WHY ASSERTION AND PRACTICAL REASONING ARE POSSIBLY NOT GOVERNED BY THE SAME EPISTEMIC NORM

Robin McKENNA

ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on Martin Montminy's recent attempt to show that assertion and practical reasoning are necessarily governed by the same epistemic norm ("Why Assertion and Practical Reasoning Must be Governed By the Same Epistemic Norm," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly,* 2013). I show that the attempt fails. I finish by considering the upshot for the recent debate concerning the connection between the epistemic norms of assertion and practical reasoning.

KEYWORDS: epistemic norms, assertion, practical reasoning, speech acts

Introductory remarks

Many think that knowledge is the epistemic norm of both assertion and practical reasoning:

KRA: One must: assert that p only if one knows that p.

KA: One must: act on the belief that p only if one knows that p.[1]

This prompts one to wonder whether there's any connection between the epistemic norm of assertion and the epistemic norm of practical reasoning. The question is whether one would expect the norms to coincide, not whether the norms just happen to coincide. One reason why one would expect the norms to coincide would be if one could derive KRA from KA, or KA from KRA, or both KA

---

[1] See, for instance, John Hawthorne and Jason Stanley, "Knowledge and action," *Journal of Philosophy* 105, 10 (2008): 571–590, Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its limits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), Ch. 11, and Timothy Williamson, "Knowledge, context, and the agent's point of view", in *Contextualism in Philosophy: Knowledge, Meaning, and Truth*, eds. Gerhard Preyer and Georg Peter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 91–114. Two clarifications: First, I ignore complications concerning how best to formulate KRA and KA. Second, while I focus on the necessity directions of both norms everything I say will go for the sufficiency directions, and therefore the biconditional versions, too.

and KRA from some third thing. Another reason would be if one had good abductive reasons for expecting the norms to coincide.[2] I'll call the thesis that one would expect the norms of assertion and practical reasoning to coincide 'commonality.'[3]

Martin Montminy[4] argues that KA, together with what he calls the "manifestation norm of assertion," entails KRA. By this he means that any assertion which satisfies the manifestation norm of assertion and is based on known premises (therefore satisfying KA) thereby satisfies KRA. In this paper I argue that the derivation fails. That is, I show that there are assertions which satisfy the manifestation norm of assertion and are based on known premises yet don't satisfy KRA. I, first, outline the derivation and, second, explain why it fails. I finish by discussing the upshot for commonality.

The derivation

Montminy follows a distinguished tradition within speech act theory by taking speech acts in general, and therefore assertion in particular, to be individuated via the attitude they express.[5] A natural suggestion is that assertions express belief:

> BRA: One must: assert that p only if one believes that p.[6]

The idea is not that, in order to assert that p, one must believe that p. That would make insincere assertion – asserting that p while believing that not-p – impossible. Rather, BRA is a condition for sincere or non-defective assertion. One's assertion is sincere or non-defective only if one believes that which one asserts. However, as Montminy notes,[7] BRA seems to rule that assertions such as the following aren't defective:

> DIRECTIONS: Two philosophers, Professor Brown and Professor Green, are debating the quickest way to get to the restaurant. Professor Brown asserts that the quickest way is to turn right. Professor Green doesn't get on at all well with Professor Brown and is disposed to contradict whatever he says. So she asserts that the quickest way is to turn left, not right. However, it just so happens that Professor Green actually believes that the quickest way is to turn left, although that belief played no role in her asserting that the quickest way is to turn left.

Montminy thinks that cases like DIRECTIONS motivate adopting an alternative to BRA, viz.:

> MRA: One must: assert that p only if one's assertion manifests one's belief that p.

Again, the idea is not that, in order to assert that p, one must manifest one's belief that p. That would make it impossible to assert that p while not manifesting one's belief that p. Rather, MRA is a condition for non-defective assertion. But what's involved in assertion manifesting belief? Montminy writes:

> When a speaker manifests her belief that p in asserting that p, her belief is a motivating reason for her assertion: that the speaker believes that p would explain (at least in part) why she asserted that p.[8]

When one asserts that p one manifests a number of beliefs, viz. those beliefs that, taken together, explain why one asserted that p. For example: imagine that Professor Brown believes both that the quickest way to get to the restaurant is to turn right and that his audience wants to know where the restaurant is, and he asserts that the quickest way is to turn right based on these beliefs. In doing so he manifests both the belief that quickest way is to turn right and the belief that his audience wants to know where the restaurant is.[9] From this account of manifestation, together with MRA, it follows that Professor Green's assertion in DIRECTIONS is defective. It is specified that Professor Green's belief that the quickest way is to turn left played no role in her asserting that the quickest way is to turn left.

Montminy[10] argues that we can derive a knowledge norm of assertion from MRA and KA (the knowledge norm of practical reasoning):

---

[8] Montminy, "Why Assertion and Practical Reasoning Must be Governed By the Same Epistemic Norm," 59.

