Epistemic *cans*

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Abstract: *We argue that S is in a position to know that p iff S can know that p. Thus, what makes position-to-know-ascriptions true is just a special case of what makes ability-ascriptions true: compossibility. The novelty of our compossibility theory of epistemic modality lies in its subsuming epistemic modality under agentive modality, the modality characterizing what agents can do.*

1. Introduction

Albert sits at home, awake and of sound mind. Outside, it's raining. Consider:

(1) Albert is in a position to know that it's raining.

Whether (1) is true depends on (i) facts about Albert and (ii) facts about the weather. With respect to (ii), it seems obvious—although not entirely uncontroversial[2]—that it must be raining. With respect to (i), things are more complicated; there is no consensus about which Albert-facts (combine with weather-facts to) determine the truth value of (1). Williamson (2000: 95) employs the metaphor of a fact's being 'unhidden':

> If one is in a position to know p, and one has done what one is in a position to do to decide whether p is true, then one does know p. The fact is open to one's view, unhidden, even if one does not yet see it.

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[2] Yli-Vakkuri & Hawthorne 2022: 1334–36.

There is obvious appeal to the idea that the truth value of (1) requires facts about the weather to be *unhidden*, or *open to Albert's view*. If, for instance, Albert were encased, Han Solo-like, in carbonite, (1) would seemingly be false.

In less extreme circumstances, however, there is room for disagreement.[3] What if Albert, having retired to his study, only has to get up and check; or only to open his eyes? Whether the fact that it's raining is *hidden* from Albert's view seems to have a less obvious answer. One's felt uneasiness in determining whether (1) is true in these latter cases derives from uneasiness about what counts as *hidden*, but also about what counts as doing *what one is in a position to do to decide whether p*.

Debates around whether agents like Albert are in a position to know rest on an under-appreciated ambiguity in position-to-know ascriptions. In our view, claims of the form 'S is in a position to know *p*' just are ability-ascriptions;[4] and what makes position-to-know ascriptions true is just what makes ability-ascriptions in general true: compossibility.[5] According to this general conception, 'S can F' is true just in case S's F-ing is compossible with contextually relevant facts. *A fortiori*, 'S is in a position to know *p*' expresses something true just in case S's knowing *p* is compossible with contextually relevant facts. If epistemic modality is the modality determined by what agents can know, our view is a *compossibility theory of epistemic modality*. Its novelty lies in its subsuming epistemic modality under agentive modality, the modality characterizing what agents can do.

The concept of *being in a position to know* has been operative in epistemology since Sosa (1974: 118), who used it to explicate something's *being evident*. Various regimentations of the concept have since emerged in discussions of closure,[6] anti-luminosity,[7] evidence possession,[8] agnosticism,[9] norms of assertion[10] and belief,[11]

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[3] Cf. Rosenkranz 2007; Heylen 2016: 66; Simion forthcoming.

[4] Cf. Yli-Vakuri & Hawtorne 2022: 1334, who claim that 'being in a position to know' is 'approximately synomous' with 'can know'.

[5] Lewis 1976; Kratzer 1977; Vetter 2015; Jaster 2020.

[6] Cohen 1999: 84, fn 14; Schaffer 2007.

[7] Williamson 2000; Smithies 2012.

[8] Simion forthcoming; Rosenkranz 2001: ch. 9; Lord 2018, ch. 3 on *reason* possession.

[9] Rosenkranz 2007.

[10] Willard-Kyle 2020.

[11] Ichikawa 2022.

suspension of judgment,[12] and propositional justification.[13] One might hope these diverse uses point toward a common phenomenon. Ultimately, however, we will argue that we should be no more optimistic about finding an informative, context-independent conception of what one is in a position to know than we are about finding an informative, context-independent conception of what one is in a position to do. Even so, our compossibility account is distinctive insofar as it subsumes epistemic modality under agentive modality—our agency as knowers cannot be disentangled from our agency as doers.

