

The Knowledge Rule and the Action Rule¹

Abstract

In this paper I compare Timothy Williamson's knowledge rule of assertion with Ishani Maitra and Brian Weatherson's action rule. The paper is in two parts. In the first part I present and respond to Maitra and Weatherson's master argument against the knowledge rule. I argue that while its second premise, to the effect that an action X can be the thing to do though one is in no position to know that it is, is true, its first premise is not: the data do not support the claim that whenever X is the thing for one to do one is in a position to assert that it is. In the second part I consider Maitra and Weatherson's alternative hypotheses, arguing that they do not provide a better explanation of the linguistic data: I conclude, in particular, that the knowledge rule is preferable to the action rule.

Keywords

Norm of Assertion; Knowledge Rule; Action Rule; Pragmatic Encroachment

Introduction

According to Timothy Williamson (1996, 2000), knowledge is the norm of assertion;² that is, one ought not to assert that p unless one knows that p. Williamson holds that this knowledge norm is constitutive of, or essential to, this type of speech act. This does not mean that any possible token assertion conforms to the knowledge norm; but it does follow that necessarily, any given assertion is governed by, or subject to it. Furthermore, the knowledge norm is not held to be moral or prudential in character; so there is no suggestion that those assertions which are governed by but fail to conform to it are either morally unacceptable or practically inadvisable actions. Such actions might be immoral (as in the case of simple and inexcusable lies) or imprudent; but all that strictly follows from the fact that an assertion is in violation of the knowledge norm is that it is not as it ought to be *qua assertion*.

I am sympathetic to this account of assertion: indeed, there is ample inductive evidence in its favour.³ In a recent paper, however, Ishani Maitra and Brian Weatherson (2010) argue against the view that assertion is, as they put it, subject to

The Knowledge Rule: Assert that p only if you know that p (2010: 100).

First, they provide a direct 'Master Argument' (2010: 100) against the thesis that knowledge is the norm of assertion; and second, they provide two alternative explanations of the linguistic data which they suggest are preferable to the Williamsonian account.

¹ Thanks to two anonymous referees for very helpful comments on an earlier draft.

² Others, such as Peter Unger (1978), have put forward related views.

³ See (Turri, 2011: 37-39).

This paper defends the claim that assertion is subject to the knowledge norm by responding to the considerations adduced by Maitra and Weatherson; and as these considerations are of two kinds, it is accordingly in two parts. In the first part I undermine the master argument given against the thesis that assertion is subject to the knowledge rule, arguing that one of its premises is simply false; and in the second I provide a negative assessment of the alternative explanations, offered by Maitra and Weatherson, of the linguistic data surrounding assertion.⁴ In particular, I argue that their action rule for assertion is implausible, even when supplemented with a requirement of evidence responsiveness.

Part 1: the Master Argument against the Knowledge Rule

Maitra and Weatherson's master argument against the claim that knowledge is the norm of assertion concerns cases in which assertions are made concerning what one ought to do. For example, in a case they call 'going to war', they ask us to

[i]magine that a country, Indalia, finds itself in a situation in which the thing for it to do, given the evidence available to its leaders, is to go to war against an enemy.... But it is a close call. Had the evidence been a bit weaker, had the enemy been a little less murderous, or the risk of excessive civilian casualties a little higher, it would have been preferable to wait for more evidence, or use non-military measures to persuade the enemy to change its ways. So, while going to war is the thing to do, the leaders of Indalia can't know this.... The Prime Minister of Indalia decides to launch the war, and gives a speech in the House of Commons setting out her reasons.... She concludes with... [the proposition that] the thing to do in the circumstances is to go to war. (2010: 101)

Maitra and Weatherson claim that in concluding her speech in this way, the Prime Minister of Indalia violates the knowledge rule, yet 'she doesn't violate any norms' (2010: 101) governing her speech act. In short, they suggest that this case constitutes a counterexample to the Williamsonian thesis that the knowledge rule is a norm governing every possible assertion.

With cases such as this in mind Maitra and Weatherson present their master argument:⁵

(P1) Necessarily, if X is the thing for an agent to do, then it is permissible for her to assert that it is.⁶

(P2) Possibly, X is the thing for an agent to do though she doesn't know that it is.⁷

⁴ Although M&W discuss it, due to considerations of space I will not touch on the ability of the knowledge rule to account for the oddness of the Moore-paradoxical assertions in what follows.

⁵ M&W give the name 'master argument' to a slightly different formulation of the argument; but the argument that follows here is a notational variant that rolls off the tongue more readily. M&W also offer a more nuanced version of the argument which mentions 'grounds' or 'bases' for action; but I focus here on the simple version.

⁶ M&W say, for instance, that "if an agent should do X, then that agent is in a position to say that they should do X." (2010: 100). It is clear that they think the principle applies equally to claims about an action being the thing to do for an agent; and I take it that by 'is in a position to say' they mean the same as they do by 'can properly assert' (2010: 100), i.e. *possibly permissibly asserts (in those very circumstances)*.

⁷ M&W say that "its being true that X is the thing to do for an agent doesn't entail that that agent knows it's the thing to do" (2010: 100).

(C) Possibly, it is permissible for an agent to assert that X is the thing to do, though she doesn't know that it is.

This argument is obviously valid, and its conclusion is in direct conflict with the claim that knowledge is the norm of assertion. Clearly, then, whether it establishes the falsity of this thesis depends entirely on whether the premises are true.

In this first part of the current paper, I defend the knowledge norm against this master argument, arguing that its first premise (P1) is false; but I begin by upholding Maitra and Weatherston's defence of the second premise (P2).

The Second Premise

Some may feel that facts about what an agent ought to do are epistemically constrained, so that Maitra and Weatherston's second premise (P2) is false. The thought behind such an objection to P2 is, perhaps, that normative facts about what one ought to do are constitutively dependent upon facts about what reasons one has for action. But reasons, one might think, are just propositions; and one has them just in case one knows them.⁸ Accordingly, the opponent of P2 concludes, normative facts about what one ought to do aren't independent of one's knowledge of them; it is impossible for propositions concerning what an agent ought to do to be true without being known by the agent in question.

