

Norms of Assertion: the quantity and quality of epistemic support

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Abstract We show that the contemporary debate surrounding the question “What is the norm of assertion?” presupposes what we call the *quantitative view*, i.e. the view that this question is best answered by determining *how much* epistemic support is required to warrant assertion. We consider what Jennifer Lackey (2010) has called cases of *isolated second-hand knowledge* and show—beyond what Lackey has suggested herself—that these cases are best understood as ones where a certain type of *understanding*, rather than knowledge, constitutes the required epistemic credential to warrant assertion. If we are right that *understanding* (and not just knowledge) is the epistemic norm for a restricted class of assertions, then this straightforwardly undercuts not only the widely supposed *quantitative view*, but also a more general presupposition concerning the universalisability of some norm governing assertion—the presumption (almost entirely unchallenged since Williamson’s 1996 paper) that any epistemic norm that governs some assertions should govern assertions—as a class of speech act—uniformly.

Keywords Assertion · Norms · Understanding · Justification · Knowledge

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Assertion can be usefully characterized, following Weiner (2005: 4) as ‘a genus that comprises species such as reports, predictions, arguments, reminders, and speculations’. The task of providing of necessary and sufficient conditions under which some speech act qualifies as an assertion is a well-worn and difficult one, as is that of clarifying what precisely distinguishes assertions from other non-assertoric declarative speech acts.¹ Our interest in this paper is, however, not to weigh in substantively here by defending any particular theory of assertion, as such. Rather, our topic will be *norms of assertion* – which are to be understood as rules governing what counts as a *proper or uncriticisable* assertion. These are importantly distinct from rules that would tell us what an assertion actually *is*.

¹ See McFarlane (2010). Also, see Cappelen (2009) for a defence of the “no assertion view”.

To begin with, we shall discuss three of the most prominent attempts to isolate some epistemic norm to which assertions are answerable: the knowledge norm, the truth norm, and the justification norm. Our first aim here will simply be to elucidate these accounts, though it is worth noting at the outset that there are considerations in support of the claim that each of these main views is distinctly unsatisfactory.

1.1

We begin with the strongest and historically most well-supported of the three most popular norms of assertion—the knowledge norm (Williamson 1996, 2000; DeRose 2002; Fricker 2007; Hawthorne 2004; Stanley 2005, among others). According to all formulations of the knowledge norm of assertion, it is epistemically improper to say what one *doesn't know to be true*. Obviously, we frequently violate the knowledge norm, rendering a lot (or, some might want to say, all) of our assertions improper, and concurrently rendering ourselves subject to criticism as asserters. The most widely discussed and compelling defence of the knowledge norm is Williamson's (1996, 2000). There are many subtly different formulations of the knowledge norm, but in order to render it immune to trivial and obvious counterexamples, we submit that the knowledge norm can (following Lackey (2007)) be most helpfully formulated in the following way:

Knowledge Norm of Assertion (KNA): One is properly epistemically positioned to assert that p only if one knows that p ².

As Brown (2008: 90) has pointed out, this claim has been commonly defended as both a necessity claim and a sufficiency claim:

Knowledge Norm (Necessity Claim): One is properly epistemically positioned to assert that p only if one knows that p .

Knowledge Norm (Sufficiency Claim): One is properly epistemically positioned to assert that p if one knows that p .