[9] Montminy's considered view seems to be that the norm of assertion requires that one knows both that what one asserts is true and that every other belief that one manifests in asserting it is true (Montminy, "Why Assertion and Practical Reasoning Must be Governed By the Same Epistemic Norm," 65).

[10] Montminy, "Why Assertion and Practical Reasoning Must be Governed By the Same Epistemic Norm," 62.

Robin McKenna

    1. One's assertion that p must manifest one's belief that p (MRA).
    2. Assertions manifest beliefs when they're based on those beliefs.
    3. Actions must be based on beliefs that count as knowledge (KA).
    4. Assertions are a type of (linguistic) action.
    5. Assertions must be based on beliefs that count as knowledge.
    6. One's assertion that p must be based on one's knowledge that p.
    7. One's assertion that p must manifest one's knowledge that p.

The conclusion can be restated as follows:

> KMRA: One must: assert that p only if one's assertion manifests one's knowledge that p.

Note that KMRA differs slightly from the original KRA. This is only to be expected, given that the aim is to individuate assertion in terms of the attitude it expresses or manifests. If one thinks that the norm of assertion is knowledge, and one thinks that assertion is individuated in terms of the attitude it manifests, then one will think that assertion manifests knowledge.[11]

Why the derivation fails

In this section I argue that the derivation fails. I'll start by showing that, on Montminy's intended reading of what is involved in assertion manifesting belief, the derivation is unsuccessful. I'll then argue that the natural amendment to his reading won't help.

    Given the quoted passage above, Montminy's intended reading seems to be this:

> MANIFESTATION: S's assertion that p manifests the belief that p iff S's belief that p explains in part why S asserted that p.

Now consider this variant on DIRECTIONS:

> DIRECTIONS*: Two philosophers, Professor Brown and Professor Green, are debating the quickest way to get to the restaurant. Professor Brown has asserted that the quickest way is to turn right. Professor Green believes that the quickest way is to turn right. However, while she knows that her grounds for believing this are fairly good, she also knows that they don't suffice for knowledge. Usually, Professor Green only asserts what she thinks she knows. But she also knows that they'll get to the restaurant eventually, whether they turn left or right, and she has no appetite for getting into an argument with Professor Brown. Professor Green reasons as follows:

---

[11] For a similar view see John Turri, "The Express Knowledge Account of Assertion," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 89, 1 (2011): 37–45.

1. I believe that the quickest way is to turn right, albeit on grounds that don't suffice for knowledge.
2. Usually, I only assert what I think I know.
3. However, I know we'll get there regardless, and I have no appetite for getting into an argument.
4. So I'll assert that the quickest way is to turn right. [12]

According to MANIFESTATION, Professor Green's assertion that the quickest way is to turn right manifests her belief that the quickest way is to turn right. That belief, together with her belief that they'll get to the restaurant eventually whether they turn left or right, explains why she asserts that the quickest way is to turn right. So Professor Green's assertion satisfies MRA.[13] Further, her assertion is based on known premises. She knows that she believes (on grounds that don't suffice for knowledge) that the quickest way is to turn right, and she knows that they'll get to the restaurant regardless. So Professor Green's assertion satisfies KA. However, Professor Green's assertion doesn't satisfy KMRA because, as she herself knows, she doesn't know that the quickest way is to turn right. So the derivation fails. An assertion that p can manifest the belief that p and be based on known premises yet not be known.[14]

The problematic step in the derivation is from (5) to (6):

5. Assertions must be based on beliefs that count as knowledge.

6. One's assertion that p must be based on one's known belief that p.

Professor Green's assertion that the quickest way is to turn right must be and indeed is based on beliefs that count as knowledge (her belief that she believes on grounds that don't suffice for knowledge that the quickest way is to turn right, and her belief that they'll get there regardless). But it doesn't follow that Professor

---

[12] Why are steps (1) and (2) required for Professor Green to reach her decision? Imagine that her reluctance to assert what she realises she doesn't know is so great that she needs the re-assurance of knowing that she has good grounds for what she asserts, albeit grounds that fall short of knowledge.

[13] Objection: Professor Green's assertion manifests the belief that she believes that the quickest way is to turn right, not the belief that the quickest way is to turn right. So it violates MRA. Response: While Professor Green uses her belief that she believes that the quickest way is to turn right as a premise in her practical reasoning (rather than just 'the quickest way is to turn right'), it seems right to say that her decision to assert is still based, in part, on her belief that the quickest way is to turn right. If she didn't have the first-order belief then she wouldn't have decided to assert. She can't have the second-order belief without the first-order belief, and the second-order belief is a vital step in her decision to assert.

[14] Note that DIRECTIONS* also shows that an assertion can satisfy BRA (the belief norm of assertion) and be based on known premises yet not be known.