Maitra and Weatherston are aware of the possibility of such an objection to P2. Their response to this line of thought is, in effect, to grant the assumptions, but reject the conclusion as a *non-sequitur*. Thus, in connection with the case of going to war above, they ask us to:

Consider all principles of the form

(KW) Going to war is *N1* only if the war-maker knows that going to war is *N2*.

where *N1* and *N2* are normative statuses, such as being the thing to do, being right, being good, being just, being utility increasing, and so on. (2010: 108)

They allow that some such epistemic constraint on war-making is correct; but they argue that no instance of KW is correct with $N1=N2$. In particular, they claim that it is false that going to war is the thing to do only if the war-maker knows that it is.

This response strikes me as basically correct: indeed, there is a general strategy for responding to the above objection which is consonant with these remarks and yet accept the objection's identification of the reasons one has with one's knowledge. The idea is that it is true that whether or not an action ought to be performed depends upon one's reasons for performing it and hence upon the knowledge one has; yet it is not in general true that an action's being the one that one ought to perform requires that one perform it for the reason that it is the action one ought to perform – i.e., because one knows that it is. Consider, in this connection:

⁸ Indeed, I endorse the thought that one's reasons, both for belief and for action, are the propositions one knows – see below. The latter identification is made explicitly by Hawthorne and Stanley (2008).

Spike Lee's Rule: Do the right thing!

One of the difficulties of the human condition is that one has an obligation to obey this rule; yet one is not always in a position to know whether one is doing so. The reason is that it can be difficult to recognize the right thing to do as such; accordingly, even when X is the right thing to do, one cannot knowledgeably follow the syllogistic reasoning - do the right thing, X is right, so do X. Still, one might hope to be able to conform to Spike Lee's rule by acting for the reasons which make one's actions right.

So Maitra and Weatherson are right to hold that, even if there is some constitutive connection between knowledge and being the thing to do, something can be the thing to do without being known to be so. Accordingly, I accept their premise P2.

The First Premise

In support of their first premise (P1), Maitra and Weatherson present two cases in which an action X is the thing for an agent S to do, yet S does not know that it is:⁹ S then makes an assertion,¹⁰ and Maitra and Weatherson take their intuitions regarding the normative status of that assertion as evidence against the knowledge rule, and in favour of P1 instead.

One of the cases in question is that of going to war, described above. The other, 'buying flood insurance', concerns Raj and Nik who have a business and must decide whether to insure it against flooding. Raj calculates the expected utility of buying insurance. He does so correctly, and it turns out that buying insurance is the thing to do; but it is again a close call, and so he does not (and cannot) know that buying insurance is the thing to do. Although he proceeds to buy insurance on behalf of the company, Raj tells Nik that he does not know this is the thing to do.

Schematically, in each of these two cases the speaker S has (at least) the following options:

- (1) assert that X is the thing to do; or
- (2) assert that S does not know that X is the thing to do.

Maitra and Weatherson argue that option 2 is bad. Since X is the thing for S to do it is demotivating for S to assert that S doesn't know that X is the thing to do; and those agents who do assert this seem to have violated some norm. I agree: Raj, for instance, has not done well in buying insurance while asserting that he doesn't know that he ought to. But Maitra and Weatherson also argue that since the proponent of the knowledge rule thinks option 1 involves a violation of the norm of assertion he or she must predict that 2 is the only legitimate option for such a speaker. In this way they aim to put pressure on the proponent of the knowledge rule; for surely the Prime Minister of Indalia does better than she would by concluding her speech with the claim that she does not know whether going to war is the thing to do!

⁹ Such cases are possible provided that the considerations in the previous section are correct.

¹⁰ In fact, the agent of the action X, in these cases, is not – or not obviously – the speaker. Instead, the agent is a kind of corporate body, and the speaker a representative of that body. It is not obvious whether this makes a normative difference, though it does help to motivate the cases.

Of course, a speaker might choose to violate the norm of assertion in the interests of some greater good; so it is not clear that when in a situation of the kind at issue - what Ulysses Everett McGill might describe as a 'tight spot' - a speaker who acknowledges the normative force of the knowledge rule would prefer option 2 to option 1. Simply put, it might be better, all things considered, to violate the norm of assertion and opt for 1: having asserted a proposition which one believes but does not know is surely a less egregious moral fault than risking failing to prevent 'murderous' behaviour, and a less serious failing of practical rationality than risking ruining one's business by failing to convince one's partner of the need to buy insurance.¹¹

It is also worth noting that the proponent of the knowledge rule is in a position to agree with Maitra and Weatherson's assessment of option 2 above as poor - and indeed can offer at least a partial explanation of this verdict. The cases in question are ones in which it is a close call that X is the thing for S to do; this is what explains the fact that S does not know that X is the thing for her to do. But then, it seems likely that in such a circumstance it will be unclear to S that she does not know that X is the thing for her to do; after all, she believes it, and for good reason! So the cases described appear to be ones in which S does not know that she does not know that X is the thing for her to do. If that's right, then in pursuing option 2 the subject S violates the knowledge rule:¹² Raj, for instance, tells Nik that he doesn't know that buying insurance is the thing to do, even though he doesn't know that he doesn't know this! Given that the knowledge rule is violated whether the speaker chooses option 1 or option 2, this drawback may be cancelled out in her deliberations, and the advocate of the rule is all the more likely to claim that option 1 is preferable. So, contrary to what Maitra and Weatherson suggest, it is far from clear that the advocate of the knowledge rule must advise an agent facing a straight choice between options 1 and 2 to opt for the latter.