2. Compossibility and Ability

We will argue (§2.1) that position-to-know ascriptions are just ordinary ability ascriptions, and that such a view vindicates a range of intuitively plausible constraints on position-to-know ascriptions (§2.2).

We understand ability-ascriptions along the lines of Lewis (1976) and Kratzer (1977), who championed *compossibility theories of agentive modality*. Here is Lewis's (1976: 149) way of putting things:

> An ape can't speak a human language—say, Finnish—but I can. Facts about the anatomy and operation of the ape's larynx and nervous system are not compossible with his speaking Finnish. The corresponding facts about my larynx and nervous system are compossible with my speaking Finnish. But don't take me along to Helsinki as your interpreter: I can't speak Finnish. My speaking Finnish is compossible with the facts considered so far, but not with further facts about my lack of training. What I can do, relative to one set of facts, I cannot do, relative to another, more inclusive, set.

Whether we speak truly in saying that David can speak Finnish depends on the context; *Yes* when we are discussing the comparative anatomies of humans and apes; and *No* when needing to make a reservation over the phone in Helsinki.

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[12] Sosa 2021: ch. 6.

[13] Cohen 1999; Turri 2010.

Kratzer's sympathetic approach treats the relativized modal phrases like 'can *in view of*' as explanatorily prior to un-relativized ones. Consider a sentence employing an un-relativized modal, such as (3):

(3) David can speak Finnish.

To assert (3), on Kratzer's way of thinking, is, ultimately, to say something like (4):

(4) David can speak Finnish (*in view of F*),

Where *F* denotes a contextually salient set of facts *in view of which* David's speaking Finnish is assessed. In the biology classroom, *F* may denote a set of facts concerning human and ape anatomy. In view of *those* facts, it is possible that David speaks Finnish; he need only take lessons. Compossibility with the facts in view is precisely what makes the ability-ascription true. On the other hand, when trying to make a reservation over the phone in Helsinki, *F* denotes a much more restrictive set, one that includes not only facts about human anatomy but also about David's linguistic training. In view of that stricter set of facts, it is not possible that David speaks Finnish; *in*compossibility with the facts in view is precisely what makes the ability-ascripton false.

According to this Lewis-cum-Kratzer *compossibility theory of agentive modality*: what agents can do is a matter of which of their doings are compossible withcertain contextually determined facts.[14] The next two subsections argue for a compossibility theory of epistemic modality.

2.1. The Compossibility Theory of Position-to-Know Ascriptions

Position-to-know-ascriptions just are ability-ascriptions. Our view, simply put, is captured by the following biconditionals:

PTK-CAN | S is in a position to know that *p* iff S can know that *p*.

CAN-COMPOSSIBLE | S can φ (in view of *F*) iff S's φ-ing is compossible with *F*.

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[14] See also Vetter 2015, 2019, 2021; Maier 2015; and Kearl & Wallace forthcoming.

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Together, these entail PTK-COMPOSSIBLE:

> PTK-COMPOSSIBLE | S is in a position to know that p (in view of F) iff S's knowing that p is compossible with F.

There's nothing metaphysically privileged about any particular set of facts F in view of which we might evaluate whether S is in a position to know. But some facts are contextually relevant and others not. Our view is thus contextualist about position-to-know ascriptions:

> PTK-ASCRIPTION | It is true to say in C that S is in a position to know that p iff (1) S's knowing that p is compossible with F, and (2) F is the set of facts that are relevant in C.

Consider again the following sentence:

> (1) Albert   is   in   a   position   to   know   that   it's   raining.

According to PTK-ASCRIPTION, whether (1) expresses a truth depends on context in much the way that 'David can speak Finnish' does. *No* if we hold fixed that he is too distracted to think about the rain. But *Yes* if we do not. *No* if we hold fixed that Albert is in a windowless, sound-proof room. *Yes* if we allow that Albert can go outside and check, and so on.

