

ASSERTION: JUST ONE WAY TO TAKE IT BACK

Mona SIMION

ABSTRACT: According to Jonathan Kvanvig, the practice of taking back one's assertion when finding out that one has been mistaken or gettiered fails to speak in favour of a knowledge norm of assertion. To support this claim, he introduces a distinction between taking back the content of the assertion, and taking back the speech act itself. This paper argues that Kvanvig's distinction does not successfully face close speech-act-theoretic scrutiny. Furthermore, I offer an alternative diagnosis of the target cases sourced in the normativity of action.

KEYWORDS: assertion, excuse, knowledge norm, Kvanvig, taking back

1. Introduction

One must: assert that *p* only if one knows that *p*. Or at least that's what a very popular view on the epistemic normativity of assertion stipulates. This has become known in the literature as the Knowledge Norm of Assertion (KNA).¹ In spite its popularity, KNA is taken by some to be too strong a requirement. Jonathan Kvanvig, for instance, defends a weaker, justified belief norm on assertion (henceforth, JNA), where the relevant epistemic standing is knowledge-level justification.² It is argued that KNA, as opposed to JNA, has a hard time explaining cases in which assertions on some lesser epistemic standings do not render the speakers subject to criticism. Assertions on false belief that the speaker mistakes for knowledge and assertions on gettiered belief are cases in point.

Defenders of KNA have mostly employed one version or another of what has become known as the 'excuse manoeuvre.' Williamson, for instance, argues that speakers asserting on what they mistakenly take to be knowledge, although in

¹ This paper is only concerned with the necessity direction of the knowledge norm of assertion. The *locus classicus* for the defence of KNA is Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

² E.g. Jonathan Kvanvig, "Assertion, Knowledge and Lotteries," in *Williamson on Knowledge*, ed. Patrick Grenough and Duncan Pritchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 140-160 and Jonathan Kvanvig, "Norms of Assertion," in *Assertion: New Philosophical Essays*, ed. Jessica Brown and Herman Cappelen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 233-250.

breach of the norm, have a good excuse for making an impermissible assertion.³ One way to see this is by noticing that, as soon as they discover they have been mistaken or gettiered, speakers will typically take back their assertions.

In defence of JNA, Kvanvig distinguishes between two ways of taking back an assertion: by taking back the speech act itself, in cases in which the speaker lacks proper justification for his assertion, or by only taking back the content of the speech act – in cases of false or gettiered justified beliefs. The norm of assertion, Kvanvig argues, is a norm governing a type of human activity. Therefore, only when the act itself is taken back should we consider the norm to have been broken.

This paper is a rejoinder on behalf of KNA. It is argued that Kvanvig's distinction between two ways of taking back does not successfully face close speech-act-theoretic scrutiny. To show this, I will first introduce the target cases (section 2); further on, I briefly outline Kvanvig's 'taking back' argument and show why it fails (section 3). In section 4, I will offer a diagnosis of Kvanvig's cases sourced in the normativity of action, which will turn out to be perfectly compatible with KNA. In the last section I conclude (5).

2. Assertions from Belief that Falls Short of Knowledge

Consider the following two cases:

(i) Assertion on justified false belief:

FAKE SNOW: [...] it is winter, and it looks exactly as it would if there were snow outside, but in fact that white stuff is not snow but foam put there by a film crew of whose existence I have no idea. I do not know that there is snow outside, because there is no snow outside, but it is quite reasonable for me to believe not just that there is snow outside but that I know that there is; for me, it is to all appearances a banal case of perceptual knowledge. Surely it is then reasonable for me to assert that there is snow outside.⁴

And

(ii) Assertion on justified true belief that falls short of knowledge:

FAKE BARNS: [...] suppose that Wendy correctly sees the only real barn that, unbeknownst to her, is completely surrounded by barn facades and asserts to me "There was a barn in the field we just passed" on this basis.⁵

³ Williamson, *Knowledge* and "Replies to Critics," in *Williamson on Knowledge*, ed. Patrick Grenough and Duncan Pritchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 279-385.

⁴ Williamson, *Knowledge*, 257.

⁵ Jennifer Lackey, "Norms of Assertion," *Nous* 41 (2008): 544.

In both the cases above, speakers assert from what they mistakenly take to be knowledge. And, intuitively, they can hardly be subject to blame. Also, notice that no further normative constraints seem to be active in these cases, so as to maybe override the epistemic requirement.

