

One Kind of Asking

Dennis Whitcomb

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Abstract. This paper extends several themes from recent work on norms of assertion. It does as much by applying those themes to the speech act of asking. In particular, it argues for the view that there is a species of asking which is governed by a certain norm, a norm to the effect that one should ask a question only if one doesn't know its answer.

Introduction

Consider the following speech:

I've been wondering about something. Am I the only omniscient being? This isn't a joke or a trick question. I'm genuinely curious about this. *Am I the only omniscient being?*

That question is incoherent. Yet it is not a contradiction. For contradictions are (necessarily) false and, being a question, the question at issue is neither true nor false.

Whence then the incoherence? One answer is that when we ask questions, we represent ourselves as not knowing their answers – and that (at least partly) because of this, we manage in asking “Am I the only omniscient being?” to represent ourselves as *both knowing and not knowing* whether we are omniscient. The incoherence, then, would come from a contradiction in what we represent as being true when we ask the question.

This answer isn't fully satisfactory. For one thing, it would be nice to know *why* we represent ourselves as failing to know the answers when we ask questions; to merely conjecture that we *do* so represent ourselves, with no underwriting explanation of why, is explanatorily shallow. For another thing, we *don't always* represent ourselves as failing to know the answers

to our questions. We don't do as much, for instance, when we ask questions on exams for our students, or when we ask rhetorical questions, or when we ask questions while acting in a play on a stage or in the course of telling a joke.

Nonetheless, I'll argue, there is a *kind* of question-asking in which we *do* always represent ourselves as not knowing the answers to our questions. A few months ago, a student asked me what I was writing about these days. My spouse asked me when I'll be gone to conferences this year, and my doctor asked me whether I've been wearing sunscreen. In these askings and many others, the askers were simply inquiring as to what the answers were. They weren't making jokes, or testing my knowledge, or making disguised assertions, or invoking the pretense of stage actors. They were just inquiring about what the answers were. Let me explain.

Data

First a terminological aside. The word "question" can refer to at least three sorts of things: the things we ask, the acts via which we ask those things, and the sentences that encode those things.¹ I'll play fast and loose with the distinctions among these things, ignoring them when they don't matter and letting context specify them when they do. A simple background awareness should suffice to avoid confusion.

Now to some initial data points.

Datum 1: Moore-paradoxical questions are incoherent.

As Moore famously noticed, assertions like "It is raining but I do not believe that it is raining" are incoherent despite being consistent. There is a cottage industry of attempts to explain why this is so. That industry has mostly focused on assertions. But other speech acts come in Moore-paradoxical forms as well, including askings. For instance:

It's snowing, but is it snowing?

¹ See e.g. (Braun 2011).

In order to see the incoherence of this utterance, it is important to interpret it in a certain way. Do not interpret it as a “tag question”, a question like “It’s Wednesday, right?”, in which the second part of the utterance in some sense takes back and reverses the force of the first part. Rather, interpret it as a two-part unit both parts of which are in force at the same time, much like “It’s snowing, but is it windy?”. So interpreted, “It’s snowing, but is it snowing?” is incoherent. Similarly with

I know it is snowing, but is it snowing?

and

Am I the only omniscient being?

It is incoherent to utter any of the three foregoing sentences. Why?

Datum 2: Trivial questions provoke interpretive resistance.²

The next time you are chatting with some people who don’t know you’re a philosopher, ask them a question whose answer is widely taken to be obvious. Ask something like “Is red a color?” or “Is the earth the earth?”.

This is a fun game to play. You should try it! What will happen is that your interlocutors will try to interpret you non-literally. They will try to *not* take you to be literally asking whether red is a color, or whether the earth is the earth. They will search for another interpretation, perhaps one on which you are joking or trying to make a point rhetorically. They may also ask you to put down the crack pipe.

So trivial questions provoke interpretive resistance. Why?

Datum 3: We can, by asking a question, mislead people into thinking we don’t know its answer.

Suppose that I hire a private investigator to follow my spouse around for a night, sending me a live video feed of her activities. And suppose that when she comes home, I utter in a normal, non-accusatory tone of voice “Hi Dear...What’d you do tonight?”. By asking that question, I

² Thanks to Gerald Marsh for pointing this out. Also see (Fiengo 2007: 58).

would mislead her into thinking I did not know what she did. Or suppose that my Dean is forming a committee to study teaching evaluations, and says that any committee members should have some knowledge of psychometrics. If I have been studying psychometrics for years but don't want to do any committee work, I can just ask the Dean "What's psychometrics?". By asking this, I can mislead her into thinking I don't know what psychometrics is.

Why does that trick work? Why can we, by asking a question, mislead people into thinking we don't know its answer?

Identifying a Species of Asking

I'll try to explain the foregoing data points, and several others, by positing the existence of a certain speech act governed by a certain norm. But first, I want to independently motivate the existence of this speech act.

Consider what I'll call "the puzzle of uninquisitive teachers". This puzzle centers on the character trait of inquisitiveness.³ The following two claims about this trait are individually plausible yet jointly in tension:

1. A tendency to ask questions renders one an inquisitive person (or at least brings one a significant distance towards that end).
2. Teachers can tend to ask questions on exams for their students, without being inquisitive people (and without being a significant portion of the distance towards that end).