This leaves open an important question: in Schaffer's (2005) turn of phrase, '[About] which epistemic gears [do] the wheels of context turn?' Our view is compatible with a range of answers to this question, variously invoking communicative intentions,[15] questions under discussion,[16] rules of presupposition,[17] and so on. We invite the reader to insert their preferred theory of how contextual parameters are determined. But let us sketch one tempting line of thought for the sake of exposition.

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[15] Grice 1967.

[16] Roberts 1996.

[17] Lewis 1996; Cohen 1988, 1998; Blome-Tillman 2014.

Position-to-know-ascriptions, like ability-ascriptions generally, are sensitive to considerations of agents' interests, expectations, and (practical and theoretical) needs. Suppose that David, entirely ignorant of the Finnish language, needs to make a reservation at Helsinki's acclaimed *Restaurant Palace*, and making a reservation requires selecting the meals in advance.

If David is about to start Finnish night classes and has months to decide on his order, we might say that he is in a position to know what appetizers are on the menu, holding fixed that he is a quick study with plenty of time. But if time is short and the good people at *Restaurant Palace* are waiting impatiently on the other end of the phone, we might deny that David is in a position to know what appetizers are on the menu; in so doing, we point out that he lacks an ability that would make any difference to him getting what he wants: a reservation. We might say, mirroring Lewis more explicitly: David is in a position to know what the appetizers are, but don't put him on the phone with the restaurant; he isn't in a position to know what the appetizers are.

In offering these remarks, we rely on broadly Lewisian considerations to sketch a positive answer to Schaffer's question. An advantage of our view is that we can appeal to a considerable literature on context-determination to do so; a disadvantage is that the relevant literature is far from settled. Even so, we're committed to Lewis's (1997) rules of *Attention* and *Accommodation*, which capture two ways that ability ascriptions and context interact.[18]

According to the Rule of Attention, 'a possibility not ignored at all is *ipso facto* not properly ignored' (559). That is, the salience of certain features—e.g., David's total mental state at a time, or his commitment to learning the language in the coming months—constrains which facts we hold fixed. According to the Rule of Accommodation, context fixes the relevant parameters (other things equal) in a way that makes the ability-ascriptions come out true. Guided by these defeasible rules of how context is determined, we think that position-to-know-ascriptions do not have some special glow; they are, rather, a reflection of relevant interests, expectations, and needs.

While philosophers might substantively disagree over what is compossible with what, one might worry that our view renders many disagreements over position-to-know-ascriptions merely verbal. But as we will argue in §4, disagreements over position-to-know-ascriptions might nevertheless be substantive insofar as they concern *which*

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[18] Lewis 1979; Kratzer 1981; Vetter 2015

abilities are relevant to those interests, expectations, and needs; analogously, philosophers concerned with the relationship between causal determinism and freedom of the will might substantively disagree over *which* abilities are relevant to our moral responsibility practices.

With this in mind, let's reconsider the disagreement over whether Albert (§1) is in a position to know that it's raining from his windowless study. Our view implies that there is both a perfectly legitimate sense in which he isn't (holding fixed his current evidence) and a perfectly legitimate sense in which he is (letting his evidence vary, holding fixed perhaps that he is in his house, but not that he's in his windowless study).

Here's why: whether it's true that S is in a position to know that *p* in a context depends on what parameters we hold fixed. But our view lets the parameters vary widely across contexts, and *none* of those parameters is metaphysically privileged. In particular, our account does not predict that one must always hold fixed one's (non-)actions when assessing one's ability to know.

While the intimate connection between knowledge and evidence might often and naturally induce a context in which position-to-know-ascriptions hold fixed an agent's current evidence, it is not necessarily so. We think the appeal of denying that Albert is in *any* sense in a position to know comes from mistakenly thinking that there is some *privileged* set of facts—perhaps those concerning Albert's current evidence, priors, or perceptual capacities—underwriting position-to-know-ascriptions. We'll discuss the *special abilities* view in more detail in §3.