In defence of KNA, Williamson argues that, in the cases above, although the speaker has a good excuse for having broken KNA, he is still in breach of the norm. According to him, it would seem natural for someone who had strong reasons to think what he asserted was true, to apologize when finding out it was actually false. Here is Williamson:

Misrecognizing someone, I may say: “That’s Sasha – no, sorry, it’s not – it’s just someone who looks very like him.” [...] Nor is it strange for a newspaper to apologize to its readers for an error in a previous edition, nor for the author of a book to apologize in the preface for any remaining errors, even though every effort has been made to ensure that the contents are correct.⁶

Equally, it would not seem very odd if Wendy, after you point out to her that she’s in Fake Barn County, were to say something along the lines of: “Sorry, I didn’t know that.”

3. Two Ways of Taking Back

Notice, however, that Williamson’s defence fails to establish that excuses, while not odd, are really *necessary* in these cases. However, one thing is clear: after finding out that one was mistaken or gettiered, one should at least not stand by the commitments implied by one’s assertion anymore. Thus, rather than presenting excuses as such, an appropriate reaction would go along the lines of “Oh, I take that back. I was not aware of there being a film crew producing fake snow outside,” or “Oh, I take that back, I had no idea we were in Fake Barn County.”

In support of JNA, however, Jonathan Kvanvig distinguishes two types of attitude a speaker may have in response to her assertions being corrected. Kvanvig argues that “in some cases of correction, we take back the content of our speech act, and in other cases we apologize for, and regret, the very act itself.” For example, if we assert *p* and then are shown that *p* is false, we take back the content of our speech act, but we needn’t apologize for or regret the very act itself. “In fact, were [we] to apologize, the natural response would be dismissive: Give it a rest, nobody’s always right...” According to Kvanvig, the same distinction plays out with gettiered assertions too. Thus, presumably, in the case of Wendy above, if

⁶Williamson, “Replies,” 345.

after she asserts “There’s a barn in the field,” and I point out to her that she can’t possibly know that, as we are in Fake Barn County, she would just take back *what* she said, not to apologize for having said it.

Kvanvig argues that things are different when you don’t have justification for what you say, even if, by some bizarre twist, you turn out to be right. In support of this, he offers the case of Billy Bob, a Texas Democrat, who, based on a headline on a tabloid, asserts to his friend Sue: “George Bush is a communist!” When Sue points out to him that he should not trust tabloids, Billy Bob apologizes: “You’re right, I shouldn’t have believed that paper and I shouldn’t have said what I did. I take it back.”

According to Kvanvig, in this situation, apologizing and taking back the speech act itself is the right thing to do. He argues that norms of assertion are norms governing a certain type of human activity, and thus relate to the speech act itself rather than the content of such an act. As such, only when the speech act itself is at fault, do we have reason to think that some norm of assertion is broken; when only the content of the assertion needs to be taken back, the assertion itself is not at fault.⁷

Here is, however, some reason to doubt that Kvanvig’s distinction works; speech act literature⁸ distinguishes between the content of a speech act and the illocutionary force by which the content is being put forward. One can perform various speech acts upon *p*: one can ask whether *p*, promise that *p*, threaten that *p*, etc. In the case of assertion, by uttering *p* the speaker presents *p* as true.

Given this, a *proposition* is itself communicatively inert; that is to say that to actually perform a speech act, one has to put forth a proposition with an *illocutionary force*, such as assertion, promise, command, etc.

But if the propositional content is inert in isolation, it is less clear how Kvanvig envisages one being able to take it back in isolation. To see this, notice that assertion, as opposed to other types of actions – say, having vacationed in Hawaii – can be ‘taken back.’ Not in the sense that one can change the past as to not have had asserted in the first place, of course. Rather, taking back an assertion that *p* refers to no longer standing behind the commitments implied by having asserted that *p*. Now, *p* itself, in isolation, does not imply any commitments whatsoever. That is, depending on which illocutionary force we will act upon it with, different commitments will follow. If I promise that *p*, for instance, I

⁷Kvanvig, “Assertion, Knowledge and Lotteries,” 148.

⁸See, e.g. Mitchell Green, “Speech Acts,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/speech-acts/>. Accessed January 2016.

commit myself to a future course of action; if I assert that p, I commit myself to, at least, it being the case that p.

If that is the case, it becomes clear that in order to take an assertion back, that is, to be released from the commitments implied by it, it has to be the case that I take back everything, force and content. I cannot only take back the content p, because p in isolation does not commit me to anything, inasmuch as I do not present it as true, or command p, or promise p, etc. Also, I cannot only take the action back either, because presenting nothing as true, or promising nothing also fails to imply any commitments on my part.

