then, why both of these premises seem plausible, why the conclusion seems implausible, and reconciling how it is that this skeptical hypothesis seems so alluring, if only initially.

When looking at the reasons that AFI is persuasive, DeRose wants to identify how the skeptic is able to make even the most ordinary claims to knowledge appear to cease to be knowledge. In doing so, DeRose looks at several possible existing solutions. The first existing solution that he considers is Lewis' contextualist argument involving the Rule of Accommodation. The Rule of Accommodation specifies that:

When a statement is made containing such a term (a context-sensitive term), then – ceteris paribus<sup>8</sup> and within certain limits – the conversational score tends to change, if need be, so as to make that statement true.<sup>9</sup>

Whenever the standard in place immediately prior to a statement is manipulated in order to make a statement true, and given ceteris paribus, then the Rule of Accommodation has been invoked. DeRose offers Dretske's painted mules example to illustrate this point. If, at a the zebra cage at a zoo, S sees what appear to be zebras, then the standard for knowing that these are zebras are that S is at a zoo with a clearly marked cage for zebras. The skeptical hypothesis, in this case, is that the animals are actually cleverly painted mules. But, DeRose claims that the skeptical hypothesis is using the Rule of Accommodation to raise the standard of knowledge beyond a level at which he and the average person would count as knowing. This is because one would have no reason to expect a zoo to place animals other than zebras in a cage clearly marked for zebras. Despite this agreement with the Rule of Accommodation, DeRose does not believe that the rule will explain the persuasiveness of AFI. While DeRose rejects the Rule of Accommodation as a complete explanation for AFI, this rule, as well as other ideas that he will reject as incomplete, are used to create his final solution.

After dismissing the Rule of Accommodation as a complete solution, DeRose also quickly explains, and then dismisses relevant alternatives. As opposed to the Rule of Accommodation, the theory of relevant alternatives is not concerned with the raising or lowering of what is required to know. Rather, the theory of relevant alternatives is primarily interested in the range of alternatives that are relevant to original claims to

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<sup>8</sup> Latin phrase meaning all things being equal, literally “with other things the same”.

<sup>9</sup> DeRose “Solving the Skeptical Problem”, Pg. 8

know. The idea of relevant alternatives does two things. First, it restricts the skeptic from creating a skeptical hypothesis which is simply unrelated. For example, whether or not it is raining in Seattle is not relevant to whether S has hands. Second, it prevents scenarios where the skeptical hypothesis formulated creates a situation which a person S would not ordinarily even consider before making a claim to know. Using the painted mules example, according to relevant alternatives, seeing cleverly painted mules in the zebra cage at the local zoo, while an alternative to seeing zebras in the zebra cage, is not a relevant alternative except in extreme situations. Such extreme examples would include a zoo that is well known for attempting to trick its patrons by using cleverly painted mules. In such a case, whether the animals that one takes to be zebras are not instead cleverly painted mules is quite relevant. However, in the prior example, as S would not normally even consider the possibility that the zoo is attempting to trick her, the cleverly painted mules hypothesis is not relevant. Again, while DeRose will use Relevant Alternatives as a building block, much as with the Rule of Accommodation, this theory fails to completely explain the persuasiveness of the AFI, and so DeRose will continue to build towards his solution.

Robert Nozick's work gets consideration from DeRose, as well. DeRose examines Nozick's Subjunctive Conditionals Account (SCA) and finds something that will assist in explaining the persuasiveness of AFI. DeRose says that "According to SCA, the problem with my belief that I'm not a BIV ... is that I would have this belief (that I'm not a BIV) even if it were false (even if I were one)."<sup>10</sup> DeRose further explains that "we have a very strong general, though not exceptionless, inclination to think that we don't know that P when we think that our belief that P is a belief that we would hold even