Moreover, the case that option 2 is all that's left once option 1 is ruled out relies on the thought that a third option

(3) assert that S thinks that X is the thing to do

¹¹ M&W, of course, are familiar with this line of thought. In response, they acknowledge the distinction between all-things-considered norms and others, but suggest that it is 'deeply unintuitive to say that the Prime Minister's assertion is defective in any respect' (2010: 103). For what it's worth, I don't find it deeply unintuitive to regard her speech act as defective *qua assertion* - but as Jerry Fodor says, "[s]quabbling about intuitions strikes me as vulgar" (1987: 10), and so I won't pursue the point further. It is, however, worth noting that, dialectically speaking, it is M&W who are relying crucially here on an appeal to intuition; for as I see it, the case for the knowledge rule is made by its explanatory power, not its intuitive character (though see my (forthcoming a) for a reason why we might want to recognize a norm violation even in cases such as that of Kant's murderer at the door in which lying is (all-things-considered) morally permissible.) There is also a further point to be addressed here. M&W say that they agree with the folk, who claim that 'actions speak louder than words' (2010: 103). They take this to mean that an agent 'incurs more normative commitments' (2010:103) by performing an action than by talking about it; and they suggest that the advocate of the knowledge rule must deny this. Yet this misinterprets the folk, who might mean (at best) that action incurs *stronger* (e.g. all-things-considered) normative commitments than words, not a greater *number* thereof, or (more likely), that action provides *stronger evidence* of belief (e.g. in one's normative commitments) than do words. There is no reason why the advocate of the knowledge rule cannot be a man, or woman, of the people.

¹² Christoph Kelp (forthcoming) also makes this point in connection with one of M&W's cases.

is no genuine alternative at all. Maitra and Weatherson claim (2010: 104) that in asserting that she thinks that p a speaker typically also asserts that p (so that option 3 ends up being a species of option 1). In support of this contention they note (2010:105) that a hearer can legitimately respond to an assertion of the proposition that the speaker thinks that p with reasons to believe that it is not the case that p. They are right, of course, that such a response is legitimate: but we can explain why this is so without supposing the speaker to have asserted that p. After all, it is clear to all involved that one ought only to believe that p if p; thus, in responding to such an assertion with reasons to think that not p, the hearer obviously implicates that the speaker ought not to think that p.¹³ It therefore seems to me wrong to assume that speakers typically assert that p in asserting that they believe that p. But even if I am mistaken, and a speaker does *often* assert that p in this way, she wouldn't do so *in the circumstances imagined*: for the whole point of S's choosing her words carefully in the tight spot described above would be to *avoid* committing herself to the truth of a proposition which she does not know to be true. So there is nothing to prevent a speaker avoiding violation of the knowledge rule by pursuing option 3 rather than option 1: for instance, Raj might tell Nik that he thinks buying insurance is the thing to do, thus explaining why he is buying the insurance.

There are also a number of other options which Maitra and Weatherson do not consider. For instance, S might

(4) assert that S has decided to do X.¹⁴

In doing so, S would not violate the knowledge rule. Moreover, such an assertion might be appropriate if, for instance, the Prime Minister has the constitutional power to launch a war independently of parliamentary approval. Of course, if she doesn't, then it might be thought inappropriate for her to simply inform Indalia's MPs of the decision she has taken. But, this suggests yet another option, namely

(5) argue that X is the thing to do.

Suppose that according to Indalia's constitution Parliament must approve any decision to go to war in a free vote. Then one might think it would be best for the PM to present her reasons for thinking that going to war is the thing to do, and indeed present them *as such*, without yet asserting that it is. In short, S might put forward the very proposition that Maitra and Weatherson suggest without committing to its truth (but only to its plausibility), and so without incurring any obligation to know it.

It is therefore far from clear that speakers in the situations at issue are faced with the stark choice between two options, one of which (option 2) undermines his or her goals, and the other of which (option 1) involves a violation of the knowledge rule; nor is it obvious that when faced with such a choice the advocate of the knowledge rule must hold that the speaker should avoid improper assertion

¹³ Suppose that the speaker were to be convinced by the hearer's objections to p. The natural thing for her to do would be to acknowledge that she was wrong to have believed p; it would *not* be natural for her to acknowledge that she was wrong to have *said* what she did, or to *retract* her assertion.

¹⁴ This is clearly different from asserting that S has decided that X is the thing to do – which M&W do consider – since different kinds of decision are at issue: one is a relation to a proposition, the other to an action, i.e. the sort of thing that is expressed by a verb phrase, not a sentence.

at all cost. In short, the considerations Maitra and Weatherson adduce fail to establish the first premise of their master argument.

But there are also direct grounds for thinking that P1 is false. To show this, I will initially make my case in a contentious manner, assuming first that a subject's evidence is the totality of her knowledge, and that these propositions known are in turn her grounds or reasons for belief,¹⁵ and second, that the point of assertion is to engender hearer knowledge, so that this is precisely what occurs when the speaker violates no norms. I will then relax these assumptions, and show that problems still arise for P1.

My argument against P1 is by *reductio*. The basic problem is that, if P1 were true, then hearers with no independent knowledge relating to a given (practical) matter could end up in a better epistemic position concerning it than the speakers who inform them on it, and subjects could increase their knowledge (at least of what ought to be done) simply by running through a testimonial chain – in effect, by playing a game of telephone! Since these results are clearly incorrect, P1 must be false.

To illustrate this, assume that the Prime Minister of Indalia asserts not only her grounds Γ for believing that going to war is the thing to do but also this very proposition p itself; and assume further, that Maitra and Weatherson are correct that she has not violated any norm of assertion in doing so. Then a member of parliament might suggest that his grounds for thinking that going to war is the thing to do are even stronger than the Prime Minister's: they include all of her reasons Γ , but also, in addition, the fact that going to war is the thing to do! Moreover, if he were then to tell the Prime Minister that going to war is the thing to do, she would have new evidence, beyond her reasons Γ , that this is so. Since both of these conclusions are clearly incorrect, we should reject the claim that whenever X is the thing for one to do one is permitted to assert that it is; that is, we should reject P1.

Of course Maitra and Weatherson may have principled grounds for objecting to this argument, couched as it is in terms of knowledge – though the suspicion that this is so must be accompanied by a specific diagnosis of error if it is to be fully satisfying. But in any case, versions of the worry can be pressed that do not revolve around the thought that when all goes well and no norms are violated assertion serves to engender hearer knowledge, and which may therefore to be taken to rest on weaker assumptions. In particular, we can give up the identification of evidence, reasons, and knowledge: if the point of assertion is to provide the hearer with reasons, however, P1 must be false.