How should we resolve the tension between these claims? One way to resolve it is by dropping the view that a tendency to ask questions renders one an inquisitive person, and replacing that view with another – in particular with the alternative view that there is a *species* of question-asking the tendency to engage in which renders one an inquisitive person. It seems

³ On this trait see (Watson 2015).

reasonable to call this species of question asking “inquiring”, in honor of its relationship to the character trait of inquisitiveness; from now on that is what I will call it.⁴ If inquiring as I have just described it is indeed a species of asking, and moreover a species of asking that we do not engage in when we ask questions on exams for our students, then we have a solution to our puzzle: (2) is true but (1) is false; and (1) only seemed plausible at first because we were overlooking the distinction between asking and inquiring.

These considerations give us some reason to believe that inquiring, as I have described it, exists. That is to say, the fact that (a) we can solve the puzzle of uninquisitive teachers by conjecturing the existence of a species of asking such that a tendency to engage in that species renders one an inquisitive person, gives us some reason to believe that (b) the relevant conjecture is true, so that there *is* such a species of asking.

Another reason to believe in this conjecture is that numerous theorists from numerous paradigms have delineated, as an explanatorily important category, exactly those askings I have called inquirings. These theorists include Searle (1969), who called them “real questions”. They also include a number of linguists, anthropologists, and psychologists, who give these questions such labels as “information questions” and “information-seeking questions”.⁵ Though none of these theorists pick out the category at issue in the way I have picked it out, namely by its connection to inquisitiveness, it is plausible that their descriptions pick out one and the same thing as my own.

We shouldn’t put too much weight on these two reasons for believing that inquiring (as I have described it, via its relationship to inquisitiveness) exists. For absent a theory of speech act individuation – a theory of what it is in virtue of which X and Y are different speech acts, when they are different speech acts – it is unclear how far these two reasons ought to move us; and I

⁴ In this paper I reserve “inquiring” for the *speech act* just described. On inquiry in a broader sense that includes trying to figure things out while not speaking, see (Hookway 2008) and (Friedman forthcoming).

⁵ In anthropology see (Goody 1978: 26); in sociolinguistics see (Streeck 1980: 143); in psychology see (Clark and Schober 1992: 23); in formal linguistics see (Fitzpatrick 2005: 143).

have not yet given a theory of speech act individuation. Nonetheless, these reasons do motivate a certain project – namely, the project of taking it on board, as a working hypothesis, that inquiring (as I have described it, via its relationship to inquisitiveness) exists.

Given this hypothesis, we can ask: how should we define the speech act at issue? We have not yet defined it; we have only *picked it out* with a certain description, namely “the species of asking a tendency to engage in which renders one an inquisitive person”. Definitions do not merely pick out by description the thing defined; they *specify the nature* of that thing. How, then, might we define inquiring? How might we specify its nature?

If we can find a plausible theory of the nature of this speech act, a theory that is well-motivated and naturally situated within a broader approach to speech act individuation, then this theory itself will further bolster the hypothesis that this speech act exists. I will now construct and argue for such a theory.

A Theory of the Nature of Inquiring

I’ll start by just stating the theory; then I’ll explain what it means; then I’ll argue that it is plausible. The theory, which I will call “The Knowledge Theory of Inquiring”, is this:

KTI: Inquiring is constitutively governed by the norm *inquire as to what Q’s answer is only if you don’t know Q’s answer*.

I’ll call the norm here “the ignorance norm”. What KTI tells us is that inquiring is “constitutively governed” by the ignorance norm. Let me now explain what that means.

First of all, a speech act is *constitutively* governed by a norm just in case it is the particular speech act it is *at least partly in virtue of* being governed by that norm. For instance, if assertion is constitutively governed by the norm *assert only what you know*, then it is at least partly in virtue of being governed by this knowledge norm, that assertion is the particular speech act it is. Similarly, if inquiring is constitutively governed by the ignorance norm, then it is at least partly in virtue of being governed by *this* norm that inquiring is the particular speech act *it* is.

Being constitutively governed by a norm is, so to speak, at-least-part of the speech act's nature. The governance, at least in part, *makes the speech act what it is*. The search for constitutive norms thus belongs to the philosophical tradition of defining things – that is to say, of searching after the natures of things – not just things like knowledge and right action, but other things as well, including the various speech acts.

So that's what it is for a speech act to be *constitutively* governed by a norm. But what is it for a speech act to be constitutively *governed* by a norm? The idea here is this. Language-use is, or at least can be usefully thought of as, a game. In this game, there are numerous moves. For each move, there are rules governing the making of it, rules specifying the conditions under which it can appropriately be made. According to KTI, among the rules of language-use is a rule about the conditions under which it is appropriate to inquire. This rule, the ignorance norm, directs us to inquire as to the answer of a given question only if we do not know that answer.

This is *not* to say that people *always follow* the relevant direction. In many cases people inquire while not following it. In these cases, people break the rule. This is not to say they are *failing to engage in* the act constitutively governed by the rule. Quite the contrary: they *are* engaging in the act, *while* violating its constitutive rule. Just as people frequently break the rules of other games they play, people frequently break the rules of the language game. In fact, we can often explain things by conjecturing that certain rules exist and are being broken. This happens, for instance, in a variety of cases in which people imply things by violating Gricean maxims. It is by conjecturing that these maxims exist, and that they are being violated, that we manage to explain how people imply various things. This explanatory work, in turn, gives us reason to believe in the Gricean maxims. Similarly, I'll argue that various bits of explanatory work give us reason to believe in KTI.