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<sup>10</sup> DeRose "Solving the Skeptical Problem", Pg 18

if P were false.”<sup>11</sup> This introduces the concept of sensitivity, or truth-tracking. Sensitivity is the idea S would not continue believe a proposition P if that proposition were false. For example, if S believed that all cars are red, S would not continue to believe that all cars are red once she saw any non-red car. This makes S’ belief that all cars are red sensitive. On the other hand, insensitivity is exactly the opposite. DeRose described insensitivity in the first quote in this paragraph. Insensitivity is where S would continue to believe a proposition regardless of the truth of the proposition. The example DeRose gives is being a BIV. Even if S is a BIV, S would not believe it. Sensitivity can also be called truth-tracking, and Nozick explains this by stating that “if p were false, S wouldn’t believe that p”.<sup>12</sup> This sensitivity will play a central role in DeRose’s critique of AFI.

Nozick’s main contribution to the contextualist solution that DeRose will provide is precisely this sensitivity. DeRose points out important exceptions to Nozick’s SCA where SCA would not count S as knowing certain propositions that lacked sensitivity, but would nonetheless be commonly considered knowledge. An example of this is given in an account of a grandmother who believes that her grandson is well when she sees him. If he were not well, or perhaps even not living, others would lie to her about her grandson to spare her grief. Here, the grandmother’s belief that her son is well is insensitive because she would continue to believe that her grandson was well regardless of whether he was, yet, because she saw her grandson, we would normally count her belief as knowledge.

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<sup>11</sup> DeRose “Solving the Skeptical Problem”, Pg 18

<sup>12</sup> Nozick “Philosophical Explanations”, pg 285.

Nozick's solution, however, ends up claiming that knowledge is sensitive – S would not believe P if P were false, and that insensitive claims – such as I'm not a BIV, cannot be known. As a result, Nozick ends up denying the second premise of AFI, namely that if S doesn't know that not-H, then S doesn't know that P because not-H is an insensitive belief (S would believe it even if it were false, or would not believe it even if it were true). The denial of the second premise, however, creates what DeRose terms the “Abominable Conjunction.”<sup>13</sup> This is because Nozick is accepting the idea that despite not knowing that a skeptical hypothesis does not obtain – such as not knowing that S is not a BIV (which thus lacks hands), Nozick would remain comfortable claiming that S does, in fact have hands.

Also important from Nozick is the principle of the closest epistemically relevant worlds. Epistemically relevant worlds are similar to the relevant alternatives previously discussed. For a “world” to be epistemically relevant, it must be sufficiently close to the real world. The sensitivity of a claim, P, is such in epistemically relevant worlds that the believer, S, would not continue to believe P were P false. In order to reach the closest non-P world where S would continue to believe P (making P insensitive), the sphere of epistemically relevant worlds must be enlarged to include more and more remote scenarios until you reach a scenario in which the believer, S, would no longer be in a position to know any proposition P. For this reason, the BIV theory would be one of the most (if not the most) remote possible worlds. DeRose believes that given the remoteness of the possibility of BIV, it is not relevant to most ordinary claims of knowledge.

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<sup>13</sup> DeRose “Solving the Skeptical Problem”, Pg 27

DeRose explains how he thinks skeptics raise the standards for knowing with what he terms the “Rule of Sensitivity”. He formulates a rule that he proposes will account for the change in the standards for knowledge in an AFI argument. His rule states:

When it is asserted that some subject S knows some proposition P, the standards for knowledge tend to be raised, if need be, to such a level as to require S's belief in that particular P to be sensitive for it to count as knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

DeRose then restates his rule to make it more closely fit the notion of truth-tracking and to account for the sphere of epistemically relevant worlds:

When it's asserted that S knows that P, then, if necessary, enlarge the sphere of epistemically relevant worlds so that it at least includes the closest worlds in which P is false.<sup>15</sup>