Both our beliefs and our actions are based on reasons, and they are appropriate only if they based on reasons to which we are entitled. Now, the PM cannot appropriately base her action on (her belief in) the proposition that going to war is the thing to do¹⁶ (nor does she in the case as described, where she goes to war on the basis of her beliefs that Γ): and yet, by reasoning similar to the above, if Maitra and Weatherson are right, an MP might acquire the proposition that going to war is the thing to do as a

¹⁵ Thomas Kelly says, "it is natural to think that 'reason to believe' and 'evidence' are more or less synonymous, being distinguished chiefly by the fact that the former functions grammatically as a count noun while the latter functions as a mass term" (2008: section 1): if so (i.e. if $E=R$), then the second claim in the text ($R=K$) follows from the first ($E=K$).

¹⁶ M&W (2010: 114-115) acknowledge that Raj does not, and should not, base his buying of flood insurance on the proposition that buying insurance is the thing to do; so they should accept the analogous claim about the PM.

(presumably conclusive) reason for going to war on the basis of the PM's assertion; and the PM might then strengthen her own practical case for going to war when he in turn tells her that this is the thing to do. Moreover, if we assume that a subject's reasons for action are also her reasons for belief, then it is safe to say that the PM does not have the proposition that going to war is the thing to do as a proper reason for belief (since as we have seen, she doesn't have it as a proper basis for action). And so, the PM might strength her grounds for believing that going to war is the thing to do, without any new considerations being adduced, simply by speaking with her MP.¹⁷

Whereas the initial argument assumed that assertion serves to engender knowledge when no norms are violated, these variants assume only that it provides hearers with proper reasons for belief and action.¹⁸ If Maitra and Weatherson are to resist the absurd conclusions of these arguments, they must articulate some other, still weaker function of assertion; yet it is hard to see what that might be.

Having seen that it lacks adequate support, and having given direct reasons to doubt it, I submit that P1 is false: it simply isn't the case that, whenever X is the thing for one to do, one is in a position to assert that it is. The reason is that X can be the thing to do, though one fails to know that it is, yet one must assert only what one knows.

Part 2: Evidence Responsiveness and the Action Rule

The knowledge rule is supported by an inference to the best explanation of certain linguistic phenomena. For example, the hypothesis that knowledge is the norm of assertion explains the fact that we can't properly assert a proposition to the effect that some particular ticket in a fair lottery will lose, given the additional but plausible assumption that we can't know such a proposition to be true. Maitra and Weatherson, however, aim to undermine the force of such evidence in favour of the knowledge rule, arguing that a fuller consideration of the data suggests some other explanation. They offer two alternative hypotheses: in what follows I consider each in turn.

The Evidence Responsiveness Rule

The first alternative to the knowledge rule Maitra and Weatherson present is

The Evidence Responsiveness Rule: Assert that p only if your attitude towards p is properly responsive to the evidence you have that bears on p. (2010: 112)

As Maitra and Weatherson themselves note (2010: 112), this 'rule' is schematic in character, and the knowledge rule itself may be thought of as being one of its instances (though, of course, they must

¹⁷ I assume that, as a limiting case, a proposition provides a reason to believe itself (indeed, the strongest possible such reason). Certainly, in response to the question, 'Why do you believe that going to war is the thing to do?' one can say, 'Because it is!' I take it that when this is legitimate it is because one knows – but the phenomenon is there to be appealed to independently of this hypothesis.

¹⁸ Tyler Burge says that '[w]e are entitled to rely, other things equal, on... the word of others' (1993: 458); I take it that other things are equal when the speaker violates no norms (together, perhaps, with some further conditions, e.g. no deviant causal chains), and that we rely on the word of others when we treat the propositions they assert as reasons for belief and action. Clearly the truth of this claim is independent of our knowledge being our reasons, and so the argument here begs no questions in the current controversy.

intend to advance some other instance). Nevertheless, the idea here is presumably that one may assert p only if the probability of p on one's evidence is sufficiently high and one accordingly believes p to that degree: and to rule out an interpretation on which the evidence responsiveness rule does not differ from the knowledge rule, it seems safe to assume that its advocates will allow that p need not be certain on one's evidence, but may instead have for one an evidential probability of less than one.¹⁹ Yet the indefiniteness of this proposal - How high an evidence responsive credence is sufficient for legitimate assertion? - reduces its potential for explanation (relative to the knowledge rule).

In any case, Maitra and Weatherson seem to have in mind that the appropriate version of the evidence responsiveness rule, whatever it is, will differentiate between the assertion that a given ticket in a fair lottery will lose, and the claim that Lewis's (1996) poor Bill, who wastes his money on lottery tickets, will never be rich. More specifically, they imagine that the rule will be context-sensitive (2010: 112), thus allowing that one is appropriately evidence responsive in saying that Bill will never be rich, while one who asserts that a given one of his tickets will lose is not. But if one wants to accommodate the thought that the claim that Bill will never be rich is (a) an assertion, and (b) appropriate, while (c) the assertion that one of his tickets in particular will lose is not appropriate, and one is willing to allow for a context-sensitive norm of assertion, one can do so – all the while retaining the knowledge rule - by appealing to contextualism about 'knowledge' (DeRose 2002). Alternatively, one might deny the first claim (a) above: that is, perhaps in saying 'Bill will never be rich' one performs some less committal speech act than assertion.²⁰ In a similar vein, Maitra and Weatherson raise the case of 'academic assertions' (2010: 114), arguing that these need not be known, but only based on strong evidence. Yet one might think that when one puts forward a proposition as supported by some evidence what one does is argue, not assert that proposition;²¹ and even if it is preferable to assert what one doesn't know in an academic context, this might simply be a case in which other considerations override the knowledge norm.