KTI dovetails with a certain approach to speech act individuation, an approach developed by Searle (1969) and taken up by several others, most influentially Williamson (2000).⁶ On this

⁶ KTI is closely aligned with Williamson's approach to assertion, as those in the know will recognize.

approach, norms which constitutively govern speech acts are thereby at-least-partly individuating of those speech acts. Applying this idea to inquiring, we see that since (according to KTI) inquiring is constitutively governed by the ignorance norm, it turns out that any speech act that is not constitutively governed by the ignorance norm is not the same speech act as inquiring. Asserting, joking, commanding, and so on are not constitutively governed by the ignorance norm; that is sufficient to make them not the same speech act as inquiring. In conjecturing KTI, then, I am also conjecturing a certain approach to speech act individuation, an approach telling us that speech acts are individuated (at least in part) by the norms that govern them, so that a difference in governing norms is sufficient for a difference in speech acts.

In sum, I want to conjecture that inquiring is constitutively governed by the ignorance norm. This conjecture amounts to a claim about what it is (at least partly) in virtue of which inquiring is the particular speech act that it is, and thus amounts to an at-least-partial definition of the speech act, that is to say, an at-least-partial specification of the speech act's nature. These views dovetail with a broader view of speech act individuation. But I have not yet argued for any of these views; to the arguments I now turn.⁷

Some Explanatory Arguments

KTI says that inquiring is constitutively governed by the ignorance norm. Using this claim, we can explain why Moore-paradoxical questions are incoherent. To start out this explanation, I should point out that hearers operate with a default assumption to the effect that

⁷ KTI presupposes that every question has a unique answer. While this presupposition holds for the questions I will discuss, it does not hold for all questions. For instance, it does not hold for "What are some former U.S. presidents?". For questions like this one, which have *multiple* (true, complete) answers, the ignorance norm should be understood as directing us to inquire only when we don't know *any* of those answers. A more general version of KTI, then, tells us that inquiring is constitutively governed by the norm *inquire as to a given question only if you don't know any of its true, complete answers*. KTI as stated in the main text is a restricted version of this more general theory, a version applying to questions with unique (true, complete) answers. I stick to the restricted version in the main text because it is relatively simple and thus a good starting place. Thanks to an anonymous referee for help on these issues.

speakers are obeying the constitutive rules governing the speech acts in which they engage. Of course this assumption can be violated, and (much like Gricean maxims) it frequently *is* violated, on accident or even purposely, in the pursuit of various communicative ends. Nonetheless, the default assumption, the thing hearers take to be true unless they are given reason to believe otherwise, is that speakers obey the constitutive rules of the speech acts they produce.

Two examples help illustrate this principle. First example: norms of assertion. Given that *assert p only if you know p* is (plausibly) a constitutive norm of assertion, we can conclude that hearers take it as a default assumption that speakers know the things they assert. This conclusion seems right. Second example: norms of promising. Given that *promise to phi only if you intend to phi* is (plausibly) a constitutive norm of promising, we can conclude that hearers take it as a default assumption that promisors intend to do the things they promise to do. This conclusion also seems right. Thus we see that plausibly constitutive norms of assertion and promising conform to the general principle that hearers take it as a default assumption that speakers are conforming to the constitutive norms of the speech acts they produce. Given that the general principle plausibly holds for assertion and promising, it is reasonable to conclude that it holds for inquiring as well – i.e. that hearers take it as a default assumption that inquirers are obeying the constitutive norms of inquiring.

I want to conjecture that inquiring is constitutively governed by the norm *inquire as to what Q's answer is only if you don't know Q's answer*. Supposing this conjecture is true, then, the default assumption of hearers is that when a speaker inquires as to the answer of a given question, she does not know its answer. By exploiting this default assumption, speakers represent themselves as not knowing the answers to their questions, when they inquire as to what those answers are. (In the same way, they represent themselves as knowing the propositions they assert, and as intending to do the things they promise to do.)

Suppose, then, that I ask someone “Am I the only omniscient being?”. If this asking is an inquiring (as opposed to e.g. an exam question), and inquiries are governed by the ignorance norm, then in asking that question I represent myself as not knowing its answer. I do as much by

exploiting the default assumption that I am obeying the constitutive norms of the speech act I produce. Since my interlocutors assume that I am obeying the constitutive norm governing my speech act, and (one way or another – perhaps partly on the basis of my intonation) they take me to be inquiring as opposed to asking e.g. an exam question, they assume that I don't know the answer to my question. It is by getting them to assume as much that I represent myself as not knowing whether I am the only omniscient being when I utter "Am I the only omniscient being?".⁸

Now, notice that if I ask a question of the form "Am I the only X?", I presuppose that I am an X. For instance, if I ask "Am I the only vegetarian at the table?", I presuppose that I am a vegetarian at the table. In the case of asking "Am I the only omniscient being?", then, I presuppose that I am an omniscient being. This presupposition, since it entails that I know *everything*, entails that I know whether I am the only omniscient being.

Thus, what I represent as being true (namely that I don't know whether I am the only omniscient being) contradicts something entailed by what I presuppose (namely that I do know whether I am the only omniscient being). The incoherence of asking "Am I the only omniscient being?" comes from this contradiction between what is represented as being true, and what is (entailed by what is) presupposed. KTI thus explains why it is incoherent to ask "Am I the only omniscient being?".

⁸ Are there other explanations of how I so represent myself? An anonymous referee suggested that we explain it via the theory that whenever we ask questions, we generate cancellable implicatures that we do not know the answers. To make this explanation stick, we would need to identify the mechanism via which these implicatures are generated. What might that mechanism be? It cannot just consist in the sorts of reasoning Grice (1975) outlined. Those outlines apply only to *assertive* speech acts, and it would take some work to alter them so as to apply to interrogative speech acts.