With this formulation of his Rule of Sensitivity, DeRose proceeds to explain what he claims is happening in AFI. For AFI to persuade, says DeRose, the proposition P must be a proposition that S would not continue to believe if it were false while the skeptical hypothesis, not-H, must be one that S would not believe even if it were true (or believe even if it were false). The cleverly painted mules example is an ideal example of this – the proposition that the animals in the zebra cage are zebras is sensitive – S would not believe that they were zebras if they were not zebras. The skeptical hypothesis, that the animals are actually cleverly painted mules, is insensitive – S would not believe that the animals are cleverly painted mules even if they were. However, in order for the skeptic to make P sensitive, the skeptic must enlarge the sphere of epistemically relevant worlds such that P's falsity becomes relevant. In other words, in order for the proposition that the animals in the zebra cages are zebras to be false, the skeptic has to seek worlds

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<sup>14</sup> DeRose “Solving the Skeptical Problem”, pg. 36

<sup>15</sup> DeRose “Solving the Skeptical Problem”, pg. 37

that are not particularly close to the real world. DeRose claims that, in enlarging the sphere of epistemically relevant worlds, the skeptic has gone well beyond the closest worlds in which Nozick's truth-tracking principle applies, and required a strong epistemic position for the truth of P, despite the fact that P would be true in all nearby worlds.

DeRose concludes from the Rule of Sensitivity that the skeptic can only truthfully state the conclusion of AFI by raising the standards for knowledge.

Here's how DeRose's Rule of Sensitivity is applied. Referring back, to the claim that he has two hands, DeRose posits that in this world, he indeed has hands, and that in the closest worlds, he continues to have hands. Even in the closest non-P worlds (worlds in which he does not have hands) he can imagine where he lost his hands in an accident, but in such a case, the skeptical hypothesis, H, which may be stated as "DeRose didn't lose his hands in an accident" would not be insensitive – it would not be a belief that DeRose would continue to have even if it were false. Therefore, in this scenario, AFI is not persuasive. If skeptical hypothesis is sensitive – if S would not believe the skeptical hypothesis if it were false, then the Rule of Sensitivity does not come into play as the standards for knowledge have not been raised. If knowing that I now have hands is contingent only upon whether I lost my hands in a farming accident as a child, and if I would not continue to believe that I had not lost my hands in a farming accident as a child even if I had, then I am in a good epistemic position to determine whether I lost my hands in a farming accident and therefore whether I do in fact have hands. So, as long as we keep the sphere of epistemically relevant worlds close to the actual world, or choose a skeptical hypothesis that is not insensitive, then the DeRose's Rule of Sensitivity doesn't apply and we appear to retain ordinary claims to know. However, once the skeptical

hypothesis becomes insensitive, or the sphere of epistemically relevant worlds is sufficiently broadened, the Rule of Sensitivity comes into effect with regard to AFI.

However, do we have good reason to accept DeRose's Rule of Sensitivity?

DeRose claims that “a powerful solution to our puzzle results when we follow the basic contextualist strategy and utilize this Rule of Sensitivity to explain how the standards of knowledge are raised by the skeptic’s presentation of AFI”,<sup>16</sup> but I am not certain that it can cover all instances where AFI would seem to still be persuasive. The requirement of DeRose’s Rule of Sensitivity to have both a proposition P that would not continue to be believed if it were not true, and a skeptical claim not-H that that would continue to be believed regardless of its bearing on reality appears to limit certain claims to know. I will attempt to demonstrate how the Rule of Sensitivity fails to accommodate certain examples where AFI will remain persuasive.