So the only way in which one can take an assertion back is by not standing behind the commitments implied by the whole compound: having presented p as true.

4. Diagnosis

Something seems, indeed, intuitively different between the two cases presented by Kvanvig, though. To see what it is, let us start by clearing the normative air a bit.

According to a fairly uncontroversial view in the normativity literature⁹ that has been with us since Aristotle, one is an apt candidate for blame for violating a norm only if the agent is aware of what it is she is doing or bringing about.¹⁰ As such, one may reasonably do something impermissible because one reasonably but falsely believes it to be permissible. If your car's (well maintained) speedometer has unluckily just broken, you might break the norms of safe driving due to its misreadings, and still be blameless for doing so. For all you know, your act is proper according to the norm, even though, in fact, this is not the case. Similarly, if you fail to keep your promise to meet your friend Ted for lunch because your (otherwise highly reliable) secretary misinforms you about the time at which you're supposed to meet him, you're blameless for not showing up. However, your having broken your promise remains an improper act according to the norms of social commitment.

⁹ See e.g. Ishtiyaque Haji, *Moral Appraisability* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) and Michael Zimmerman, "Moral Responsibility and Ignorance," *Ethics* 107 (1997): 410-426. People working in this field disagree whether a belief or a knowledge condition is appropriate for blameworthiness. Although not much in this paper hinges on this, I here go with the stronger view – supporting the belief condition – both because I find it more plausible, and in order to stay on the safe side by attributing blameworthiness more generously.

¹⁰Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Terrence Irwin, transl., Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1985), 1110a-1111b4.

With regard to this though, some qualifications are needed. The literature¹¹ distinguishes between direct and indirect blameworthiness for performing an action. One is indirectly blameworthy for something x, if and only if one is blameworthy for it by way of being blameworthy for something else, y, of which x is the consequence.

One could be indirectly blameworthy for performing an action out of ignorance, by being directly blameworthy for being ignorant. Notice, though, that in both the above cases, although the agent ends up with a false belief that his actions are in accordance with the relevant norms, this seems to happen through no fault of his own. That is, he seems to have conformed to his epistemic duties: coming to believe that you are driving at a certain speed via looking at your car's well maintained speedometer is a quite reliable way to go about it, as is asking your secretary about your schedule for the day. Surely, if our agent were to be speeding due to his trusting his three years old son's readings of the speedometer, we would tend to find him blameworthy for his breaking the traffic norms.¹² Thus, let us formulate the principle governing the relationship between awareness of breach of the norm and blameworthiness as follows:

Blame-Awareness: An agent is blameless for performing an all-things-considered improper act if she conformed to her epistemic duties and she had good reasons to believe she was respecting the norm.

Let us now, in the light of this, go back to the cases put forth by Kvanvig. First, by *Blame-Awareness*, the speakers in FAKE SNOW and FAKE BARNES, asserting on justified belief, are epistemically blameless, both directly and indirectly. They both assert from what they mistakenly take to be knowledge, and they seem to have conformed to their epistemic duties in forming the respective beliefs. After all, perception is a pretty reliable way to go about forming beliefs. In contrast, notice that Billy Bob's belief formation process, as Sue rightly points out, does not stand very tall when it comes to reliability. So, indeed, Billy Bob is indirectly blameworthy, as he failed to conform to his epistemic duties before proceeding, which led to him being in breach of the norm.

¹¹ E.g. Zimmerman, "Moral Responsibility."

¹² It might also be that your belief is unjustified yet blameless – say because you have been brainwashed into believing your 3-year-old son on this. This case, however, concerns a control condition on blameworthiness that falls outside the scope of this paper. I discuss it more in detail in Mona Simion, "Knowledge, Rational Credibility and Assertion: The Scoreboard," in *Epistemic Reasons, Epistemic Norms and Epistemic Goals*, ed. Martin Grajner and Pedro Schmechtig (DeGruyter Berlin/Boston, forthcoming).

5. Conclusion

I have argued that Kvanvig's distinction between two ways of taking back a speech act does not successfully face close speech-act theoretic scrutiny. In order to be released from the commitments implied by a speech act, one has to take back both content and illocutionary force; one without the other will not imply any commitments to begin with. Also, I have put forth a KNA-friendly explanation of Kvanvig's target cases sourced in the normativity of action in general, so as to stay off suspicions of ad-hocness.