2.2. Principles Governing the Position to Know

We've given a theory of what being in a position to know *is*. S is in a position to know *p* iff S's knowing *p* is compossible with contextually relevant facts. From this definition, various proposed conditions on the position to know can be evaluated.

Here, we further motivate our view by showing how it vindicates certain of those conditions and invalidates others while nevertheless capturing what plausibly underwrites them. Sometimes, whether a principle is vindicated depends on the parameters one holds fixed while making the relevant epistemic ability ascription. In such cases, our view explains the divergence of dialectical options.

2.2.1. Knowledge-entailed

Consider the following principle:

ENTAILED BY KNOWLEDGE | S knows that $p \vDash$ S is in a position to know that p.

Does our account vindicate this proposal? Yes. For consider the following principle:

S φ-s $\vDash$ S is able to φ.

This principle is valid for what Mele (2003) calls *simple* ability ascriptions. There's a sense in which: the fact that I *do* roll a hard six entails that I *can* roll a hard six. On the compossibility theory, then, it's unsurprising that epistemologists have often gone in for the corresponding principle about the position to know.[19] We *always* have the simple ability to do what we do: we are always in a position to know what we do know.[20]

2.2.2. Anti-Collapse

Next, consider the following anti-collapse principle:

ANTI-COLLAPSE | S is in a position to know that $p \nvDash$ S knows that p

Again, this is made highly plausible by the compossibility theory of the position to know. For consider the following principle about abilities:

GENERALIZED ANTI-COLLAPSE | S is able to $\varphi \nvDash$ S φ-s

This principle is true for most act types. Having the ability to do something doesn't entail actually doing it. It's no surprise then that the principle should be widely endorsed for the position to know.

2.2.3. Possibility

What about the following principle linking the position to know to possibility?

POSSIBILITY | S is in a position to know that $p \vDash$ it is possible for S to know that p.

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[19] Heylen 2016: 65.

[20] Rosenkranz 2021: 37: 'Trivially, …one only ever does what one is in a position to do.'

This widely endorsed[21] principle is entailed by the compossibility theory. For the compossibility theory says that one is in a position to know that p when knowing that p is compossible with the contextually relevant facts. Compossible with the relevant facts entails possible. So the compossibility theory predicts that whenever S is in a position to know that p, it is possible for S to know that p.

2.2.4. Factivity

Is the position to know factive?

> FACTIVITY | S is in a position to know that $p \vDash p$ is true.

FACTIVITY is popular (Williamson 2000: 95; Rosenkranz 2007: 73; Greenough 2009: 404; Lord 2018: 71; Willard-Kyle 2020: 331, *i.a.*) although not uncontested (Yli-Vakkuri & Hawthorne 2022: 1336).

Our theory suggests an argument for FACTIVITY:

> (5) S can know that p only if p is true.
> (6) If S is in a position to know that p then S can know that p. (from PTK-CAN)
> (7) So, if S is in a position to know that p, then p is true.

But (5) is ambiguous between

> (5a) $\neg \Diamond ((\text{S knows that } p) \wedge \neg p)$, and
> (5b) $\neg ((\text{S can know that } p) \wedge \neg p)$

(5a) is true: it expresses the factivity of knowledge. But the argument needs (5b). And (5b) is *not* obvious. It depends on whether $\neg p$ is held fixed when evaluating what S can know. And some contexts don't demand this. Consider a case adapted from Reisner (2007):

> MINDREADER | Sam's brain is connected to a mindreading machine. Sam knows that in 10 seconds, the monitor will display a number. Sam also knows that: If they

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[21] Rosenkranz 2007, 2016; Heylen 2016: 64; Willard-Kyle 2020; Simion forthcoming. See Rosenkranz 2021: ch. 3 for reservations.

believe that the number on the monitor will be 1, then the number will be 1, and 0 otherwise.

At the moment Sam is connected to the mindreader, it's intuitive that Sam is, in some sense, both in a position to know that the number on the monitor will be 1 and in a position to know that the number on the monitor will be 0. Sam *can* know that the number on the monitor will be 1 (by so believing) and *can* know that the number on the monitor will be 0 (by so believing).