First, I will attempt to demonstrate a situation where AFI is persuasive, but which the Rule of Sensitivity says is not. This is due to the Rule of Sensitivity ignoring situations where not-H is sensitive, as previously described. In this example, the proposition P is sensitive – S would not believe it if it was false, the skeptical hypothesis not-H is also sensitive – S would not believe it, either, was it false, but where there can be doubt regarding whether S actually has knowledge. In this situation, Sally, after having been raised by her parents, begins to take note of certain physical features that appear out of place. For example, Sally has red hair, but both of her parents have dark hair. Sally has a square jaw while both parents have rounded jaws. Sally has a fair complexion while her parents both have darker complexions. To be certain, none of these prove anything, as Sally knows that many hereditary traits can come from recessive genes. But,

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<sup>16</sup> DeRose “Solving the Skeptical Problem”, Pg 37.

due to the Sally's inquisitive nature she begins to wonder whether or not her parents are actually her biological parents. In this situation, let proposition P represent that Sally is the daughter of the parents whom raised her. Let the skeptical hypothesis, not-H, be that Sally's seemingly odd hereditary traits are not a result of adoption. In this example, both P and not-H are sensitive, Sally would not believe either if either turned out to not be true. Both P's falsity and not-H's falsity are in a nearby epistemic world. In this situation, because of the persuasiveness of the skeptical hypothesis, Sally couldn't make an ordinary claim to know that she was the daughter of the parents whom raised her.

Both P and not-H in the above scenario are both such that Sally would not believe either if either was not true. Something as simple and readily available as a DNA test could quickly confirm Sally's belief in P, that she is the daughter of the people who raised her, and could just as quickly prove or disprove the skeptical hypothesis. Further, without expanding the sphere of epistemically relevant worlds to include such skeptical questions as whether the DNA test was administered correctly, whether the doctor accidentally looked at the wrong file, or whether Sally is nothing more than an otherwise bodiless BIV, we have created a skeptical scenario that is persuasive and would count against ordinary claims to know. However, DeRose's Rule of Sensitivity fails to acknowledge the persuasiveness of AFI when S would not continue to believe the skeptical hypothesis if it was false.

One problem here is that if Sally is correct in her belief that she is the daughter of the people who raised her, then we would acknowledge her claim to know. Or, if the DNA test proved that the skeptical hypothesis was correct, no one would allow that she knows that she is the daughter of the people who raised her. This is to be expected,

though, as both P and not-H would not be continued to be believed if they were false. Further, I do not believe that simply because we can know something after we have discovered the truth (or falsity) of a proposition means that we could make a claim at any level to know the truth of the proposition before hand. The lottery example comes to mind. If S purchased a lottery ticket in Texas, she would have roughly a 1 in 52 million chance of winning. But, until the lottery was held, S wouldn't claim that she knew she held a losing ticket despite the overwhelming odds that her ticket would be a loser. It appears that the same is true with Sally. Similarly, once the winning lotto number was announced, S would know whether her ticket was a loser just as once the DNA results were announced, Sally would know that she was not adopted. Until that time, however, Sally would not ordinarily claim to know.

Next, I would like to propose an example where we do almost the opposite. In this scenario, I will fashion a proposition P that is insensitive as well as a skeptical hypothesis that is insensitive. This scenario will demonstrate that DeRose's Rule of Sensitivity is unable to explain persuasive skeptical uses of AFI in a variety of sensitivity combinations. Here, consider that Sarah was brought up in a Mormon household and taught most of her life about the doctrines and covenants of the Mormon faith. Despite this, she, like all Mormons, must undergo a quest for God which will ultimately culminate in prayer and a burning in her bosom – the sign that God gives to demonstrate His existence to the faithful.<sup>17</sup> For Sarah, the proposition P would be that God exists as evidenced through her experiences, while the skeptical hypothesis would be that the

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<sup>17</sup> I use the Mormon faith here only because of the noteworthy experience of the “burning in the bosom” that signals God’s presence. Other faiths would work as well, but at least Mormons would claim to have experiential evidence of God’s existence above and beyond the evidence that many other religions would claim in concert with the Mormon faith.

burning sensation she felt in her bosom was caused by something other than God, perhaps a psychological effect, at least taking away her experiential evidence for God's existence. For Sarah to know P, she must know that not-H that the "burning in the bosom" was necessarily caused by God.