Consideration of the above linguistic data does not, it seems, support a version of the evidence responsiveness rule which differs from the knowledge rule. We can equally well accommodate the data either by taking a context-sensitive version of the knowledge rule, by recognizing that there are a variety of speech acts one may perform using a declarative sentence, or by simply recognizing that the knowledge rule is not an all-things-considered norm; and of course one might adopt some combination of these responses. Unless some more specific version of the evidence responsiveness rule is offered -

¹⁹ If one takes the view that a subject's knowledge is her evidence, then it is natural to think that knowledge entails evidential probability one. Of course, many philosophers will allow that even propositions which a subject knows do not have evidential probability of one for that subject; by contrast, few will allow that propositions which she does not know have evidential probability one for her. Accordingly, to preclude reading the evidence responsiveness rule as the knowledge rule, it seems (dialectically) necessary, though not sufficient, that one allow assertions of propositions which have less than evidential probability one for the speaker.

²⁰ The existence of what Williamson (2000: 244) calls 'conjecture' confirms that there are such acts: though I am tempted to say that the speech act at issue in this case is prediction (see Kelp (forthcoming) for a plausible elaboration of this notion, as well as a response to the suggestion that predictions are assertions due to Matthew Weiner (2005)). Note also that failure to recognize the variety of illocutionary acts that can be performed with a 'declarative' sentence may be due to the fact, noted by Kent Bach (2005), that the verb 'say' is sometimes, but not always, used to mean *state* or *assert*.

²¹ See Kelp (forthcoming) for a plausible sketch of putting a proposition forward as supported by one's evidence.

one which clearly differs from the knowledge rule – it cannot be said that it offers any explanatory advantage over the knowledge rule itself.

The Action Rule

All of the data so far considered can be accounted for by the knowledge rule together with auxiliary assumptions. Yet Maitra and Weatherson think there is yet another class of linguistic phenomena which must be accounted for by the correct norm of assertion. In particular, they claim that there are propositions of two sorts: those (the minority) whose truth suffices for their warranted assertion (by a salient agent); and those (the majority) of which this is not true. The knowledge rule does not explain the (alleged) asymmetry between these two classes of proposition; they claim that the following does:

The Action Rule: Assert that p only if acting as if p is true is the thing for you to do.
(2010: 114)

Of course, if we are to assess this norm, we must first understand the central notion which figures in it, that of *acting as if* a proposition is true. Recognizing this, Maitra and Weatherson provide some elucidations – more on which in a moment. But one initial concern with the action rule is that it would be, at the very least, surprising if we should turn out to have no pre-theoretical understanding of the principal notion figuring in a norm constitutively governing the practice of assertion. Given that assertion is such an important part of linguistic activity, which in turn is so central to human social interaction, one would expect language users to possess both the concepts and vocabulary required for the assessment of assertions as proper or improper. Yet we do not seem to have an antecedent understanding of the notion of *acting as if a proposition is true*, nor do we have any single word expressing this notion. By contrast, people clearly do have the concept of knowledge, and a word expressing it:²² thus, while not conclusive, these considerations seem to favour the knowledge rule.²³

In any case, how are we to understand the notion of *acting as if*? Maitra and Weatherson say that they borrow it from Stalnaker (1973).²⁴ Yet Stalnaker says little by way of explication there of what is meant by this; he uses the notion to explain his notion of presupposition, but he does not say what it is to act as if some proposition is true - all he says is that it does not require actually believing the proposition. But perhaps this is to be expected: Stalnaker only uses 'S acts as if p' in contexts in which what replaces 'p' is a sentence ascribing a propositional attitude to the subject S. This means that for him it is not a technical notion, but has its meaning determined compositionally from its parts. For instance, S acts as if he believes that p just in case he acts in a way that he would act if he believed that p. But what does it mean *in general* to say that S acts as if p? If p is not a proposition ascribing an attitude to S, how would S act if p were true? Wouldn't this depend upon whether or not he knew, or believed, or suspected, or cared that it was true? Further elucidation of this notion is needed.

Maitra and Weatherson oblige. The first gloss on *acting as if* they provide is the following:

²² See Kelp (forthcoming) for an explanation of how a practice might have arisen in which the concept of knowledge is invoked as providing the norm of what he calls 'informative speech acts'.

²³ Compare Hawthorne and Stanley (2008: 573) for a similar thought in connection with the difference between knowledge and justified belief as notions governing the appraisal of action.

²⁴ In fact, however, it seems to be modelled more closely on the account of Fantl and McGrath (2002): see below.

Intuitively, to act as if p is true is to build p into one's plans, or to take p for granted when acting. (2010: 114)

This suggests that acting as if p is true is having a propositional attitude. Of course, the very grammar of 'S acts as if p ' requires that *acting as if* is a relation between a subject and a proposition: but *standing next to an inscription of a sentence which means that p* is a relation of this logical type; the above quote suggests something more, namely, that *acting as if* involves a psychologically interesting relation of this sort, one which merits being called an 'attitude'. Nevertheless, Maitra and Weatherston immediately follow up by saying:

[t]his... is not the same as using p as a basis for action (2010: 114);

and although they do not say precisely what they mean when speaking of using a proposition as a basis for action, it presumably requires being caused to act in part by the attitude that one takes to that proposition. The denial that acting as if p involves using p as a basis for action therefore suggests that this relation does not involve a psychologically interesting, causally explanatory attitude.

Indeed, this conjecture is easily confirmed in the special case in which p is the proposition that X is what to do: for Maitra and Weatherston (2010: 115) embrace the following

Key Equivalence: for any subject S , action X , and circumstance C , S acts as if X is the thing to do in C if and only if S performs X in C .