But either it's false that the number will be 1 or that the number will be 0. So when Sam is hooked up to the mindreader, they are in a position to know something false. So the position to know is not inherently factive.

The truth of the target proposition is often a natural parameter for assessing epistemic abilities. Beliefs normally have a world-to-mind direction of fit: our beliefs aim to match the world. And so, normally, the epistemic ability to know is assessed holding fixed the truth of the target proposition. Even so, as MINDREADER illustrates, this parameter need not be contextually relevant.

2.2.5. Agglomeration

What about the view that the position to know is closed under conjunction?

> CONJUNCTION | S is in a position to know that p, S is in a position to know that $q \vDash$ S is in a position to know that (p & q)

There's a ready recipe for generating counterexamples to CONJUNCTION given POSSIBILITY.[22] So it's no surprise that our account invalidates CONJUNCTION. Suppose that you are in a position to know p. And suppose also that you know that you do not believe p. (I surely know that I don't believe some things that, as it turns out, I am also in a position to know.) Since you know you don't believe p—and also know that knowledge entails belief—you are in a position to know that you don't know that p. But you aren't in a position to know this conjunction: p, but I don't know that p. That Moorean

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[22] Originally in Heylen 2016. Cf. Willard-Kyle 2020: 338–39, Rosenkranz 2021: 49, 64.

conjunction is, for familiar reasons, unknowable.[23] Since it's unknowable, then (by POSSIBILITY) you aren't in a position to know it. So given POSSIBILITY, CONJUNCTION is false.

Part of our positive argument for the compossibility theory has been to show how it neatly handles a range of disputed principles and conditions purportedly governing the position to know. In the next section, we show how the compossibility theory fares better than two competitors.

3. Two Austere Conceptions

The compossibility theory of the position to know is avowedly contextualist: whether it's true to say that S is in a position to know that *p* depends on the parameters that are held fixed for evaluating S's abilities in the context of utterance. In addition to being contextualist, our account is *unrestricted.* The compossibility theory of the position to know is unrestricted in the *kinds* of abilities whereby one can exercise one's capacity to know that *p*. We'll call this combination of views *unrestricted contextualism*.

Unrestricted contextualism is controversial. It's at odds with what Waxman (2022: 295–96) labels the *austere* conception of the position to know, which 'involves merely processing the evidence one already has.'[24] As Waxman notes, this austere conception is at least implicit in Williamson (2000: 95). In this section, we articulate and criticize two ways to adopt an austere conception.

3.1. The Simple Counterfactual View

Consider the 'Simple Counterfactual View,' according to which:

S is in a position to know *p* just in case: were S to believe *p*, S would thereby know *p*.

According to the Simple Counterfactual View, the position to know is just that special epistemic state a subject S sometimes occupies with respect to proposition *p* such that, intuitively, all S needs to do to know that *p* is believe it.[25]

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[23] See the argument from Church discussed in Salerno 2009.

[24] Waxman articulates but does not endorse this conception.

[25] Cf. Williamson 2000: 95; Stanley 2008: 49; and Smithies 2019.

To frame our complaint against the Simple Counterfactual View, compare it with the Classical Conditional Analysis of abilities:

> S was able to do otherwise in circumstances C just in case: if S had tried to φ in C, S would have φ'd.

According to the Classical Conditional Analysis, having an ability to φ is just to be such that: if you had tried (or wanted, or…) to φ, you would have φ'd. This analysis faces, somewhat famously, powerful counterexamples. Consider one from Lehrer (1968):

> PHOBIA | Mary has a pathological phobia of small red things (which remind her of blood). She is offered a bowl of red candy. In the closest world where Mary tries to take the candy, she would, since that would be a world where Mary is relieved of her phobia.