Green's assertion that the quickest way is to turn right must be based on her knowledge that the quickest way is to turn right. All that KA requires is that one's assertions, like one's actions in general, must be based on known beliefs. It doesn't require that one's assertion that p must be based on one's known belief that p.

This shows that, on Montminy's intended reading of what is involved in assertion manifesting belief, the derivation fails. But there's a fairly natural amendment that one might think will save the derivation:

> MANIFESTATION*: S's assertion that p manifests the belief that p iff S's belief that p non-deviantly causes S to assert that p.[15]

There are all sorts of ways in which one's belief that p can deviantly cause one to assert that p. For example, say that I believe that the bank is round the corner, intend to deceive my interlocutors by asserting that the bank isn't round the corner, but misspeak and assert that the bank is round the corner. So perhaps Professor Green's belief that the quickest way is to turn right causes her to assert that the quickest way is to turn right, but in a deviant way. To make this plausible, note that it's specified that Professor Green usually only asserts what she thinks she knows. This case, in which she asserts yet knows that she lacks knowledge, is an exception to the rule. Exceptions to a rule are deviant.

Consider another variant on DIRECTIONS:

> DIRECTIONS**: Two philosophers, Professor Brown and Professor Green, are debating the quickest way to get to the restaurant. Professor Green believes that the quickest way is to turn right. However, while she knows that her grounds for believing this are fairly good, she also knows that they don't suffice for knowledge. However, Professor Green is habitually fairly lax in her assertions; she often asserts things she hasn't got particularly good grounds for believing. Further, she knows this about herself. Professor Green reasons as follows:
>
> 1. I believe that the quickest way is to turn right, albeit on grounds that don't suffice for knowledge.
>
> 2. I usually assert based on grounds that don't suffice for knowledge.
>
> 3. So I'll assert that the quickest way is to turn right.

Again, Professor Green's assertion is based on known premises, and it's specified that she habitually asserts even when she realises that she lacks knowledge. It's hard to see how her belief that the quickest way is to turn right could have caused her assertion that the quickest way is to turn right in a non-deviant way. So the amended MANIFESTATION* won't save the derivation.

---

[15] Montminy himself suggests this reading at one point (Montminy, "Why Assertion and Practical Reasoning Must be Governed By the Same Epistemic Norm," 59 fn. 7).

Whither commonality?

Where does this leave commonality (the idea that we should expect there to be a common epistemic norm of assertion and practical reasoning)? I mentioned in the introductory section that there are two reasons one might have to endorse commonality. The first would be if one could derive the norm of assertion from the norm of practical reasoning, the norm of practical reasoning from the norm of assertion, or the norm of assertion and practical reasoning from the norm of some third thing. I'm skeptical about the prospects for carrying out any of these derivations.[16] The second would be if one had good abductive grounds for expecting the norms to coincide. I think this is a far more promising route, and I'll finish by discussing one possible ground.

It seems clear that we often use assertions as reasons for action.[17] If I assert that the restaurant is round the corner to my audience then, assuming we're in a normal sort of situation, I expect my audience to act on my assertion, and my audience expects to be able to act on my assertion. If we assume that knowledge is the norm of practical reasoning, this provides some support for thinking that knowledge is the norm of assertion. I wouldn't expect my audience to act on my assertion if I didn't expect them to take me to know that the restaurant is round the corner, and my audience wouldn't expect to be able to act on my assertion if they didn't expect me to assert only if I know that the restaurant is round the corner. I certainly don't think one could derive KRA from KA on this basis.[18] Rather, the idea would be that the best way to make sense of both my expectation and my audiences' expectation would be if knowledge were the norm of assertion as well as the norm of practical reasoning.

While I think this sort of strategy is promising, a word of warning. Both KRA and KA are exceptionless norms. Knowledge isn't the norm of most assertion or most practical reasoning, knowledge is the norm of all assertion and all practical reasoning. But all we have are the observations that we *often* use assertions as reasons for action, and that *in normal situations* speakers expect audiences to act on their assertions, and audiences expect to be able to act on speakers' assertions. While this might suggest that knowledge is often the norm of

---

[16] Brown ("Assertion and practical reasoning") provides a battery of arguments against a range of possible derivations.

[17] McKinnon makes this observation, and suggests that it provides abductive support for commonality (Rachel R. McKinnon, What I Learned in the Lunch Room about Assertion and Practical Reasoning," *Logos & Episteme* 3, 4 (2012): 568).

[18] Brown ("Assertion and practical reasoning," 144–155) argues convincingly that such a derivation would fail.

Robin McKenna

assertion as well as the norm of practical reasoning, or that in normal situations knowledge is the norm of assertion as well as the norm of practical reasoning, it's unclear why it suggests that knowledge is always the norm of assertion as well as the norm of practical reasoning.[19]