

MOOREAN SENTENCES AND THE NORM OF ASSERTION

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ABSTRACT: In this paper Timothy Williamson's argument that the knowledge norm of assertion is the best explanation of the unassertability of Moorean sentences is challenged and an alternative account of the norm of assertion is defended.

KEYWORDS: Moorean sentences, knowledge, assertion, approximate truth

Recently there has been much interest in the topic of the norm(s) of assertion and this interest drives from a variety of sources. The debate concerning pragmatic encroachment on knowledge is one such source. So, the debate about whether or not pragmatic factors affect whether an agent knows or does not know has raised the issue of the proper norm for practical reasoning or acting. Those who endorse pragmatic encroachment on knowledge have typically defended the view that the proper norm of practical reasoning is knowledge. They defend the knowledge norm for practical reason. This has then further suggested that the proper norm for *assertion* is knowledge via what is known as the commonality thesis. The commonality thesis is just the idea that the proper norm of assertion is the same as the proper norm of practical reasoning.¹ Timothy Williamson in particular has defended the commonality thesis and the knowledge norm.² For Williamson the proper norm of both practical reasoning and assertion is knowledge. So, in its most elemental form, this principle is the following claim:

(KN-C) one should act on or assert a proposition, if and only if, it is known.

Both the knowledge norm of assertion and the knowledge norm of practical reasoning have been subjected to considerable criticism, but they have also been vigorously defended by some influential contemporary philosophers.³ Timothy

¹ See Jessica Brown, "Fallibilism, and the Knowledge Norm for Assertion and Practical Reasoning," in *Assertion: New Philosophical Essays*, eds. Jessica Brown and Herman Cappelen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 153-174.

² Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³ See, for example, Jonathan Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Jonathan Hawthorne and Jason Stanley, "Knowledge and Action," *The Journal of Philosophy* 105 (2008): 571-590, Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, Timothy Williamson, "Contextualism, Subject-Sensitive Invariantism and Knowledge of Knowledge," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 55 (2005): 213-235.

Williamson in particular defends the knowledge norm for assertion by appeal to its supposed explanatory power. More specifically, he argues that the knowledge norm of assertion is the best explanation of the unassertability of sentences of the form “p, but I do not believe that p.” In mounting this defense Williamson claims that such Moorean sentences are (1) unassertable and (2) that the best explanation of this fact is that knowledge is the proper norm of assertion. Here issue will be taken with this particular aspect of Williamson’s defense of the knowledge norm of assertion and it will be argued that his defense is predicated on a mistake concerning the proper norm of assertion and practical reasoning.

So why is the alleged unassertability of Moorean sentences supposed to support the knowledge norm of assertion? This is supposed to be the case because if asserting that p is governed by the norm of knowledge, then one should assert p, if and only if, it is true. Provided then that one accepts the view that knowledge entails belief one should assert that p, if and only if, p is believed. Thus to assert a Moorean sentence is to violate the knowledge norm of assertion. One ought not to assert that p when p is not believed because then it cannot be known. Consider the claim that “Obama is the President of the United States in 2012.” Suppose that Howard attempts to assert the following compound proposition:

(O) Obama is the President of the United States in 2012, but I do not believe it.

So, Howard perhaps utters the English sentence “Obama is the President of the United States in 2012, but I do not believe it.” What Howard is saying is widely supposed to be paradoxically odd – as originally noticed by Moore. However, Williamson alleges that this is the case because Howard is violating the knowledge norm of assertion. Asserting O involves the assertion of a compound proposition made up of the following two component propositions:

(OP1) Obama is the President of the United States in 2012.

(OP2) I do not believe that Obama is the President of the United States in 2012.

In attempting to assert O, Howard’s assertion of OP2 grates against his assertion that OP1. If O is properly asserted, then both OP1 and OP2 are known. But knowing OP1 implies the negation of OP2. In virtue of this observation Howard is then supposed to be *failing to make a real assertion*. What he is saying does not meet the standard for assertion because that standard is knowledge. So, according to Williamson, (in accordance with the orthodox view) Moorean sentences are unassertable, and this fact is explained by the knowledge norm of assertion.