Support for the knowledge norm tends to largely be drawn from its explanatory power. Firstly, Williamson (1996; 2000) has claimed that the act of asserting involves the speaker representing himself as knowing, and that it is therefore only acceptable to assert if we know (as opposed to merely justifiably believe). Arguably a virtue of the knowledge norm is that it appears best suited to explain two particularly problematic types of assertions—seemingly paradoxical Moorean assertions, and the impermissible

² In all of our formulations of the proposed norms of assertion, the inclusion of “epistemically positioned” (as opposed to simply “positioned”) accounts for the fact that the epistemic state to which the norm refers might be insufficient for various kinds of *non-epistemic* propriety. Formulations of the norms that lack such a qualification would be open to obvious and philosophically uninteresting counterexamples.

assertion of lottery propositions. A classic example of a Moorean assertion is “Dogs bark, but I don’t know that they do” or “Dogs bark, but I don’t believe that they do”, whilst an example of a problematic lottery proposition assertion would be “Your ticket didn’t win!” if said by someone with no inside information (at a time between the drawing of a lottery and an announcement of the winner). When it comes to Moorean sentences, the knowledge norm offers a satisfying explanation of why they are paradoxical because, given that knowledge entails belief, you can permissibly assert such sentences only if you believe both that p and that $\sim p$.

Regarding the assertion of lottery propositions, the knowledge norm makes straightforward sense of why you should not assert them—you may have a highly justified belief in lottery propositions but (prior to the drawing of a lottery and in the absence of any inside information) you do not *know* lottery propositions.

Much of the literature espousing the knowledge norm focuses mainly on the necessity claim, according to which one is *never* properly epistemically positioned to assert unless one knows.³ However, there is also explicit support for the claim that the knowledge norm is *sufficient* for proper assertion, according to which one is always properly epistemically positioned to assert *if* one knows.⁴

At the opposite end of the spectrum to the knowledge norm of assertion, we find the weakest of the three most prominent answers to the assertion question in the contemporary debate—the truth norm of assertion (as primarily advocated by Weiner, 2005).

Truth Norm of Assertion (TNA): One is properly epistemically positioned to assert that p only if p is true.

Why, then, should we suppose that truth might be the norm of assertion? Arguably, it is satisfyingly inclusive in the way in which it allows for the existence of cases where assertions are wholly proper even though the truth that is asserted is (according to orthodox definitions) not *known*. Weiner (2005: 8) suggests that the bulk of intuitively correct assertions that are not expressions of knowledge will be *predictions and retroindications*. An example of the former would be something like an experienced political analyst making the utterance “The exit polls correctly indicate which party will win this election”, whilst an example of the latter could be something along the lines of “Steff ate the last cookie—everyone else in the house would have asked before eating it!”

It is often thought that the knowledge norm is too strong, whilst the truth norm is too weak⁵; this brings us to a plausible alternative to the Truth Norm (TNA) and the Knowledge Norm (KNA)—the Justification Norm of Assertion (JNA). It is weaker than

³ The knowledge norm specifically as a necessary condition for assertion is normally attributed to Williamson (e.g. 2000), and also gains substantial support from DeRose (e.g. 2002), Unger (1975), Hawthorne (e.g. 2004), Fricker (e.g. 2007), and Stanley (e.g. 2005).

⁴ DeRose (2002) is the main advocate of this position, but implicit or briefly stated support can also be found in Reynolds (2002), Hawthorne (2004), and Stanley (2008).

⁵ After all, it would seem that an asserter who asserts a proposition on scant evidence, or as the result of prejudice or superstition, is epistemically criticisable even if the assertion turns out to be true. This counts in favour of the idea that whatever norm governs assertion epistemically will be sensitive not only to the truth value of the assertion but also to the epistemic grounds possessed by the asserter.

the Knowledge Norm, yet stronger than the Truth Norm, and there are at least three prominent formulations—defended by Douven⁶ (2008), Lackey⁷ (2007) and Kvanvig (2009). The most straightforward and inclusive articulation, Kvanvig’s (2009), claims:

Justification Norm of Assertion (JNA): one is properly epistemically positioned to assert that p only if one has good reasons or justification for p .