While Sarah will undoubtedly claim to know both P and not-H, both are insensitive and she would believe them even if they weren't the case. This case is perhaps more interesting due to the fact that Sarah knows that she at least seemed to feel a burning sensation, which makes even the most remote world epistemically relevant (BIV scenario). This is because even if Sarah is, in fact, a BIV and was manipulated using electrodes into a false perception, she would still be in a strong enough epistemic position to know that she seemed to feel a burning sensation. However, even though the feeling is as near certain as she can be, most people would be inclined to find the skeptical hypothesis persuasive and believe that Sarah does not, in fact, have knowledge about God's existence based on such a burning sensation.

Unfortunately, this example fails for one very important reason. DeRose's Rule of Sensitivity does account for situations where P is insensitive. This was the most important feature that DeRose took away from Nozick – the SCA account of S not continuing to believe P if P were false. The problem is that if P is not sensitive – if S would continue to believe P even if P were false, then DeRose would say that there never was knowledge in the first place. AFI is not remotely persuasive here because we don't even require a skeptical hypothesis to cast doubt on an insensitive belief. If a belief is one that would be held regardless of its falsity, then the Rule of Sensitivity correctly identifies that belief as not constituting knowledge even at an ordinary level.

Instead of attempting to reject the Rule of Sensitivity for examples that fall outside what DeRose claims is necessary for AFI to be persuasive (namely sensitive P and insensitive H) I will try to use example that the Rule of Sensitivity specifically claims to be able to explain. I will attempt to demonstrate that the Rule of Sensitivity claims that the standard of knowledge is being raised in instances where we would not ordinarily claim to know. I believe that this can be seen in any occasion where deception is involved.

In a deceptive practice known as social engineering, people have repeatedly shown their willingness to believe anything they are told by an individual who looks or acts as if he knows what he is doing. Perhaps this practice is most easily described by a popular real-world example of the most famous computer hacker in the United States, Kevin Mitnick. Mr. Mitnick was able to repeatedly gain unauthorized access to the accounting systems of large banks and various other corporations by simply calling employees at these locations and asking for the information necessary to gain such access. Of course, it is not quite that simple. Mr. Mitnick would not have been successful had he not encountered numerous individuals who believed that the person to whom they were speaking was not currently deceiving them.

Here is a scenario similar to one in which Mr. Mitnick, and countless others, have used to gain unauthorized access to various systems. The social engineer, Ned, makes random calls to a large corporation. Each person who answers the phone hears the same line from Ned, that he is from tech-support and he is calling them back to attempt to solve their problem. Most people that Ned calls are not experiencing any problem at the moment, so they tell Ned this, and he quickly apologizes and indicates that he dialed the

wrong number. At some point, Ned calls an employee, Sarah, who does, in actuality, have a problem with her computer. Sarah, being happy that someone is going to work on her computer, is ready and willing to assist Ned in solving this problem. So, Ned quickly begins asking seemingly legitimate questions about the problem. Within these questions are the two Ned is actually interested in; 1) what is your username, and 2) what is your password. Of course, Sarah provides this information without much thought. And, now, Ned has access to everything to which Sarah has access.

This example can be pared down to fit AFI as follows, S is Sarah, H is the skeptical hypothesis that S is now being deceived by Ned, and P is that Ned is a member of tech-support. So, fitting these statements into AI will look like this:

- 1) Sarah does not know that she is not now being deceived by Ned.
- 2) If Sarah does not know that she is not now being deceived by Ned, then Sarah does not know that Ned is a member of tech-support.
- C) Sarah does not know that Ned is a member of tech-support.

The key to this being a counter-example to DeRose is in its real-world applicability. In fact, such deceptive practices are extremely common, and are currently a top concern in computer related security. The Rule of Sensitivity would claim that the standards for knowledge have been raised by the skeptical hypothesis, explaining the persuasiveness of AFI in this example, but would conclude that we know in an ordinary sense. However, we would commonly believe that Sarah did not, in fact, have knowledge of Ned being a member of tech-support. It was only Sarah's unfounded trust that whoever happens to call her regarding tech-support must, therefore, in actuality be a member of tech-support that gave her the false belief in P.