There are extant attempts to do that work (Groenendijk and Roelofsen 2009, Braun 2011). But, as far as I know, none of them specify the mechanism we are now trying to specify. It would be a good project to build such specifications and examine their explanatory power. In the meantime, the norm-centered mechanisms I have specified here provide a plausible working hypothesis about how we represent ourselves as not knowing the answers to our questions. At least, this hypothesis should be plausible to theorists who take the normative approach to speech acts, as it falls out of that approach given modest supplementation. For a similar hypothesis focused on how we represent ourselves when we *assert*, see (Goldberg 2015: 155-157).

Similar explanations apply to other Moore-paradoxical questions, for instance “It is snowing but is it snowing?”. The utterance of this question is a conjunctive speech act one part of which is an assertion that it is snowing and the other part of which is an asking of whether it is snowing. If that asking is an inquiring, then by doing it I represent myself as not knowing whether it is snowing. But plausibly, knowledge is a norm of assertion: that is to say, assertion is constitutively governed by the norm *assert p only if you know p*.⁹ Because of this, we represent ourselves as knowing things whenever we assert those things. And, in particular, we represent ourselves as knowing that it is snowing in the first part of our utterance “It is snowing but is it snowing?”. Thus we see that in uttering “It is snowing but is it snowing?” I represent myself as both knowing and not knowing whether it is snowing.

We can also explain why trivial questions provoke interpretive resistance. If you inquire as to what the answer is to one of these questions, you represent yourself as not knowing its answer. Given that your interlocutors generally take people to know the answers to trivial questions, then, they should be expected to interpret you as not inquiring when you ask such a question. That is why they try to interpret you non-literally, for instance as joking or making a point rhetorically.

Finally, we can explain why, by asking questions, we can mislead people into thinking we don’t know their answers. Of course, we don’t by asking rhetorical questions (or exam questions, or questions in the course of telling a joke) mislead people into thinking we don’t know their answers. But there is a kind of question-asking in which we do as much; that kind of question-asking is readily apparent, independent of any theorizing, in the examples of my spouse and my Dean. In those examples I mislead my spouse and my Dean *because my askings are inquirings*. As inquirings, they are governed by the ignorance norm; and because those askings

⁹ I take it as a premise that knowledge is a norm of assertion. In support of this premise see (Unger 1975), (Williamson 2000), and (Turri 2011a, 2011b, 2013). Against it see (Weiner 2005), (Lackey 2007), (Pelling 2013), and (McKinnon 2015). Feel free to interpret the current paper as arguing for the knowledge norm of assertion along with the KTI. That would be fair; after all, the knowledge norm of assertion is part of my explanatory package. I prefer to frame it as a background premise, though, because I want to foreground my claims about inquiring.

are governed by that norm, in producing them I represent myself as not knowing the answers. By picking up on this representation, my interlocutors come to believe that I don't know those answers. Thus we see that KTI explains why we can, by asking questions, mislead people into thinking we don't know their answers.

Note that this explanation helps defuse an objection to KTI. Suppose that a schoolboy knows the answer to a question on an exam, but is convinced that he doesn't, and inquires with his teacher as to what it is. One might object to KTI by claiming that this schoolboy inquires appropriately while knowing the answer to his question.

This objection is unconvincing, for two reasons. First, the appearance of propriety can be at least partly explained away, on the grounds that the schoolboy *believes that he doesn't know* the answer to his question. Because he has this belief, we are inclined to cut him some slack. That is (at least in part) why he *appears* to be inquiring appropriately even though he isn't. Second, there is an additional thing to notice about the case at hand: in it, the schoolboy *misrepresents himself*. In particular, he misrepresents himself as not knowing the answer to the question he asks.

What explains why he misrepresents himself in this way? KTI explains it, in the same way it explains why I misrepresent myself in the cases of my spouse and my Dean. This explanatory work, in conjunction with our at-least-partial explaining away of the apparent propriety of the schoolboy's question, defuses the objection at hand.¹⁰

Having offered up a theory and used it to explain our three initial data points, we're now in a position to deepen some remarks of John Hawthorne's:

¹⁰ Thanks to an anonymous referee for this objection and a similar one to which there is a similar reply. The similar objection: a person might be in "high stakes" case where he must get to the bank today to avoid defaulting on his mortgage; this person might know that the bank is open, and still appropriately inquire (with a teller, say) as to whether the bank is open. The similar reply: intuitions of propriety here are untrustworthy because we cut unfortunate people some slack; moreover, the case features a *misrepresentation* that KTI explains. (The subject misrepresents himself as not knowing whether the bank is open, when he asks as much; KTI explains why.)

Just as knowledge is the norm of assertion, ignorance is the norm of questioning...in the paradigmatic case of questioning, a questioner represents herself as lacking knowledge and, indeed, could be properly criticized for asking a question to which she already knew the answer.¹¹

Hawthorne's setup differs from mine; for instance, he writes of "the paradigmatic case of questioning" instead of "a species of asking". Put those differences aside. What is important is Hawthorne's point, I think a correct one, that in certain cases we can be properly criticized for asking a question while knowing its answer.

Given our own setup so far, we can deepen that point by articulating what the relevant criticism is. It is *that we are being misleading*. And we are being misleading because we are engaging in inquiring, a speech act that is governed by the ignorance norm and thus a speech act via which we represent ourselves as not knowing the answers to our questions.

Now that we've seen how KTI explains our three initial data points and deepens Hawthorne's remarks, several questions arise, to wit:

- What other explanatory packages might deal with the same data?
- What *further* data might be relevant?
- With respect to the entirety of data available, which explanatory package is best?

These are large issues. I will not try to fully and finally resolve them. I will, however, try to make some initial progress on them. In making this initial progress, I will marshal several further explanations on offer from KTI.