Two sorts of cases recommend this view. First, take cases where one has excellent epistemic grounds for believing a proposition which happens to be false. For example, Lewis might believe that James is at the opera on excellent epistemic grounds (e.g. he sees his car parked outside, and he knows James enjoys the opera.) He asserts “James is at the opera.” Even if we suppose this claim is false—James, it turns out, parked at the opera and instead took an inspired stroll—it’s counterintuitive to fault Lewis for his assertion. The JNA, unlike the KNA and TNA, accommodates the sense in which we find assertions on the basis of good evidence blameless, regardless of whether the assertion is true. Such cases favor JNA as appropriately inclusive, where KNA and TNA seem in comparison too exclusive.

A second sort of case is offered by proponents of JNA to separate specifically from the TNA: suppose Jesper is a victim asked to identify the perpetrator of an assault against him in a line-up. Jesper doesn’t remember what the criminal looked like, but wants someone to pay, and so asserts: “It was Person No.3 who attacked me.” Even if it *were* No. 3 who attacked Jesper (and so his assertion was true), it seems plausible to contend that Jesper’s assertion was improper given that Jesper lacked the appropriate sort of evidential grounds. This sort of case favors JNA as appropriately exclusive, where TNA seems in comparison too inclusive.

1.2

Overwhelmingly, philosophers have, against this background, attempted to advance the mainstream debate via the strategy of defending one of these three proposed norms against the other two. Invariably, this strategy requires one take a stand on the matter of *how much epistemic support*⁸ *is needed* for one to properly assert what she does. The

⁶ Douven (2008) defends what he calls the Rationally Credible Norm of Assertion. According to this norm: One is properly epistemically positioned to assert only what is rationally credible to one.

⁷ Lackey (2007) defends what she calls the Reasonable to Believe Norm of Assertion according to which one is properly epistemically positioned to assert that p only if (i) it is reasonable to one to believe that p , and (ii) if one asserted that p , one would assert that p at least in part *because* it is reasonable for one to believe that p . One supporting case that Lackey uses to show how her norm works involves a woman asserting that a co-worker forgot to turn the alarm on before leaving work because she does not want to be suspected for this error herself, even though she loves that co-worker in a way that actually prevents her from rationally *suspecting* him. Here, this woman’s assertion is obviously improper, and the reasonable to believe norm gives just this result—even though the asserted proposition is reasonable, it is not asserted *because* it is reasonable.

⁸ We do not mean to imply here that the property of a belief constituted in its ‘being true’ constitutes epistemic support for the belief. Though the truth and knowledge accounts of assertion differ from justification accounts on the point of whether asserted beliefs must have the property of being true to be warranted, the relevant point we make is that what distinguishes each view uniquely from the others is the matter of how much epistemic support is warranted for assertion.

options become:

- (i) none, so long as the belief asserted is true (*the truth account*);
- (ii) some, regardless of whether the belief is true (*the justification account*), or;
- (iii) support sufficient for the asserted true belief to qualify as knowledge (*the knowledge account*).

What this reveals is a crucial presupposition internal to the debate. This presupposition, held by defenders of all three of the main rival views, is what we will call the *quantitative view*:

Quantitative View: The question “What is the norm of assertion?” is best answered by determining how much epistemic support is required to warrant assertion.

By presupposing the quantitative view in attempting to answer the question “What is the norm of assertion?”, defenders of all three accounts reveal their commitment to a gradient account of epistemic support. This would be an account according to which, for a subject S who asserts propositional content α , if S knows α , then S has maximal epistemic support for α . Thus, on the quantitative view presupposed by the mainstream debate, if S knows what one asserts, then S satisfies (in virtue of having maximal epistemic support for her assertion) the norm of assertion, whatever it might be.

The mainstream debate, then, is committed not only to the quantitative view, but also to what we called in section (1) the *knowledge norm sufficiency claim* (hereafter SUFF):

Knowledge Norm (Sufficiency Claim) (SUFF): One is properly epistemically positioned to assert that p if one knows that p .