But, once again, there is an unfortunate mistake here. It seems that the Rule of Sensitivity is prepared to handle this situation. What is going on in the example of deception here is that once again, Sarah's belief that Ned is a member of tech support is clearly insensitive – she believes it regardless of the fact that Ned is not a member of tech support. While it is certainly unfortunate that Sarah proceeded to hand over her account information to Ned and that she was not more skeptical of his request, this nonetheless does not present a problem for DeRose. His Rule of Sensitivity deftly explains my objection away by reiterating the requirement that P be sensitive.

Additionally, examples regarding the reliability of certain things will also tend to speak against DeRose's Rule of Sensitivity. For example, Fred takes Susie's temperature with a thermometer that is, unbeknownst to Fred or Susie, broken. However, the thermometer is broken in such a way that it appears to work. In fact, the thermometer does accurately register temperatures up to roughly 98 degrees Fahrenheit. So, when Fred uses this broken thermometer to measure Susie's temperature, he concludes that Susie does not have a fever due to the thermometer registering Susie's temperature as 98 degrees. Despite the reading on the broken thermometer, Susie does, in fact, have a fever, and is consequently running a few degrees warmer than normal.

Fitting the above example into the AI format will yield something like this: S is Fred, H is the skeptical hypothesis that the thermometer is broken (or otherwise not functioning properly), and P is the proposition that Susie does not now have a fever. According to AFI, since Fred does not know that the thermometer is not broken, he does not know that Susie does not now have a fever, assuming that he used this particular

broken thermometer to measure Susie's temperature and that he relied upon the reading on the broken thermometer to conclude that Susie does not now have a fever.

This example suffers, once again from the same flaws as several of my previous examples. P here is insensitive – Fred believes P despite P being false. So, there is not problem for the Rule of Sensitivity here. The difference in this example of the others that suffer similar problems is that this one appears to be quickly fixable. What if Susie did not, in fact, have a fever? I can also imagine, in addition, a situation in which the thermometer was broken and would simply give random readings. So, if I make the appropriate changes, Fred takes Susie's temperature and concludes that Susie does not have a fever. In fact, Susie does not have a fever. However, the information that Fred used to draw this correct conclusion was completely inaccurate. It seems, at first glance, that I may have been able to take this example somewhere. Unfortunately, once again, due to the manner in which Fred is making his decision, P remains insensitive. The only difference is that in this case is that instead of Fred incorrectly believing P despite it being false, Fred correctly believes P, but would continue to believe P even if it were false. So, again, this does not represent any significant problem for DeRose.

Upon further review, further attempted counter-examples suffer similar problems. With an insensitive proposition, DeRose would not make even an ordinary claim to knowledge. As this particular problem resurfaces in further examples, and the problem does not seem to be something that can be worked around, the examples were simply dropped. The prior examples give an adequate explanation as to how I started and where I ended in my attempts to counter the Rule of Sensitivity.

I will, therefore, put aside my discussion of the Rule of Sensitivity and instead question the concept of raising the standards for knowledge. I do not believe that the standards for knowledge are changeable; rather, the epistemic position required for knowledge is invariant. This is the position known as invariantism. While it may be true that our conversational use of the word ‘know’ does seem to allow for varied meanings, the word itself describes a situation in which we are aware of that which is in actuality, and this does not seem to vary. When I claim that I know I have two hands, I am, in fact, asserting that it is true that, in actuality, I have two hands. This is an ordinary claim to know, supported by evidence such as being able to see my two hands. But, I very well could be nothing more than an otherwise bodiless BIV. In fact, if I were an otherwise bodiless BIV, I would still believe that I had hands, and I would still base this on the evidence of being able to see them. Without having available to me the reality of a claim P, that I have two hands, or H, that I am a BIV, I can make no stronger case for one over the other. The same evidence that leads me to believe that I know I have two hands would be there regardless of whether I had two hands given a skeptical hypothesis such as BIV.