Chisholm (1964/1989) suggested (and Lehrer (1968) dramatized) that the problem with the Classical Conditional Analysis is that it is silent on whether an agent is able to *try* to do otherwise. In some perfectly legitimate sense, Mary can take one of the candies: she'd succeed if she tried. But it's not clear, in another legitimate sense, that Mary can take one of the candies, precisely because her pathology renders her unable to try to do so.[26] The Classical Conditional Analysis cannot deliver this latter verdict.

The Simple Counterfactual View faces its own Chisholm problem. Consider the following:

> BLINDED BY LOVE | John cannot bear to think ill of his son, Luke; he is blinded by love. Nevertheless, Luke has recently been (correctly) accused of vandalizing school property, caught on CCTV footage. John does everything in his power to avoid believing what this damning evidence supports, to explain it away, to find space for doubt.

The Simple Counterfactual View claims that position-to-know ascriptions are grounded in counterfactuals, the antecedent of which involves an agent forming a belief and the consequent of which involves an agent knowing the thing believed in the antecedent.

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[26] Shope 1978; Bonevac, Dever, & Sosa 2006.

And in the closest world where John believes that Luke is guilty, he would know it, since that would be a world where John is relieved of his love-blindness. Thus, the Simple Counterfactual View predicts that John is in a position to know that Lucas is guilty.

As with PHOBIA, we do not dispute that there is some perfectly legitimate sense in which John is in a position to know Luke is guilty; he'd know it if he believed it. But precisely because his love-blindness renders him *unable to believe it*, it's less clear that John is in a position to know Luke is guilty in *every* interesting sense. The Simple Counterfactual View cannot deliver this latter verdict.

Just as Chisholm complained that the Classical Conditional Analysis fell silent on whether the agent in question was *able to try*, we complain that the Simple Counterfactual View falls silent on whether the agent in question is *able to believe*.

3.2. Invariantism and The Special Abilities View

The compossibility view is contextualist about position-to-know ascriptions; the semantic alternative is invariantism. Invariantism says that whether it is true to say that S is in a position to know that *p* does *not* vary across contexts.

The contextualism at issue is not whether 'the position to know' inherits context-sensitivity from knows:[27] Rather, we are interested in whether the meaning of 'S is in a position to know' is context-sensitive or invariant even when the meaning of 'knows' is held fixed.

One prominent way to be invariantist about the position to know is to say that there is a metaphysical fact of the matter about which abilities matter for assessing the position to know. Call this the 'Special Abilities View.' For instance, Simion's (forthcoming) definition of the position to know suggests that it's only those cognitive processes that have the function of producing knowledge whose possession can ground one's position to know.[28] Other (largely actional) capacities cannot.

The Special Ability View is influential.[29] But it is false. We offer two arguments for this claim. First, it's intuitively acceptable to make the following judgments (albeit not in the same context):

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[27] See DeRose 1992 and Lewis 1996 for classic defenses.

[28] 'S is in a position to know a fact F if S has a cognitive process with the function of generating knowledge that can …easily uptake F in cognizers of S's type' (Simion forthcoming).

[29] Compare our position with Sosa 2015: 23–26, according to which an agent's abilities or competences are determined by her 'seat,' 'shape,' and 'situation'. We differ from Sosa in two ways. First, Sosa-

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(6a) Albert is in a position to know that it's raining—he can easily get up to check.

(6b) Albert is *not* in a position to know that it's raining—he can't see the window from his chair.

The intuitive propriety of both judgments is evidence for contextualism. These instances of Lewisean doublespeak are just what we should expect given the compossibility theory ('[a]n ape can't speak a human language—say, Finnish—but I can… But don't take me along to Helsinki as your interpreter: I can't speak Finnish'). Special Abilities Views, as a species of invariantism, cannot explain why our judgments switch depending on what is held fixed.

