Assertion, Knowledge, and Predictions

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John N. Williams (1994) and Matthew Weiner (2005) invoke *predictions* in order to undermine the normative relevance of knowledge for assertions;[1] in particular, Weiner argues, predictions are important counter-examples to the knowledge account of assertion (KAA). I argue here that they are not true counter-examples at all, a point that can be agreed upon even by those who reject KAA.

Williams notes that predictions offer 'a case of claiming without claiming to know':

> I look up at the sky and say emphatically, 'It will rain soon'. I will admit that I don't pretend to have anything as strong as knowledge, but nonetheless my conviction is firm. (1994: 163)

And Weiner (2005: 230–31) submits the following prediction: Captain Jack Aubrey has long experience of naval combat against the French Navy. He and young Lieutenant Pullings have been watching ships manoeuvre off Mauritius all day. At 2 p.m., Aubrey says to Pullings,

(1) The French will wait until nightfall to attack.

Intuitively, Aubrey does not know this, even if it turns out true.[2] Nevertheless, Aubrey's asserting (1) in this case seems proper even though he doesn't know it. Such predictive assertions in the absence of knowledge appear to undermine KAA, for they seem entirely appropriate in context, and, it is thought, hearers will not assess such predicters as representing themselves as knowing.

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[1] Though Williams's main targets are Jones's (1991) and Welbourne's (1992) views of how knowledge inhabits the intentional structure of assertion, his counter-example extends to KAA.

[2] Weiner says that if Aubrey's basis for asserting had instead been his spy intercepting the French orders, we would then agree that Aubrey knows.

However, if these were correct, we should expect some of the central evidence for KAA to be missing in these cases, and it isn't. First, if asserting (1) in that context amounts to a (mere) prediction not requiring knowledge, it should be conjoinable with a conjunct disavowing knowledge:

(2) # The French will wait until nightfall to attack, but I don't know that they will.

(3) # I don't know that the French will wait, but they will.

But these sound quite bad, as do related conjunctions:

(4) # I don't know that the French will wait, but I can say that they will.

(5) # I don't know that the French will wait, but I can tell you that they will.[3]

Williams rightly notes that 'Moorean assertions made by... claimants of belief without knowledge do not cease to be absurd' (1994: 163).[4] Yet Weiner holds that Moorean conjunctions *can* be acceptable for predictions: they

> are generally acceptable in the absence of knowledge precisely be-
> cause the most likely and satisfactory warrant for believing in their
> truth is not sufficient for knowledge. Indeed, predictions ...can be
> maintained while knowledge is explicitly disclaimed. (2005: 238)

His example is Aubrey saying, after being asked about his (1),

(6) I don't *know* they'll attack – we haven't intercepted their orders – but my prediction is that they will.

But this conjunction is not akin to our (3); indeed, its final conjunct, prefaced as it is with 'my prediction is that', seems to back off from the original outright (1).[5]

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[3] See Turri (2011: 39) for discussion of such conjunctions.

[4] Williams may retort here that he doesn't count conjunctions of form (2) as 'Moorean'; but Moore himself (1962: 277), and many others, think them absurd.

[5] See also apt criticism by DeRose (2009: 97–98, n. 20).

Secondly, if KAA does not apply, we should expect that queries such as 'How do you know?' and 'Do you really know that?', which presuppose knowledge, will be inadmissible in response to predictions like (1). But in fact, they are clearly admissible, as Weiner himself acknowledges: his (6) is constructed in response to Pullings asking 'How do you know the French will wait until nightfall to attack?' If KAA didn't hold for predictions like (6), Pullings's question would be puzzling and out of line.[6]

Evidence of KAA emerges, then, even in Weiner's own attempted counterexample and its conjunction (6): given KAA, it is natural for Aubrey to concede, in the face of Pullings's question, that he doesn't know (1). And this concession is naturally coupled with a retreat by way of qualification, from the initial 'The French will wait' to the weakened 'my prediction is that they will', a retreat that is natural in light of Pullings's question only because of KAA's normative requirement that asserters know.

So even predictive assertions such as (1) are subject to KAA: that is why when one wants to make a prediction in the absence of knowledge, one typically will use a hedged rather than an outright assertion. We thus take Weiner's third way out (2005: 242–43): predictions like (1) only *seem* permissible because they are naturally and normally made in contexts of acknowledged practical urgency wherein it is recognized that knowledge won't be had, and yet predictions still must be made.[7] Given such urgent contexts, it is understandable why we often enough don't enforce the knowledge requirement with predictions.[8]

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[6] Thirdly, a point worth making but not worth leaning on: if KAA does not apply to predictions, we should find unobjectionable an outright predictive assertion that a lottery ticket will lose: one should be able to assert flat-out 'That ticket will lose', because one could thereby predict that it will lose. But most agree with Williamson (2000: 246–49) that it is improper to assert this flat-out; this agreement would be puzzling if such assertions could be mere predictions not subject to KAA. (Yet because of dissent on this data (e.g. Turri 2011: 37, n. 1), I do not rest much upon this point.)

[7] See Williamson 2000: 256.

[8] Many thanks to Ernest Sosa and John Turri for their helpful feedback.

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