Further, invariantism makes sense. Describing that which is in actuality, either I am an otherwise bodiless BIV, or I am not. Invariantism gives us a simple exclusive disjunction that demonstrates what we mean when we say that we know. In my prior example, we see  $BIV \vee \sim BIV$ . Clearly, both cannot be true, but one of them must be true. If knowledge is sensitive, if I would not believe that I have hands if, in fact, I did not have hands, then I would need to know that I was not a BIV in order to know, in actuality, I have hands. Since I am asserting that, in actuality, I now have two hands, the

exclusive disjunction can be stated as  $P \vee \text{BIV}$ , where  $P$  is the proposition that I have two hands and  $\text{BIV}$  is the skeptical hypothesis that I am a BIV. Of course, given that exactly one side of the exclusive disjunction must be true, once I have asserted  $P$ , the other side can be any relevant not- $P$  skeptical hypothesis whatsoever.

The standards of knowledge seem to be irrelevant when considering the verb “to know” using the exclusive disjunction. If, in actuality, I do have two hands, the standard of knowledge being employed is unimportant; it will be possible for me to know that I have two hands at any epistemic level of knowledge. It seems intuitive and quite logical to follow this line of thought with respect to all claims to knowledge. If knowledge is sensitive – if  $S$  would not believe any proposition  $P$  if that proposition were false – then if I am a BIV, the proposition that I have two hands is false, and would not count as knowledge. DeRose says the same thing:

Indeed, I am ready to admit to the skeptic that if I am a BIV, then I do not know that I have hands, according to any standards for knowledge. But, of course, as I firmly believe, I am not a BIV.<sup>18</sup>

In order to know that I have hands, I must know that I actually have hands. Perceiving my hands does not demonstrate that they actually exist as the BIV scenario would produce the same results. It seems, therefore, that unless I can know that I’m not actually a BIV, that I cannot know that I actually have hands unless we allow knowledge to be insensitive – where we would continue to believe  $P$  regardless of  $P$ ’s falsity. This would allow me to then know that I have two hands based on my perceptions without needing to know that in actuality I have two hands.

This particular defense of AFI can also be stated in terms of warranted assertability. What the warranted assertability maneuver attempts to do is claim that the

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<sup>18</sup> DeRose “Solving the Skeptical Problem”, Pg. 50.

contextualist has actually only demonstrated that, for a given proposition P, that the knower S is warranted in asserting P despite the skeptical hypothesis of AFI, but that this does not constitute knowledge. In other words, given the proposition that I now have two hands, and given the seemingly remote possibility that that skeptical hypothesis that I am an otherwise bodiless BIV obtains, I am warranted in asserting that I do, in fact, now have two hands. This keeps open the fact that I don't actually know whether I now have two hands as I am not in an epistemically strong enough position to know such a thing while keeping alive the ability to continue to converse without devolving into a philosophical discussion for every basic topic.

Further considerations for the warranted assertability maneuver include how it would appear to also accurately explain a variety of levels of knowledge in typical claims to knowledge. This maneuver lines up quite well with any low, high, or uneven standards of knowledge. Going back to a prior example describing epistemically relevant worlds, if I keep the level of knowledge low across my usage of AFI by claiming that P is the proposition that I now have two hands while not-H is the proposition that I did not lose my hands in an accident as a child, then warranted assertability still works. What is actually being claimed here are two separate instances of AFI. There is the instance on the surface, and the underlying instance that knowing that I did not lose my hands in an accident as a child entails knowing any number of other skeptical hypotheses – such as not being a BIV. As we have already seen, warranted assertability can handle this underlying instance of AFI, and so can handle the instance on the surface. In so far as I am warranted that I did not lose my hands in an accident as a child, I am also warranted in asserting that I now have two hands.