On Simion's (forthcoming) view, it is invariantly true that Albert is not in a position to know that it's raining since Albert would have to exercise an actional ability (to walk outside) that does not have a knowledge-generating function. But Simion recognizes that there is some pressure to say that Albert has some kind of access to the fact that it's raining. To preserve invariantism, Simion distinguishes between what an agent is in a position to *know* and merely in a position to *come* to know:

> I am not in a position to know what is happening in the other room. I am, however, in a position to come to know it. Roughly, …if all that needs to happen for me to come to know F is that my relevant cognitive processes take up F and process it accordingly, then I am in a position to know F. [But if] I need to open my eyes, or turn around, or go to the other room, or give you a call, [then] I am in a position to come to know F, but not in a position to know it.

Pace Simion, coming to know is a *way* of knowing, not a competitor to knowing. Compare the analogous but specious distinction between being in a position to *do* and being in a position to *come to do* something. As Larry lazes on his sofa, the doorbell rings, and his mother asks him to get the door. He claims that he is not in a position to do so, implicitly holding fixed his couch posture in assessing his abilities. But Larry's mother, rather than

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competences are understood in terms of dispositions, the stimulus of which involves an agent's *trying*; we sympathize with Vetter's 2019 criticism. Second, to the extent that Sosa-competences depend on just three potential parameters, our approach is strictly more flexible.

appealing to what Larry is in a *position to come to do*, can reasonably insist that he *is* in a position to get the door—he'd just have to get up.

We side with Larry's mother, at least in the following respect. As we'll discuss in §4, these disagreements do not call for new relations (notably, the *position to come to do* relation); this is just meta-semantic negotiation about whether to assess Larry's door-opening abilities in a way that holds fixed his sitting on the couch. There's no metaphysically robust distinction between two different abilities here, only a choice between two sets of parameters, and a debate about which parameters are (or should be) contextually relevant.

Notice that the compossibility account can recover Simion's notion by understanding the relevant 'position to know' ascriptions as being parameterized by *what an agent's cognitive systems are capable of knowledgeably uptaking from her current vantage point*. Nothing that we've said entails that Simion is wrong to use this (parameterized) notion of the position to know when evaluating positive epistemic duties. We just insist this isn't the only interesting use.

The second argument against the austere account is the argument from *gradualism*. There is no sharp cutoff between the 'special' epistemic abilities that these theories privilege and the broader set of action-implicating[30] abilities that supposedly underwrite position-to-come-to-know ascriptions.[31]

Imagine that Giada is evaluating some complicated evidence bearing on whether *p*. In fact, the evidence supports *p*, but the evidence is complicated enough that Giada can learn that *p* only if she attends closely to the relevant evidence.

Suppose Giada is *not* attending to her evidence right now. Should that prevent it from being true to say (in some contexts) that Giada is in position to know that *p*? Absolutely not. Giada is a paradigm case of someone who, even by the lights of the austere approach, is in a position to know that *p*. Giada's ability to attend mentally to her evidence is the sort of ability that can matter for assessing whether she is in a position to know. To adopt Simion's terminology, attending to one's evidence has a knowledge-generating function.

But now suppose things are slightly different. Suppose Giada's visual field contains a flying jackdaw, whose appearance occupies a small, out-of-focus slice of her visual field. Giada can learn that there is a jackdaw there only if she attends to that part

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[30] Our view is consistent with, but does not assume, an actional conception of judgment (Cf. Sosa 2015).
[31] Cf. Lord 2018: 91.

of her visual field. Giada's way of attending to this part of her visual field inevitably involves her eyes moving slightly to track the jackdaw's flight and squinting to focus on the relevant part of her visual field (perhaps even turning her head or leaning to see past the light pole obstructing her view). Shall we say that Giada is *not* in any position to know that there's a jackdaw just because she'd have to perform certain simple actions (moving her eyes, leaning) to learn that? Intuitively, no. The fact that Giada would need to move her eyes or squint is not in principle different from the fact that Giada would need to attend to her evidence: it does not remove her from being, in some sense, in a position to know.

We think there is no sharp line between Giada's 'epistemic' and 'actional' abilities. Her agency is integrated, and she can use (traditionally) actional abilities in the service of achieving epistemic aims. Depending on the context, any of her abilities can ground her being in a position to know: none is invariantly privileged.

