

WHAT I LEARNED IN THE LUNCH ROOM ABOUT ASSERTION AND PRACTICAL REASONING

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ABSTRACT: It is increasingly argued that there is a single unified constitutive norm of both assertion and practical reasoning. The most common suggestion is that knowledge is this norm. If this is correct, then we would expect that a diagnosis of problematic assertions should manifest as problematic reasons for acting. Jennifer Lackey has recently argued that assertions epistemically grounded in isolated second-hand knowledge (ISHK) are unwarranted. I argue that decisions epistemically grounded in premises based on ISHK also seem inappropriate. I finish by suggesting that this finding has important implications for the debates regarding the norms of assertion and practical reasoning.

KEYWORDS: assertion, practical reasoning, testimony, norms, isolated second-hand knowledge, knowledge norm

1. Introduction

A common feature of efforts to articulate norms of assertion has been a search for the appropriate epistemic standard for warranted assertibility. Some have called this the *quantity view* of assertoric norms: the name derives from the idea that an assertion is warranted when it is grounded in a sufficient quantity or degree of epistemic support.

A recent argument put forward by Jennifer Lackey,¹ and further developed by Adam Carter and Emma Gordon,² aims to show that certain cases of assertions grounded in isolated second-hand knowledge (ISHK) are not warrantably assertible. ISHK is, in effect, knowledge grounded entirely on someone else's say-so, without the speaker's possessing independent grounds for knowledge. The relevant implications of this argument are, first, that knowledge of what one asserts is not sufficient epistemic support for warranted assertibility; and second,

¹ Jennifer Lackey, "Assertion and Isolated Second-Hand Knowledge," in *Assertion: New Philosophical Essays*, eds. Jessica Brown and Herman Cappelen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 251-76.

² J. Adam Carter and Emma C. Gordon, "Norms of Assertion: The Quantity and Quality of Epistemic Support," *Philosophia* 39, 4 (2011): 615-635.

that the quantity view is false. In this paper I offer support for the view that assertions grounded in ISHK are not warrantably assertible, based on reflections on a reluctance to use instances of ISHK as premises in practical reasoning. This position suggests a unified account of the norms of assertion and practical reasoning – an idea that has received growing support in the literature.³

It's important to note that I am not defending, *per se*, Lackey's claim that assertions epistemically grounded in ISHK are unwarrantably assertible. Nor am I defending the view that assertion and practical reasoning are governed by a single constitutive norm. However, if assertion and practical reasoning *are* governed by the same constitutive norm, then we would expect that assertions epistemically grounded in ISHK being inappropriate will be, *mutatis mutandis*, paired with decisions epistemically grounded in ISHK being inappropriate. So if it's the case that decisions epistemically grounded in ISHK are inappropriate, then this is abductive evidence for Lackey's claim that assertions so grounded are also inappropriate. Furthermore, if both assertions and practical reasoning epistemically grounded in ISHK seem inappropriate, then this is evidence for a unified norm of both practical reasoning and assertion.

2. Assertion and Isolated Second-Hand Knowledge

There's still a lively debate over plausible candidates for the central (epistemic) norm of assertion. The principal competitors are the knowledge norm (KNA), truth norm (TNA), and some version of a justified belief norm (JNA). Specifically, I'll mention Lackey's⁴ reasonable-to-believe norm (RTBNA) and McKinnon's⁵ supportive reasons norm (SRNA).

KNA one may assert p only if one knows that p.⁶

³ Most notably, from John Hawthorne, Jason Stanley, "Knowledge and Action," *Journal of Philosophy* 105, 10 (2008): 571-590, and Jeremy Fantl, Matt McGrath, *Knowledge in an Uncertain World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). There's also a close connection with assertibility and licensing inferences in Robert Brandom, "Asserting," *Nous* 17, 4 (1983): 153-71, and *Making it Explicit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). Cf. Jessica Brown, "Fallibilism and the Knowledge Norm for Assertion and Practical Reasoning," in *Assertion: New Philosophical Essays*, 153-74.

⁴ Jennifer Lackey, "Norms of Assertion," *Nous* 41, 4 (2007): 594-626.

⁵ Rachel McKinnon, "The Supportive Reasons Norm of Assertion," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, forthcoming.

⁶ Compare, e.g., Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Keith DeRose, "Assertion, Knowledge, and Context," *Philosophical Review* 111 (2002): 167-203, John Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

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- TNA one may assert p only if p (is true).⁷
- JNA one may assert p only if one is (epistemically) justified in believing that p.⁸
- RTBNA i) one may assert that p only if it's reasonable for one to believe that p, and
 ii) if one asserted that p, one would assert that p at least in part because it's reasonable to believe that p.⁹
- SRNA i) One may assert that p only if the speaker has supportive reasons for p, and
 ii) the relevant conventional and pragmatic elements of the context of assertion are present¹⁰

Each of the canvassed norms, except perhaps SRNA, seems committed to the following sufficiency thesis:

- KNA-S* one is properly epistemically positioned to assert that p if one knows that p.¹¹

This is easy to see, since if justification is the epistemic standard required to assert properly, then knowledge, being a stronger epistemic state, is sufficient for satisfying JNA/RTBNA. The same applies for TNA and KNA. It would be a problem, then, if there were cases in which a speaker asserts something she knows and yet fails to warrantably assert, where the failure is due to an epistemic deficiency. Lackey¹² argues for a number of such cases: assertions based on isolated second-hand knowledge (ISHK).

An agent has ISHK when she gains knowledge of a proposition based (almost) entirely on the reliable testimony of another agent. The knowledge is

2004), and Jason Stanley, "Knowledge and Certainty," *Philosophical Issues* 18 (2008): 33-55, among others.