Likewise, the warranted assertability maneuver will deny that a person is warranted in claiming knowledge in circumstances where we would reasonably expect that there is no knowledge. As in the same example as above, if I claimed that I now have three hands, then I would not be warranted in claiming to actually have knowledge of this proposition, even conversationally.

The warranted assertability maneuver is really pragmatic in nature as it takes into account the typical beliefs that we do know quite a few things about reality while retaining the need for a strong epistemic position to actually know. Also inherent in warranted assertability is that it explains the persuasiveness of AFI in all sensitivity circumstances as well as meshes nicely with common sense.

However, it is important to note that DeRose considers and rejects the warranted assertability maneuver. DeRose questions the attempt to claim that the verb “to know” is the only case in which invariantism is used. It would seem that the invariantist cannot claim that invariantism is true only in certain contexts, i.e., the use of the verb “to know”. DeRose says as much when he claims that “they (invariantists) seem to appeal to *special* rules for the assertability of “knows”.<sup>19</sup> DeRose’s point is that the invariantist allows himself leeway for his apparently contextual claim but does not offer the same to the contextualist; we should not expect the invariantist to pick and choose which verbs qualify and which do not.

However, there is no reason why “know” cannot be on a plane by itself.<sup>20</sup> While I am not claiming that “know” is the only word or verb that doesn’t vary, I believe I can

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<sup>19</sup> DeRose “Contextualism: An explanation and defense”. Pg 201, emphasis is DeRose’s

<sup>20</sup> DeRose points out that Unger has a slew of words with absolute terms. While I am ready to accept the majority of Unger’s invariant terms, my purpose here is to claim that “to know” is invariant. As such, I

demonstrate why there is reason to believe that this word is, in fact, special. I will illustrate this point using the word “tall”. “Tall” seems to be clearly context sensitive. This can be readily seen in the following example. Billy is a ninth grade high-school freshman. He attends a fair sized school, but at over six feet in height, Billy is tall. When Billy goes to class, he is a full head and shoulder taller than his closest class-mate. Billy also plays basketball for the high-school team. But, when Billy goes to basketball practice, he plays with an assortment of others who are all taller than he. Throughout the day, Billy goes from being tall to being not tall, despite Billy’s height not changing. Also, in both cases, the reference for Billy being tall is other students. The context is critical, for Billy is tall compared to average students, and this does not change throughout the day. However, Billy is not tall when compared to a group of other people who are taller than the average person, and this does not change throughout the day. Billy actually never experienced change throughout the day; rather, it was due to the changing context, the way in which we apply the word “tall” changed. In other words, the standard for Billy “tall” changed with the context in which we used the word. In contrast, the word “know” continues to carry the same meaning throughout the day. Whether Billy knew that he was tall at the beginning of the day versus during practice never changes despite the same context changing the meaning of the word “tall”. Still, “know” does not need a special rule for itself, but is in a category of absolute terms that require, as a set, its own special rule. A comprehensive list of words that would qualify as being part of that set is outside the scope of this essay.

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will not attempt to create any such list – I’ll limit invariantism within the scope of this essay to “to know”, but I personally subscribe to a notion more like that of Unger.

The Rule of Sensitivity appears to hold up well under scrutiny. I made repeated attempts to unhinge the concept and ultimately fell short of being able to concretely identify a situation where the rule fails to demonstrate the persuasiveness of AFI. I believe the strongest case to be made against DeRose and contextualism may lie in invariantism and using the warranted assertability maneuver. Even still, I would not consider this essay, overall, to have been a successful refutation of DeRose or contextualism. I will conclude by acknowledging that DeRose has built a strong solution to AFI, but that even after this essay is concluded, I will continue my pursuit into invariantism.

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