More specifically, they claim that

acting as if X is what to do (in your circumstances) is simply to do X (in those circumstances). And in doing X , you're acting as if X is what to do (in your circumstances). (2010: 115)

Moreover, this key equivalence holds regardless of what your reasons for doing X might be: you can have any attitude whatsoever towards the proposition that X is what to do and still act as if it is. Clearly, then, your standing in this relation to this proposition doesn't causally explain your action. But the point also holds more generally, as the following more detailed account of *acting as if* makes clear:

When an agent is trying to maximise the expected value of some variable (e.g., utility, profit, etc.), then to act as if p is true is simply to maximise the conditional expected value of that variable, in particular, to maximise the expected value of that variable conditional on p . (2010: 115)²⁵

Clearly, an action can maximize the value of a variable for one *conditional* on p – that is, *ignoring* how that variable behaves for one in cases in which not p – although one has virtually *any* doxastic attitude

²⁵ M&W continue saying, "Even when one is not maximising any expected value, we can still use the same idea. To act as if p is to take certain conditional obligations or permissions you have—in particular, those obligations or permissions that are conditional on p —to be actual obligations or permissions" (2010: 115). In what follows I ignore this generalization as it makes no difference to the points I will make.

towards p itself whatsoever.²⁶ But then *acting as if*, although a relation to a proposition, is not a psychologically explanatory one: it relates an agent to a proposition simply in virtue of what actions she performs; it does not in any way serve to causally explain those actions, as the beliefs and desires of an agent do.²⁷

Given this fact, however, it seems odd that the notion of *acting as if* should figure in the norm of assertion: for one might expect the propriety of a speech act to be explained by its proper basis in the agent's attitude to its object. In other words, one might expect a speech act whose object (or content) is p to be proper only if it is the expression of an attitude the speaker bears towards p (and that attitude is itself proper).²⁸ In particular then, an assertion that p would be proper only if caused (in the right way) by the speaker's bearing an appropriate attitude towards p.²⁹

Indeed, an account of just this sort is available to one who accepts that assertion is subject to a knowledge norm. For suppose that one asserts that p because one knows that p, thereby conforming to the knowledge rule.³⁰ The propriety of one's action is explained by the fact that it is caused (in the right way) by the attitude one bears to p – i.e. to the proposition which is the object of one's act - an attitude which makes one's action appropriate. More specifically, it is caused by one's knowledge-constituting belief that p; and since knowledge is the norm of belief,³¹ that attitude can serve as the proper basis of one's action.

No such explanation of propriety is available to the proponent of the action rule, however: for one may properly assert p on the basis of grounds Γ which do not include p if the action rule is correct; no (psychologically interesting) relation to p need be involved in the causal etiology of a proper assertion that p. To see this in more detail, note that the fact that the thing to do is to act as if p can be explained

²⁶ Except, perhaps, credence zero, in which case credence conditional on p is not defined. I ignore this complication in what follows.

²⁷ *Acting as if* thus differs from Stalnaker's notion of presupposition – and, indeed, his (1984: 15) account of belief and desire - in that, while neither seems to require explicit representation of the proposition which is the object of the attitude, Stalnaker's attitudes are at least *dispositional*, and so arguably causally explanatory. *Acting as if* truly is a strange – I would say deflationary – propositional relation.

²⁸ Indeed, the hypothesis that this is so might be thought to explain the popularity of the expression theory of speech acts, according to which to perform a speech act just is to express an attitude (Bach and Harnish, 1979). Of course, the notion of expression appealed to in such accounts is one on which it is possible to express an attitude which one lacks, whereas the one invoked here requires that one possess an attitude if one is to express it (see below). But attitude expression theorists recognize that they are appealing to a technical notion, i.e. that 'express' as they use it is a term of art. The point here is that such theorists may be led to the view that all speech acts express (in this extended sense) attitudes because of a truth in the neighbourhood, namely, that proper speech acts do (in the ordinary sense). See e.g. my (forthcoming b) where such proper assertions are called 'disclosures'.

²⁹ Compare, for instance, Turri (2011), who offers the following provisional account of expression: "your assertion expresses mental state M just in case M non-deviantly causes your assertion. *Expression* here is a special way for concrete token mental states to *manifest* themselves" (2011: 42, footnote 12, italics original). Since he thinks that an assertion is proper only if it expresses knowledge, he claims that "proper assertion is speech manifesting knowledge" (2011: 42) – a view to which I am very sympathetic (see below).

³⁰ As Turri says, "For those who think that knowledge isn't a mental state and so can't really be expressed... there's an easy fix. Understand 'expresses knowledge that Q' to mean 'expresses a belief that Q, in virtue of which you count as knowing that Q', or 'expresses a knowledgeable belief that Q'." (2011: 42)

³¹ See Williamson (2000: 47).

by appeal to one's attitudes to propositions other than p: for example, it can be explained by one's attitudes to some other propositions Γ which make it the case that the thing for one to do is act as if p. And even if one does act as if p (as one ought, given that it is the thing for one to do), the fact that one stands in this relation to p does not causally explain one's action, as we have seen. Accordingly, one may assert that p in conformity with the action rule without basing one's speech act on p – that is, without expressing any attitude, appropriate or not, towards p. This seems both surprising and undesirable.³²

These considerations suggest that no good explanation of the propriety of assertions conforming to the action rule is available - but what of the predictive successes and failures of this rule? Maitra and Weatherson argue that the action rule predicts that propositions concerning what an agent is to do can be properly asserted by that agent whenever they are true. Substituting 'X is the thing to do' for 'p' in the claim that S can properly assert that p only if acting as if p is the thing to do - that is, in the action rule - yields the following schema:

S can properly assert that X is the thing to do only if acting as if X is the thing to do is the thing to do.

Applying the key equivalence (above) to the consequent,³³ however, we can see that this is itself equivalent to the claim that, when it comes to propositions about what one is to do, truth is the only necessary condition on proper assertion:

S can properly assert that X is the thing to do only if X is the thing to do.

This is, of course, just what Maitra and Weatherson wanted:³⁴ for, as we have seen, it is the ability of the action rule to explain the alleged difference in conditions of propriety between assertions concerning what one is to do as opposed to other assertions that is said to constitute its advantage over the knowledge rule.