More Explanatory Arguments

There are many possible alternative explanations of our data. The most obvious of them conjecture different normative theories of inquiring, for instance:

¹¹ (Hawthorne 2004: 24). Also see (Benton 2012: 71) and (Fitzpatrick 2005: 143).

BTI: Inquiring is constitutively governed by the norm *inquire as to what Q's answer is only if there is no proposition you believe to be its answer.*

JBTI: Inquiring is constitutively governed by the norm *inquire as to what Q's answer is only if there is no proposition you justifiedly believe to be its answer.*

BKTI: Inquiring is constitutively governed by the norm *inquire as to what Q's answer is only if you do not believe that you know its answer.*

Each of these theories gives a decent explanation of why trivial questions provoke interpretive resistance. For, in addition to generally taking one another to know the answers to trivial questions, people also generally take one another to believe, and justifiedly believe, and believe that they know those answers. Our three new theories can each take advantage of these facts to offer up explanations of why trivial questions provoke interpretive resistance.

But these theories don't do as well with Moore-paradoxical questions. To see this, consider cases in which you are talking with someone, and you know that she knows the answer to a given question. Suppose, for instance, that you know that she knows whether the temperature reached freezing last night. Imagine you utter this:

(1) I know it reached freezing last night, but did it?

This utterance, interpreted as an inquiring (as opposed to e.g. a joke), would be incoherent. Now, keeping in mind that you know that your interlocutor knows whether it reached freezing last night, imagine that you utter as an inquiring one of *these* sentences:

(2) I believe that it reached freezing last night, but did it?

(3) I have a justified belief that it reached freezing last night, but did it?

(4) I believe that I know that it reached freezing last night, but did it?

None of these are incoherent in the envisaged context. Given that you don't know the answer and you know that your interlocutor does know it, why not ask her what it is?

Even if you have your own beliefs about the matter, even justified beliefs or beliefs you take to be knowledge, you know that she knows the answer. Asking her what it is, given these background conditions, seems thoroughly appropriate. Yet the competitors to KTI predict that it

is incoherent to do as much. BTI predicts that (2) is incoherent, JBTI predicts that (3) is incoherent, and BKTI predicts that (4) is incoherent. The lesson is that these three theories do not do as well as KTI, at least not with Moore-paradoxical questions.

Nor do they do as well with misleading questions. Suppose that someone accuses you of misleading them in the relevant way. If in response you claim that you did not know the answer to the question you asked, that claim *would count as a defense* of yourself. What is more, making such a claim would be a natural, normal way to defend yourself. You *could*, I suppose, try to defend yourself by saying you didn't have any beliefs about the matter, or any justified beliefs about it, or that you didn't believe you had knowledge. But these would all be abnormal ways to defend yourself from a charge of the relevant sort of misleadingness. The normal, expected way to defend yourself from such a charge would be to claim that you did not know the answer to the question you asked.

This gives us a minor reason to prefer KTI to BTI, JBTI, and BKTI. Similarly with the above points about Moore-paradoxical questions; they too give us a minor reason to favor KTI. Now I'm going to move on to some more reasons, these I think a bit more significant.

There is a certain point, which I've not yet broached, and which confirms KTI while disconfirming BTI, JBTI, and BKTI. The point at issue is too theoretical to call a "datum". Nonetheless, it's fairly plausible. I'll call it a "conjecture". Here it is:

Conjecture: Only non-knowers pass the "I can't answer that" test. That is to say,

If

someone asks you a question and you respond by uttering a sentence of the form "I can't answer that but I _____ the answer is that P",

then

your speech act is coherent only if the construction filling in the blank does not require knowing.

To illustrate this conjecture, suppose that someone asks you whether it is raining. If you reply by uttering "I can't answer that but I believe the answer is that it is raining", or "I can't answer that

but I suspect the answer is that it is raining”, or “I can’t answer that but I predict the answer is that it is raining”, then your speech act is coherent.¹² However, if you reply by uttering “I can’t answer that but I know the answer is that it is raining” or “I can’t answer that but I’m aware the answer is that it is raining” or “I can’t answer that but I know that I know the answer is that it is raining”, your speech act *is not* coherent. Plausibly, the pattern holds in general: knowledge-entailing constructions render the speech act incoherent, but non-knowledge-entailing constructions allow for it to be coherent. In sum, only non-knowers pass the “I can’t answer that” test. This conjecture, I will now argue, confirms KTI while disconfirming all the other theories on the table.

Notice the following points. BTI predicts, incorrectly, that it is incoherent to reply to an inquiring with “I can’t answer that but I believe that the answer is P”. JBTI predicts, incorrectly, that it is incoherent to reply to an inquiring with “I can’t answer that but I have a justified belief that the answer is P”. And BKTI predicts, incorrectly, that it is incoherent to reply to an inquiring with “I can’t answer that but I believe that I know that the answer is P”. These theories are therefore disconfirmed by our conjecture and the test results it generalizes. KTI, however, predicts the correct results about how we can coherently fill in the blank in “I can’t answer that but I _____ the answer is that P”. Uniquely among the theories on the table so far, it is confirmed by our conjecture.¹³

One more thing. If someone comes to you with an inquiry, and you do not know the answer to their question, then the cooperative thing to do is to send them to someone who does. It is *not* cooperative to send them to someone who *believes some proposition to be the answer*, or who *justifiedly believes some proposition to be the answer*, or who *believes that they know the*

¹² On norms of prediction see (Turri and Benton 2014).