There are a variety of criticisms that have been leveled against the knowledge norm of practical reasoning and if the commonality thesis is true, then

such criticisms should implicate the knowledge norm of assertion as well. Criticisms of the knowledge norm of action include those that challenge its sufficiency and its necessity. The most convincing of these criticisms concern the claim that knowledge is necessary for action. In other words they challenge the view that one ought to act on a proposition only if it is known. These criticisms have then given rise to a whole host of weaker suggestions concerning the proper norm for action, for the defenders of these views all agree that the knowledge norm of action is too strong. Recently, I have defended the view that the correct norm for action is as follows: where the choice is p-dependent,

(JBAT-PR) It is epistemically rational for S to employ p (appropriately) in S's practical reasoning \equiv it is at least the case that S is justified in believing that p is approximately true, and p is at least approximately true.⁴

This view was proposed in light of counterexamples that implicate both the knowledge norm and its other weaker cousins, such as those proposed by Ram Neta and Clayton Littlejohn.⁵ It is important to notice that the justified belief component of the left hand side of the bi-conditional of JBAT-PR is qualified by an 'at least' qualification with its scope outside the doxastic operator. This is intentionally designed to capture the idea that the norm of practical reasoning involves at least S being justified in her belief that p is approximately true. This is then compatible with S's being justified in her belief that p is strictly true as well as her being justified in her belief that p is only approximately true. We cannot just substitute S's is justified in believing that p is at least approximately true for S is justified in believing that p is true or S is justified in believing that p is approximately true without running into problems as demonstrated in my "Not-Exact-Truths, Pragmatic Encroachment and the Epistemic Norm of Practical Reasoning."⁶ So that particular qualification is crucial. In the other conjunct in the left hand side of the bi-conditional p's being at least approximately true signifies that p is true *or* that p is approximately true.

So this much weaker principle captures a much more reasonable sense of the epistemic conditions on practical reasoning and it has two important virtues. First and foremost, it gets us the correct result in a wide variety of allegedly problematic cases. Second, this weak principle of the epistemic conditions on

⁴ Michael Shaffer, "Not-Exact-Truths, Pragmatic Encroachment and the Epistemic Norm of Practical Reasoning," *Logos & Episteme* 3 (2012): 239-259.

⁵ See Ram Neta, "Treating Something as a Reason for Knowledge," *Nous* 43 (2009): 684-699 and Clayton Littlejohn, "Must We Act Only on What We Know," *The Journal of Philosophy* 106 (2009): 463-473.

⁶ Shaffer, "Not-Exact-Truths."

practical reasoning respects what a number of variously motivated philosophers have convincingly argued about epistemic rationality and inexact truth to a much greater extent than do any of the other proposals. This is interesting because the parties to the debate about pragmatic encroachment and the defenders of the knowledge norm of practical reasoning have by and large simply assumed some implicit philosophical or folk theory of rationality in the discussion of these ideas that ignores the practical rationality of inexact, partial or approximate truths. A number of other philosophers have recently and compellingly argued that rational thinking and acting involves the use of approximations, idealizations and/or inexact truths.⁷ That we are less than perfectly rational is, of course, not at all a new recognition and the debates between the various defenders of the heuristics and biases tradition, the ecological rationality model and more traditional views attests to this.⁸ We do not need to go into the details of these debates here, but what they strongly suggest is that we sometimes base both practical and theoretical reasoning on propositions that are not-exactly-true and that we can be efficient problem solvers and deliberators in even though we do not reason in maximally accurate ways on the basis of exact truths.⁹ We often trade degrees of accuracy with respect to truth for things like efficiency, ease of use and generality without compromising rationality or success. There is nothing irrational about employing approximate, partial or inexact truths in our practical reasoning and JBAT-PR reflects this whereas the stronger alternatives alluded to above simply do not do so. In that respect JBAT-PR is more realistic. What is then interesting for the issue at hand is that if the commonality thesis is true and JBAT-

⁷ See Catherine Elgin, *Considered Judgment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), Catherine Elgin, "True Enough," *Philosophical Issues* 14 (2004): 113-131, Nancy Cartwright, *How the Laws of Physics Lie* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), Elijah Millgram, *Hard Truths* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), Paul Teller, "Twilight of the Perfect Model," *Erkenntnis* 55 (2001): 393-415, Paul Teller, "The Finewright Theory," in *Nancy Cartwright's Philosophy of Science*, eds. Stephan Hartmann, Carl Hoefer, and Luc Bovens (London: Routledge, 2008), 91-116, Mark Wilson, *Wandering Significance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), and William Wimsatt, *Re-engineering Philosophy for Limited Beings: Piecewise Approximations to Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁸ See, for example, Renée Elio, ed., *Common Sense, Reasoning and Rationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), Massimo Piattei-Palmarini, *Inevitable Illusions* (New York: Wiley, 1994), Gerd Gigerenzer, *Adaptive Thinking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Michael Shaffer, "Decision Theory, Intelligent Planning and Counterfactuals," *Minds and Machines* 19 (2009): 61-92, and Michael Shaffer, *Counterfactuals and Scientific Realism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

⁹ See Shaffer, "Decision Theory, Intelligent Planning and Counterfactuals."