4. No Work for the Position to Know?

One virtue of the compossibility theory of the position to know is that it explains why people have such divergent intuitions about what one is in a position to know. Indeed, such divergence is evidence *for* our contextualist view!

Moreover, we think that first-order debates about the position to know can often be recast as meta-linguistic negotiations about which facts to hold fixed while making epistemic ability ascriptions in the service of a given aim.

Meta-linguistic disagreements are not about first-order content: they are about 'which concept is best suited to play a certain functional role in thought and practice' (Plunkett & Sundell 2013: 21). For example, consider a debate over whether Secretariat— the racehorse who won the triple crown—is an athlete.[32] On the surface, this looks like a debate over the first-order content *that Secretariat is an athlete.* But plausibly, 'athlete' is a context-sensitive term that can be used in a way that includes non-humans (or not). The crux of the debate isn't really about whether Secretariat is an athlete by *some* admissible definition but whether 'athlete,' as used in the context of dispute, *should* include racehorses in its extension or not.

Meta-linguistic disagreements are *non-canonical* in that interlocutors needn't disagree about the literal content; nevertheless, meta-linguistic disputes can be *genuine* or

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[32] Ludlow 2008; Plunkett and Sundell 2013.

'disagreements worth having' (Plunkett & Sundell 2013: 22). This happens (for instance) when the application of the term is tethered to normative evaluations. Thus, it *matters* to voters for the Associated Press Athlete of the Year Award whether *their* use of 'athlete' should include racehorses in its extension.

Similarly, it *matters* to epistemologists which concept of 'the position to know' is utilized in the service of various epistemic goals. Let's focus on one such goal to illustrate. 'Position to know' talk is often used to explicate propositional justification[33] or the related notion of what evidence one has.[34] Supposing that's right, let's reconsider John (BLINDED BY LOVE) and whether he is in a position to know that his son vandalized school property.

Given our view, it can be true to say either that John is or is not in a position to know this, depending on whether the context holds fixed his psychological aversion to thinking ill of his son. Even so, there is a disagreement worth having about which concept of 'the position to know' we should use *given a context where the notion of epistemic position at issue is the one connected to propositional justification*. In fact, it is (near enough) just the debate about whether propositional or doxastic justification is more fundamental. Most evidentialists will think that the relevant notion of 'position to know' does *not* hold fixed John's psychological limitations—all that matters for propositional justification is John's evidence, irrespective of whether he can believe on its basis. But suppose Goldman (1979: 103) is right that John is propositionally justified only if John has a 'belief-forming operation available' to him whereby John can become doxastically justified.[35] Then, plausibly, the concept of 'position to know' used when discussing propositional justification *should* hold fixed what John is psychologically (in)capable of believing—we might deny that John is in a position to know that Luke is guilty precisely because he does not have a relevant 'belief-forming operation available' to him, the manifestation of which would result in his knowing the fact in question.

Just as Kratzer's and Lewis's compossibility theory about action does not, by itself, solve the first-order debate about whether free will is compatible with determinism, neither does our compossibility theory of the position to know, by itself, solve the first-order debate about whether propositional or doxastic justification is more fundamental. Even so, it provides a framework for normative disagreements in epistemology that invoke the position to know.

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[33] Cohen 1999: 74; Bird 2007; Rosenkranz 2021; Waxman 2022.

[34] Simion forthcoming; Rosenkranz 2021; Lord 2018.

[35] Turri 2010.

5. Conclusion

We argued that S is in a position to know that *p* (in view of *F*) iff S's knowing that *p* is compossible with *F*. If we are correct, there is no interesting, context-independent conception of being in a position to know that can explain everything that notion is called upon to explain. Even so, our account of the position to know is distinctive insofar as it subsumes epistemic modality under agentive modality. And that's as it should be: epistemic agency, no less than practical agency, is grounded in our abilities.[36]

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