¹³ Compare Turri’s (2011a, 2011b) observations that it is normally okay to respond to questions by saying “I don’t know”, and that “I don’t know” and “I can’t answer that” are practically interchangeable responses to questions. Also see (Engel 2008) and especially (Schaffer 2006).

answer. And it is definitely not cooperative to send them to someone who *doesn't know the answer.*

To illustrate these points, imagine that someone asks you “Did it freeze last night?”. Suppose you reply by saying “I don’t know the answer, but I’m willing to help out. Go talk to John. There’s a proposition he believes to be the answer!”.

If you said that, you’d get the stink eye. And if you ended your speech with “...there’s a proposition he justifiedly believes to be the answer!” or “...there’s a proposition he believes that he knows to be the answer!”, you would be similarly socially sanctioned. If you wanted to get some *really* nasty looks, a good way to do that would be to reply to someone’s inquiry with “John doesn’t know the answer to that question, so you should go ask *him*”.

BTI, JBTI, and BKTI are disconfirmed by these patterns of social sanctioning. BTI predicts that it is cooperative to send inquirers to people who merely believe some proposition to be the answer to their question. For if BTI is true, then inquirings represent one as lacking belief. And, plausibly, the purpose of answerings is to give the inquirer the thing which she represents herself as lacking. Answerings that give the inquirer belief, then, do what they are supposed to do if BTI is true. That is why BTI predicts that it is cooperative to send inquirers to people who merely believe some proposition to be the answer to their question. For the same sorts of reasons, JBTI predicts that it is cooperative to send inquirers to people who merely justifiedly believe some proposition to be the answer to their question. And, similarly, BKTI predicts that it is cooperative to send inquirers to people who merely believe themselves to know some proposition to be the answer to their question.

None of these predictions are borne out by our patterns of social sanctioning, patterns by which we are given the stink eye if we tell inquirers to go talk to people who believe, or justifiedly believe, or believe themselves to know the answer to the inquirer’s question. So certain patterns of social sanctioning, patterns involving the facts about who it is cooperative to send inquirers to, disconfirm BTI, JBTI, and BKTI.

Moreover, these patterns of social sanctioning *confirm* KTI. For if we assume that inquiring is governed by the ignorance norm, then it becomes easy to see why these patterns obtain. They obtain because (a) inquirings represent one as lacking knowledge, (b) the purpose of answerings is to bring inquirers to possess the thing they represent themselves as lacking, and (c) testimony from non-knowers does not typically yield knowledge.¹⁴ Given these points, we should predict that it is uncooperative to send inquirers to non-knowers. This prediction is borne out. And another prediction of KTI is borne out as well, to wit the prediction that it *is* cooperative to send inquirers to *knowers*.

Now suppose that you refer an inquirer to a third party, advising them to direct their question to that third party. And suppose that this third party does not know the answer. If the inquirer learned this fact, and came back to you, *it would count as a complaint* for them to say “You sent me to someone who only believed something to be the answer” or “You sent me to someone who only justifiedly believed something to be the answer” or “You sent me to someone who only believed he knew the answer” or even “You sent me to someone who didn’t know the answer”. If KTI is true, then it is easy to see why these things all count as complaints. But if any of the other theories on the table are true, it is hard to see why they all count as complaints.

Moreover, *it would count as making an excuse* for yourself, if you responded to one of these complaints by saying “Oh sorry I thought that guy knew the answer”. Yet it would *not* count as making an excuse for yourself, if you responded to one of these complaints by saying “Oh sorry I thought that guy believed some proposition to be the answer” “Oh sorry I thought that guy justifiedly believed some proposition to the answer” or “Oh sorry I thought that guy believed that he knew the answer”. Here again we find something – namely a pattern of what sorts of things do and don’t count as making an excuse – which is explained by KTI but not by BTI, JBTI, or BKTI.

¹⁴ This last point, that testimony from non-knowers does not typically yield knowledge, is one of the lessons of post-Gettier epistemology. Testimony from non-knowers typically yields (at best) Gettiered belief.

Now, there are many additional alternatives to KTI. To see what some of them are, think about the relationships between theories of inquiring and theories of assertion. Each theory of inquiring thus far considered corresponds to a particular theory of assertion. KTI corresponds to the knowledge theory of assertion – the theory that assertion is constitutively governed by the norm *assert only what you know*. Similarly, BTI corresponds to the belief theory of assertion – the theory that assertion is constitutively governed by the norm *assert only what you believe*. With each pair of theories, we have a status *S* such that there is a constitutive norm of inquiring having the form *inquire only if you don't have S* and a constitutive norm of assertion having the form *assert only if you do have S*. The theories line up because the theory of inquiring tells us to inquire only when we lack the thing which, given the theory of assertion, we should assert only when we have.

These sorts of parallel norms are natural to conjecture given the norm-theoretic approach to speech acts advocated here. For, pretheoretically, it would seem that inquiring and asserting are in some sense *opposite* speech acts. Theories should explicate this point, delineating the sense in which these speech acts are opposed. On the norm-theoretic approach, the sense in which they are opposed amounts to this: they are governed by parallel norms, norms directing us to inquire only when we lack the thing which we should assert only when we have.

Of course, there are other ways we might try to delineate the sense in which inquiring and asserting are opposed. Theorists in the Lewisian tradition often view conversations as having “scoreboards” which specify, *inter alia*, the *goals* of those conversations. We might add to these views the claims that inquiring serves to *create* a new goal on the scoreboard (namely the goal of answering the question), and that asserting serves to *fulfill* that goal by adding that question’s answer to the common ground, the set of things taken for granted by the conversants.¹⁵ Since *creating* a goal and *fulfilling* that goal are in some sense opposite acts, we

¹⁵ Compare (Schaffer 2008) and (Roberts 2015).

might propose to explicate the inquiring/asserting opposition via scoreboards and common grounds instead of parallel norms.