⁷ Matthew Weiner, "Must We Know What We Say?" *Philosophical Review* 114, 2 (2005): 227-251.

⁸ Compare, e.g., Igor Douven, "Assertion, Knowledge, and Rational Credibility," *Philosophical Review* 115, 4 (2006): 449-85 and Jonathan Kvanvig, "Assertion, Knowledge, and Lotteries," in *Williamson on Knowledge*, eds. Patrick Greenough and Duncan Pritchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 140-160.

⁹ Lackey, "Norms of Assertion." Compare Rachel Rhys McKinnon, "How Do You Know That 'How Do You Know' Challenges a Speaker's Knowledge?" *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 93, 1 (2012): 65-83.

¹⁰ McKinnon, "The Supportive Reasons."

¹¹ Lackey, "Assertion and Isolated," 252.

¹² Lackey, "Assertion and Isolated."

isolated because she lacks independent reasons for justifying her belief (or assertion), and the knowledge is second-hand because it derives its justification from testimony. Lackey argues that cases of ISHK are not necessarily unwarrantedly assertible *per se*, but become so particularly “when a subject’s assertion that *p* is grounded in such knowledge in contexts where the hearer reasonably has the right to expect the asserter to possess more than merely isolated second-hand knowledge....”¹³

One of her central cases is of a student, Jamie, coming into a professor’s office who accuses another student, Sam, of cheating. This charge is based solely on Jamie’s having heard, from her trustworthy and reliable friend Colin, that Sam has cheated. Lackey argues that Jamie’s assertion, “Sam Smith cheated on the midterm exam,” is unwarranted. A professor receiving Jamie’s assertion, Lackey writes, would reasonably expect Jamie to possess some evidence other than the isolated testimony of Colin.¹⁴ So while it’s plausible that Jamie *knows* that Sam cheated based on Colin’s testimony, it’s questionable whether Jamie can warrantably assert as much to the professor. Since Jamie’s assertion has the epistemic status of knowledge but seems unassertible, this is taken as evidence against KNA-S* and the quantity view.

3. ISHK and Practical Reasoning

Some writers have suggested a connection between the norm of assertion and the norm of practical reasoning. Hawthorne and Stanley,¹⁵ for example, argue that one should only use premises in practical reasoning that one knows. Furthermore, if one should only make decisions based on premises one knows, and if we typically use people’s assertions (*i.e.*, testimony) as reasons for action, this suggests that one should only assert that *p* if one knows that *p* (*i.e.*, KNA). I offer a very simple argument to the conclusion that, insofar as we think it correct to assimilate norms of assertion to norms of practical reasoning, and *vice versa*, we can adduce support for the ISHK objection to KNA-S* based on observations of our reluctance to use instances of ISHK as premises in practical reasoning.¹⁶

¹³ Lackey, “Assertion and Isolated,” 254.

¹⁴ Lackey notes in a footnote that this may be why courts disallow hearsay as testimony. Cf. Lackey, “Assertion and Isolated,” 261 fn6.

¹⁵ Hawthorne, Stanley, *Knowledge and Action*.

¹⁶ One could argue that insofar as the apparent unassertibility of assertions grounded in ISHK is evidence against the quantity view of assertoric norms, then, by parity of reasoning, the reluctance to use ISHK as premises in practical reasoning is evidence against a quantity view of norms of practical reasoning.

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I was recently in our department's lunch room when I overheard a discussion between colleagues about one colleague, call her Jill, keeping a particular brand of 'leak proof' plastic dish inside a ziplock bag.¹⁷ They were questioning why Jill would keep a 'leak-proof' product protected in another supposedly leak-proof product. This implied that she didn't quite trust the dishware to live up to its claim, something she readily admitted. Jill had recently purchased the product based partly on her observation that many other members of the department owned the same dishware. However, she lacked first-hand evidence of the leak-proof properties of the dishware. That is, while she knew that her colleagues used the same dishware, she hadn't seen evidence of its leak-proof properties in action. Rather, Jill bought the dishware (almost) entirely based on her colleagues' testimony to the effectiveness of the dishes. Now, let's suppose that her colleagues are sufficiently epistemically situated such that their testimony is sufficient to impart knowledge to Jill. Her decision to purchase the dishware was thus made with an instance of ISHK as a premise.

Notice, however, Jill's reluctance to make the decision to pack her lunch to work in the new dishware alone. Her reluctance to trust the dish manifests a reluctance to rely on the ISHK as a premise in her practical reasoning: trust is *earned*, she says. Intuitively, Jill wanted to see for herself, rather than merely to rely on the ISHK for her decision to pack her lunch in only the dish. This is a distinctive feature of what (sometimes) seems unassertible about propositions grounded on ISHK. What seems wrong about Jamie's assertion is that she doesn't have any first-person evidence that Sam cheated: she's relying entirely on hearsay. Moreover, Jill's behaviour seems to represent a fairly robust phenomenon. Although we may form a justified belief, or even gain knowledge, through ISHK, we are reluctant to use instances of ISHK as premises in practical reasoning: we want to be personally acquainted with evidence, even though it's the same sort of evidence providing the epistemic justification for the ISHK. We want to see for ourselves, as we say.

Insofar as evidence from what we're willing to use as premises in practical reasoning can tell us something important about norms of assertion, this provides further support for the unassertibility of propositions when such assertions are epistemically grounded only on ISHK. Furthermore, insofar as assertions and decisions epistemically grounded in ISHK both seem inappropriate, this is evidence for a unified norm of assertion and practical reasoning.

¹⁷ I'm using these as generic terms rather than brand-names.