PR is the proper norm for acting, then JBAT-A should be the proper norm for asserting. We can state this as follows:

(JBAT-A) It is epistemically rational for S to assert $p \equiv$ it is at least the case that S is justified in believing that p is approximately true, and p is at least approximately true.

This is especially interesting because recognizing JBAT-A as the proper norm for assertion implies that Moorean sentences can be assertable and that Williamson's defense of the knowledge norm of assertion on the basis that it best explains the unassertability of Moorean sentences fails.

Consider the following case:

MATH1: Joe is an elementary school mathematics teacher and he is teaching his students about geometry. In the course of teaching his students how to calculate the area of a circle via the use of the equation $A = \pi r^2$ he tells his students the value of π . Specifically, he says that $\pi = 3.14159$. Joe works out several examples and the students learn how to do this for themselves.

MATH1 seems to be an utterly pedestrian and realistic case. There is nothing at all odd or unusual about it and such actual cases of precisely this sort have been repeated many, many times in many places. However, in MATH1 Joe asserts that $\pi = 3.14159$ via his uttering the English sentence "the value of pi is 3.14159." Now, strictly speaking, this is not true, but it is close enough for the purposes of Joe and his students. But, according to defenders of the knowledge norm of assertion, Joe is violating the proper norm of assertion. So, he is either acting inappropriately or he is failing to make an assertion. However, neither of these options is at all plausible. Joe is asserting a proposition in a perfectly ordinary sense and his assertion seems entirely appropriate in the context in which he is making that assertion. He is making an assertion that involves a not-exactly-true or approximately true proposition, and this seems entirely reasonable in the case as it is described. So, there is clearly something wrong with the knowledge norm of assertion, but it is not simply a case where one can reasonably bite the bullet and claim that Joe's behavior is epistemically irrational, as might be the case if he were baldly asserting a falsehood that was not approximately true. As such, it seems to be the case that it can be epistemically rational to assert some falsehoods when they are approximately true. Let us then consider the following slight modification of MATH1:

MATH2: Joe is an elementary school mathematics teacher and he is teaching his students about geometry. In the course of teaching his students how to calculate the area of a circle via the use of the equation $A = \pi r^2$ he tells his students the value of π . Specifically, he says that $\pi = 3.14159$. Joe works out several examples

and the students learn how to do this for themselves. After class he winks at his best student Jane, who is aware that his assertion about the value of π is only an approximation, and says “the value of π is 3.14159, but I don’t believe it.”

The Moorean sentence in MATH2 has the supposed air of paradox about it that many have attributed to Moorean sentences, but this is only a *prima facie* problem given JBAT-A. If, as we have seen in MATH1, it is epistemically appropriate to assert approximately true propositions that one is at least justified in believing to be approximately, then there is nothing wrong with Joe’s assertion in MATH2. Let us work this out in more detail. In MATH2 Joe is asserting the following compound proposition:

(C) the value of π is 3.14159, but I don’t believe it.

As in the case of the Obama assertion, asserting C involves the assertion of a compound proposition made up of the following two component propositions:

(CP1) The value of π is 3.14159.

(CP2) I do not believe that the value of π is 3.14159.

In attempting to assert C, Joe’s assertion of CP1 might initially appear to grate against his assertion that CP2, but this dissonance vanishes when the assertion is understood in terms of JBAT-A. If C is properly asserted with respect to JBAT-A, then both CP1 and CP2 are at least approximately true and it is at least the case that Joe is justified in believing that they are approximately true. In the case of CP1 this is because that proposition is approximately true and Joe is justified in believing that it is approximately true. In the case of CP2 this is because that proposition is true and he is justified in believing that it is true, so he doesn’t really believe that the value of π is, strictly speaking, 3.14159. So, the context of the assertion of CP1 in MATH2 renders that assertion epistemically rational, despite its being an approximation, and this is fully compatible with the simultaneous epistemically rational assertion of CP2. In virtue of this observation Joe is making a real and fully coherent assertion in asserting C, despite its superficially paradoxical character. What he is saying meets the JBAT-A standard for assertion. As a result Williamson’s, claims that Moorean sentences are unassertable and this fact is (best) explained by the knowledge norm of assertion are not compelling. It is simply false that all Moorean sentences are unassertable and so the knowledge norm *cannot* be the best explanation of the unassertability of such sentences.