While such a proposal plausibly illuminates *a* way in which inquiring and asserting are opposed, it does not tell the whole story. For there is an *epistemic* absence, an absence in the epistemic states of the inquirer, that inquirings expose and assertions remove; and the opposition of the two speech acts is closely connected this epistemic absence.¹⁶ The scoreboard-theoretic proposal, focused as it is on *creating conversational goals* as opposed to *exposing epistemic absences*, does not on its own do justice to these points. The norm-theoretic approach, however, does do justice to them. With respect to explicating the inquiring/asserting opposition, then, we do well to appeal to parallel constitutive norms.

In any case, it is theoretically fruitful to consider the hypothesis that there are such norms. For that hypothesis suggests several additional norm-theoretic theories of inquiring. The literature features numerous normative theories of assertion, theories claiming that some norm governs assertion. Given our hypothesis about parallel norms, these theories generate corresponding theories of inquiring - theories taking inquiring to be constitutively governed by a norm directing us to inquire only when we lack the thing which, according to the relevant theory of assertion, we should assert only when we have. For instance, the theories that *true belief* is a norm of assertion and that *being reasonable for one to believe* is a norm of assertion generate the following theories of inquiring:¹⁷

TBTI: Inquiring is constitutively governed by the norm *inquire as to what Q's answer is only if there is no proposition you truly believe to be its answer.*

and

¹⁶ Compare (Fiengo 2007: 50): "By asking a question, one displays a lack, a lack that can be relieved by the making of an assertion".

¹⁷ See (Weiner 2005) and (Lackey 2007).

RTBTI: Inquiring is constitutively governed by the norm *inquire as to what Q's answer is only if there is no proposition such that it is reasonable for you to believe that proposition to be Q's answer.*

As for RTBTI, it does not explain the data involving Moore-paradoxical questions or the data involving patterns of cooperation; or so I'll now argue.

There is nothing incoherent about "It is reasonable for me to believe that it is snowing, but is it?". At least, there is nothing incoherent about it in the right context – for instance, when you know that your interlocutor knows the answer to your question. KTI nicely explains why this is so, but RTBTI predicts incorrectly that it *isn't* so. With respect to Moore-paradoxical questions, then, KTI is explanatorily superior to RTBTI.

Similarly with our patterns of cooperation. If someone comes to you with an inquiry, it is *not* cooperative to send them to a third party for whom it is reasonable to believe some proposition to be the answer to their question. This point is reflected in the fact that you would get the stink eye if you told an inquirer "I can't answer your question, but you should go talk to John, because there is a proposition which is reasonable for him to believe to be the answer". It is also reflected in that fact that, if you sent an inquirer to a third party, and they found out that this third party did not know the answer to the question, *it would count as a complaint* if they came back to you and said "That guy didn't know the answer to my question!". Moreover, if you responded to this complaint by saying "Oh sorry I thought that guy knew the answer", your response *would count as making an excuse* for yourself. And yet if you responded to this complaint by saying "What are you talking about – there was a proposition which was reasonable for him to believe to be the answer!", your response *would not count as* making an excuse for yourself. RTBTI predicts, incorrectly, that none of the foregoing points are true; KTI predicts that they are true and also explains why. The lesson is that KTI is superior to RTBTI with respect to various patterns of cooperation involving referrals of inquirers to third parties.

Are there other explanations of these patterns? We might try to explain them with a *knowledge norm of belief* – that is to say, with a view to the effect that we should believe only

what we know.¹⁸ On this explanation, the relevant patterns obtain because it is uncooperative to set a person up to believe something without knowing it, thereby violating the norm of belief.

This explanation fails to capture the *response-directedness* of the uncooperativeness at hand. Sending an inquirer to a non-knower is not just uncooperative *tout court*. Nor is just it uncooperative with respect to their beliefs. It is uncooperative *qua* response. To illustrate this, contrast (a) out-of-the-blue telling someone to go ask some third party a question (where this third party happens to not know its answer), with (b) sending an inquirer to a third party who does not know the answer to the question the inquirer has just asked. These two acts are not uncooperative in the same way; only latter is uncooperative *qua* response.¹⁹ But if the knowledge norm of belief explained the uncooperativeness at issue, these two acts *would* be uncooperative in the same way, as they both set people up to violate that norm.

Now to TBTI. This theory has some advantages over RTBTI and the other alternative theories we have considered. While those theories are all disconfirmed by our “I can’t answer that” tests, TBTI is confirmed by them: it predicts, correctly, that “I can’t answer that but I truly believe p to be its answer” is incoherent. Nonetheless, TBTI is still not quite as good as KTI. The reason is that KTI does a bit better with misleading questions. Or so I’ll now argue.

Suppose that someone accuses you of misleading them in the relevant way. For instance, suppose that you ask a person whether it froze last night, and that later she finds out from a third party that you had already known the answer. And suppose that, after getting this third party

¹⁸ Thanks to an anonymous referee for this suggestion. On the knowledge norm of belief, see (Whitcomb 2014).

¹⁹ To see the difference between responses that are uncooperative, and responses that are uncooperative *qua* responses, contrast

Case 1: You know that Maria hates looking at sunglasses. She asks you whether it froze last night. You pick a third party (“John”, say) who *does know* the answer. Then you write on a pair of sunglasses “Go ask John”, and show those sunglasses to Maria.

with

Case 2: Maria asks you whether it froze last night. You pick a third party (“Jim”, say) who *doesn’t know* the answer. Then you say “Go ask Jim”.