But the action rule turns out to be far too liberal in the assertions it admits. Suppose, for example, that whether X is the thing for one to do does not depend on whether p.³⁵ then it turns out that one can assert p no matter what evidence one has for or against p! To see this, note that the action rule licenses (or at least fails to prohibit) assertions that p when acting as if p is true is the thing for one to do. Now,

³² Compare Hawthorne and Stanley (2008: 576), who complain that on Fantl and McGrath's (2002) view, one knows or is justified in believing p because it is rational for one to act as if p, yet the reverse order of explanation is the more intuitive one. My objection is similar: acting as if p is at best correlated with properly asserting that p; the former cannot play a role in explaining the latter. One might object to my argument here on the following grounds. I have shown that *acting as if p* is not an attitude possession of which can explain the propriety of proper assertions that p: but this is to be expected, since the norm says that one may assert p only if acting as if p *is the thing for one to do*; yet this is itself an attitude – something like what Fantl and McGrath (2002) call 'preferring as if p' (see below) – and nothing I have said shows that having *it* fails to explain the propriety of proper assertions that p. This is a fair point: but as we shall see, there are situations in which even the fact that the thing for one to do is act as if p does not require that one have a high credence in p, even assuming that one's credence is responsive to one's evidence; so my point could be made equally well with respect to this more complex attitude.

³³ This is legitimate because M&W "take this [key] equivalence to be quite resilient; in particular, it holds under operators like *ThingToDo*" (2010:115).

³⁴ Indeed, they derive this claim themselves (2010: 115).

³⁵ See Hawthorne and Stanley (2008: 578) for the notion of a choice between actions depending on p.

acting as if p is true is the thing for one to do provided that some action A is the thing for one to do both in fact, and conditional on p:³⁶ but that is to say that acting as if p is true is the thing for one to do if, and only if, A is preferable to any alternative action B, both in fact, and conditional on p. Suppose that the question whether p doesn't make a difference to which action it is best for one to perform. For instance, suppose that an agent faces a choice between whether to study for her exams or not, and that p is the proposition that it is sunny;³⁷ and suppose further that failing her exams will ruin her life, so that whether it is sunny or not it is best for her to study for her exams (since any pleasure she receives from going outside in the sun instead of studying is swamped by the disutility of failing the exams). Then the thing for her to do in fact is to study for her exams. But equally, the thing for her to do conditional on its being sunny is to study for her exams. Then it is permissible, so far as the action rule tells us, for her to assert that it is sunny: for the thing for her to do in fact is to study for her exams, which is exactly the thing for her to do conditional on its being sunny; that is, acting as if it is sunny (i.e. studying for her exams) is the thing for her to do, and it is accordingly permissible for her to assert that it is sunny. But we made this argument without having made *any assumptions whatsoever* about the credence, or evidential probability, of the proposition that it is sunny for the agent in question - thus, the action rule licenses the assertion that it is sunny, even if one is almost certain, given one's evidence, that it is not!³⁸ More generally, the action rule licenses the assertion that p in some cases in which p is neither true, nor believed, nor even moderately evidentially supported. If we must accept these implausible consequences in order to accommodate the intuition that one may assert a proposition to the effect that X is the thing to do whenever it is, then we had better not!

It is perhaps worth making one further point here. Maitra and Weatherston say that they agree with Williamson that assertion is partly constituted by its connection with evidence:

Williamson holds that part of what makes a speech act an assertion as opposed to some other kind of act is that it is governed by The Knowledge Rule. Although many philosophers agree with Williamson that The Knowledge Rule is true, this fascinating claim about the metaphysics of speech acts has been largely ignored. Translating Williamson's work into the terminology of this paper, we're inclined to agree that a speech act is an assertion partly in virtue of being responsive to evidence in the right way. (2010: 112, note 7)

Note that the claim with which they say they agree is not true as stated, for there are certainly assertions which are not appropriately responsive to evidence – consider the obvious case of *lies*.³⁹ But I take it that what they want to agree with is the claim that assertion is constituted by its *normative* connection with evidence responsiveness – the essence of assertion is doing something which one *ought* not to do unless one has appropriate evidence. However, as we have just seen, if the action rule

³⁶ See Fantl and McGrath (2002) and Hawthorne and Stanley (2008).

³⁷ I assume the agent is no better or worse at her exams, or at studying for them, depending on whether it is sunny.

³⁸ What is worse, the action rule also allows the assertion that it is not sunny in such a case.

³⁹ Even if one's beliefs must be responsive to the evidence in order for one to lie effectively (one must try to discern what is true so that one can say the opposite), it does not follow that one's act of assertion is appropriately responsive to the evidence in such cases. Thanks to DS for discussion here.

provides the constitutive norm of assertion, there is no reason to suspect that it will link assertion with evidence in this manner. Accordingly, the action rule fails to satisfy the desiderata laid forth by Maitra and Weatherston themselves.

In order to avoid these consequences, we might try to revise the action rule. One way to do this would be to restrict attention to those propositions on which one's choice of actions depends. That is, one might advocate

The Restricted Action Rule: If what one is to do is depends on whether p , then assert that p only if acting as if p is true is the thing for you to do.

This would avoid the problem raised above in connection with the assertion that it is sunny – for whether it was sunny was irrelevant to the agent's decision whether to study for exams. But the proposal comes at the cost of having a rule which applies only to some of the propositions one might wish to assert, while remaining entirely silent on others. Since a rule of assertion should be perfectly general, the cost incurred is extreme, and should be avoided.

In any case, the proposed restriction would not suffice to avoid the problem. We can see this by considering the example Maitra and Weatherston themselves use to establish the asymmetry between the predictions of the action rule regarding assertions about what the thing for one to do is and other assertions. As we have seen, the key equivalence says that S acts as if X is the thing to do if and only if S does X . It follows from (the robustness of) this that acting as if X is the thing for S to do is the thing for S to do if and only if X is the thing for S to do. From this it follows that when p is the proposition that X is the thing for S to do, the action rule is, in effect, a truth rule.