In both cases, your response is uncooperative. But only in the second case is the uncooperativeness response-directed. In that case your response is uncooperative *qua* response; in the first case it is merely a response that is uncooperative.

report, your interlocutor comes back to you and says “that was misleading of you to ask me that question”.

In response to such an accusation, it would be normal and natural for you to defend yourself by saying “but I didn’t know the answer”. But it would be abnormal and unnatural for you to defend yourself by saying that you didn’t truly believe any proposition to be the answer. Perhaps you might say the latter thing as a way to defending yourself. But that wouldn’t be a normal or natural way to do it, whereas it would be normal and natural to defend yourself by saying you didn’t know the answer. KTI furnishes a simple explanation of this asymmetry in naturalness: since not-knowing is the norm of inquiring, saying “I didn’t know the answer” is a very straightforward way to convey the point that you were obeying the norms of your speech act, and thus not misleading anyone (at least not in the relevant way). And again since not-knowing is the norm of inquiring, saying “I didn’t truly believe any proposition to be the answer” is a less straightforward way to convey the point that you were obeying the norms of your speech act, if a way to convey it at all.

We shouldn’t put too much weight on this explanation, though, because there are other live candidate explanations of the relevant asymmetry. For instance, perhaps “I didn’t truly believe any proposition to be the answer” is unnatural because it is the negation of a conjunction (which negations are typically relatively uninformative and thus uncooperative), or simply because it is *longer* than “I didn’t know the answer”. Perhaps these sources of uncooperativeness, and nothing about KTI or TBTI, are what explains the asymmetry in naturalness of those two ways of defending oneself.²⁰

In any event, there are other reasons involving misleadingness to prefer KTI to TBTI. To bring these reasons out, consider cases where you don’t know an answer but you know that your interlocutor knows it. For instance, consider the following concrete case.

²⁰ Thanks to an anonymous referee for these suggestions.

I take it that *you*, a sophisticated reader of philosophy, believe that human-caused climate change is happening. Now suppose that you learn that someone knows the truth about this matter – some powerful alien, or God if you like, or even a scientist who, somehow, you know *knows* whether human-caused climate change is happening. There would be nothing wrong, even given that you have your beliefs about the matter, with asking this person whether human-caused climate change is happening. (*Wouldn't you* ask the question? And wouldn't there be nothing wrong with that?)

The appropriateness of asking this question is relevant to TBTI. For that appropriateness plausibly remains if we alter the case at hand by stipulating further that, not only do you have beliefs about matter (of whether human-caused climate change is happening), but furthermore your beliefs are *true* (which, of course, we sophisticated philosophers all think they are). The truth of your beliefs about the matter does not remove the appropriateness of your asking the question, in this particular concrete case.

TBTI predicts the opposite, suggesting that in such a case you would count as *misleading* your interlocutor, and therefore doing something *inappropriate*, if you asked her whether human-caused climate change is happening. For if TBTI is true, then in inquiring we represent ourselves as failing to truly believe propositions to be the answers to our questions. Such representations would be *misrepresentations* in cases where we have beliefs about the relevant matters and those beliefs turn out to be true. And yet, we do not in all such cases count misrepresenting ourselves, as the case of climate change illustrates. TBTI therefore stands disconfirmed.

And there is more disconfirming evidence in the same vicinity. To bring this evidence out, continue to suppose that you are confronted with someone who you know *knows* whether human-caused climate change is happening. And suppose that you ask her whether it really is, and that she tells you the answer. Now: if all of this happened, and you then responded by saying “Oh good, my belief about that was true all along”, this response *would not count as* a way of signaling that moments ago (when you asked your question) you had misled your

interlocutor about your epistemic state. TBTI predicts the opposite, because if TBTI is true then we count as misleading our interlocutors when we inquire as to the answer of a given question, while truly believing some proposition to be the answer to that question. Thus we have another piece of evidence – in particular, a piece of evidence concerning which things count as signals that you had moments ago mislead your interlocutor – which disconfirms TBTI.

The more general point here is that, in cases where you don't know the answer to a question but you do have beliefs about what the answer is, there's nothing misleading about asking a known knower what the answer is - *even if your beliefs are true*.

But if you not only truly believed that some proposition was the answer to your question, but further *knew* that this proposition was the answer, then you *would* count as misleading your interlocutor about your epistemic state by asking them what the answer was. We can see this by noticing that it would count as a complaint that you were being misleading, indeed a *naturally-stated* complaint that you were being misleading, if your interlocutor said “But you knew the answer all along!”.

In sum: when you know that your interlocutor knows the answer to a question,

(a) it *counts as misleading* your interlocutor, if you inquire as to what the question's answer is, while *knowing* that answer,

but

(b) it *does not count as misleading* your interlocutor, if you inquire as to what the question's answer is, while *truly believing* (but not knowing) that answer.

KTI makes it easy to see why these points hold, while TBTI makes it hard to see why they hold. These points therefore offer some confirmation of KTI over TBTI.

Summing Up

I've presented several explanatory arguments for KTI: arguments involving Moore-paradoxical questions, trivial questions, misleading questions, “I can't answer that” tests, and

cooperative referral. None of these arguments are very powerful taken on their own. But their power multiplies when they are taken in concert. The case they build is, taken as a whole, plausible. Of course, it is not *conclusive*. It leaves unaddressed a number of important issues. For instance, it does not attempt to exhaustively locate every data point that might be relevant. Nor does it canvas every possible normative theory of inquiring. Nor does it explore theories of asking which deny that inquiring is one of its species, or theories that individuate speech acts non-normatively. Since it leaves these issues (and others) aside, the case I have presented does not aspire to fully and finally resolve its topics; it does not aspire to be the last word.²¹

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