But Maitra and Weatherston point out that the analogous equivalences do not hold across the board: in particular, it is not true in general that S acts as if p if and only if p ; nor is it true for arbitrary p and S that the thing for S to do is act as if p if and only if p . Returning to the case of Raj and Nik, they consider the case in which p is the proposition that there will not be a flood. They say:

To act as if this is true is to, inter alia, not buy flood insurance. If there won't be a flood, buying flood insurance is throwing away money, and when you're running a business, throwing away money isn't the thing to do.... But not buying flood insurance is not the thing to do. The prudent plan is to buy flood insurance. So, [the claim that the thing for Raj and Nik to do is to act as if p] is false, even though p is true. Therefore, the first biconditional fails. Since Raj and Nik do go on to buy flood insurance, i.e., since they don't act as if [the thing for them to do is act as if p], the left-hand-side of the second biconditional is also false. But again, the right-hand-side is true. So, that biconditional is false as well. And without those biconditionals, The Action Rule doesn't collapse into [a truth rule]. (2010: 116)

Maitra and Weatherston take this to be a good result, since Raj and Nik are in no position to assert that there will not be a flood.

But what happens if we let p be the proposition that there *will* be a flood, changing the story slightly so that this proposition is now true? The result is that both biconditionals turn out to be true: in particular,

Nik and Raj act as if there will be a flood, since buying insurance is the thing to do if there will be a flood, and there will be one; moreover, the thing for them to do is act as if there will be a flood and there will. So in this variant case, the action rule does not preclude Raj and Nik from asserting that there will be a flood, even if they don't have strong evidence that this is so, and even though it is relevant to the question whether to buy insurance.

Might we avoid the pitfalls of the unrestricted action rule in some other way? Perhaps it will be thought the solution to the above worries is obvious: we need to add that p is given sufficiently high credence to count as believed; and moreover, that the credence p is given is appropriately responsive to the subject's evidence. In short, we might combine the action rule with a requirement of evidence responsiveness, so that it becomes

The Evidence Responsive Action Rule: Assert that p only if you believe p because of the evidence you have, and acting as if p is true is the thing for you to do.⁴⁰

Of course, this evidence responsive action rule is not as simple as the knowledge rule is: but while this is a theoretical disadvantage of the new rule, it might be thought to be a price worth paying if it helps us to achieve accuracy. Unfortunately, however, the evidence responsive action rule does not make accurate predictions. For imagine a dialogue of the following form between Wooster and Jeeves.

Wooster: p .

Jeeves: Is that all sir?

Wooster: No, of course not Jeeves. Also, q .

Jeeves: So, p and q sir?

Wooster: Well, I wouldn't go that far, Jeeves!

Wooster's speech behaviour here is clearly absurd. I suggest that the reason is that in asserting a proposition one undertakes a commitment to its truth.⁴¹ Accordingly, having asserted p and asserted q Wooster has already committed to conditions obtaining which suffice for the truth of p and q : it is no *further* commitment for him to assert p and q ! And so we can't make much sense of what Wooster is trying to do. Yet if the evidence responsive action rule is correct, Wooster's behaviour might be perfectly correct.

To show this, I borrow an example from John Hawthorne and Jason Stanley (2008), who write:

⁴⁰ This rule might be thought to be an instance of the evidence responsiveness rule which specifies that one has 'sufficient' evidence to assert a proposition only if the thing for one to do is to act as if that proposition is true. That is, the evidence responsiveness rule is a kind of justified belief rule, to which the evidence responsiveness action rule adds that pragmatic considerations play a role in determining whether a belief is justified. In short, the current rule is evidence responsiveness plus pragmatic encroachment.

⁴¹ One discharges this commitment by knowing the proposition in question, thereby ensuring its truth.

Suppose I am faced with a choice between A and B. B does not risk a fine. If law x is in force then if I do A, I pay a 10 pound fine to authority w, and if law y is in force then if I do A I pay a 10 pound fine to authority v. I do not prefer to do A conditional on having to pay both fines. Suppose I am .9 confident that law x is in force and .9 confident that law y is in force but only .8 confident that both are in force. I prefer doing A to doing B, since the risk of two fines is sufficiently low. It is not at all hard to find utility assignments such that it is true that I prefer that I do A to that I do B iff I prefer that I do A to that I do B conditional on law x being in force, and I prefer that I do A to that I do B iff I prefer that I do A to that I do B conditional on law y being in force, but I do not prefer that I do A to that I do B iff I prefer that I do A to that I do B conditional on law x being in force and law y being in force. Suppose further that credence .8 is sufficient for full belief (2008: 576-577).

In a case like this it will be appropriate for me to assert that law x is in force, and appropriate for me to assert that law y is in force, but not appropriate for me to assert that law x and law y are both in force. In short, I will be in exactly the absurd position in which we found Wooster a moment ago! The reason is that I believe, on the basis of appropriate evidence, both that law x is in force, and that law y is in force: moreover, the preferences I have make it rational for me to act as if each of these laws is in force (by doing A); and so nothing prevents me, as far as the evidence responsive action rule is concerned, from asserting each of these propositions. But it is not rational for me to act as if both laws are in force and so, even though I believe that they are, I am barred, by the evidence responsive action rule, from asserting that they are. This result is, I take it, quite implausible.

We have seen that each of its various incarnations suffers significant drawbacks; accordingly, I do not think that Maitra and Weatherson's action rule provides a better account of the linguistic data than does the knowledge rule.

Conclusion

In this paper I have compared Williamson's knowledge rule of assertion with Maitra and Weatherson's alternatives, including their action rule. In the first part I rebutted Maitra and Weatherson's master argument against the knowledge rule, arguing that, while its second premise is true, and an action X can be the thing to do though one is in no position to know that it is, the first premise is false: the data surrounding assertions concerning which action it is best to perform do not support the thesis that whenever X is the thing for one to do one is in a position to assert that it is; moreover, accepting this premise yields problematic results regarding the consequences of proper assertion. In short, the master argument against the knowledge rule fails.

In the second part of the paper I have argued that no combination of the alternatives to the knowledge rule provided by Maitra and Weatherson yields a better explanation of the linguistic phenomena than the knowledge rule itself does. I have raised a number of concerns, but the most significant are that the action rule in particular involves a technical notion of which we have no pre-theoretical understanding: it fails to be explanatory of propriety when conformed to; and even when it is supplemented with a requirement of evidence responsiveness, it implausibly predicts that we can be in a position to assert

each of two proposition without being able to legitimately assert their conjunction. The upshot is that the knowledge rule is to be preferred to the action rule.

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