Importantly, SUFF stands as a commitment of *whichever* of the three mainstream candidates for the norm of assertion (truth, justification or knowledge) is endorsed. If SUFF is false, then, this would count not only against the knowledge norm, but also against the *quantitative view* presupposed by all three mainstream accounts. Consequently, if SUFF is false, then the question “What is the norm of assertion?” is *not* best answered by determining *how much* epistemic support is required to warrant assertion. This would be a significant result, the implications of which we will set aside for now. The present task will be to consider whether SUFF (and *a fortiori* the quantitative view that presupposes it) does in fact hold.

2.1

Our challenge to SUFF—and by extension, to the quantitative view—is one that becomes apparent when considering some recent literature on the epistemology of testimony. Firstly, however, some very brief background is in order. A central dividing line in the epistemology of testimony concerns the epistemic burden that should fall on the recipient of testimonial knowledge. On this score, *reductionists* hold that one must have additional

(i.e. non-testimonially dependent) reasons for accepting some item of testimony if one is to possess testimonial knowledge.⁹ *Non-reductionists*, on the other hand, reject this requirement that additional reasons over and above the testimony itself are required for the possession of testimonial knowledge.¹⁰

Some cases are particularly conducive to highlighting how it is that reductionism and non-reductionism would come apart. “Stranger-directions cases”, for instance, are ones in which the non-reductionist will be more inclined than the reductionist to award testimonial knowledge; after all, apart from the fact *that* the informant says what he says concerning the directions he gives, you have no independent (i.e. non-testimonial) reason to believe what it is that he has said. You *would* have such reasons, however, if you already knew that the informant were pretty competent on the subject matter at hand (i.e. that he was someone who had been to the area several times). You would have *especially* (perhaps maximally) strong independent reasons to trust a given piece of testimony if the informant was one you identify as a full-fledged expert on the subject matter at hand (i.e. a local navigator/cartographer). Absent any defeaters, then, it is uncontroversial (for both reductionists and non-reductionists alike) that truthful testimony from a knowledgeable and correctly identified expert (on the matter at hand) is sufficient as a source of knowledge.

With this idea in mind, we’ll see that certain cases of testimonial knowledge exchange pose a direct challenge to the claim that one is properly epistemically positioned to assert that *p* if one knows that *p* (SUFF). For an example of such a case, consider Jennifer Lackey’s (2008) recent DOCTOR case:

DOCTOR: Matilda is an oncologist at a teaching hospital who has been diagnosing and treating various kinds of cancers for the past fifteen years. One of her patients, Derek, was recently referred to her office because he has been experiencing intense abdominal pain for a couple of weeks. After requesting an ultrasound and MRI, the results of the tests arrived on Matilda’s day off; consequently, all of the relevant data were reviewed by Nancy, a competent medical student in oncology training at her hospital. Being able to confer for only a very brief period of time prior to Derek’s appointment today, Nancy communicated to Matilda simply that her diagnosis is pancreatic cancer, without offering any of the details of the test results or the reasons underlying her conclusion. Shortly thereafter, Matilda had her appointment with Derek, where she truly asserts to him purely on the basis of Nancy’s reliable testimony, “I am very sorry to tell you this, but you have pancreatic cancer. (Lackey 2008: 3-4)

Here Matilda heard first-hand that Derek has pancreatic cancer, from a fellow expert (Nancy) who looked at Derek’s charts, so she knows that he has pancreatic cancer. However, is it nonetheless the case that Matilda is not epistemically positioned to assert this knowledge to Derek? In Lackey’s own assessment of DOCTOR, she writes:

The question we must now consider is whether, under these conditions, Matilda is properly epistemically positioned to flat out assert to Derek that he has pancreatic cancer. And here the answer is clearly no. (Lackey 2008: 6).

⁹ For some recent defences of reductionism, see Lyons (1997), Lipton (1998), Lehrer (2006), Van Cleve (2006) and Fricker (1995).

¹⁰ For some recent defences of non-reductionism, see Welbourne (1979), Audi (1997), Burge (1993), Foley (1994) and McDowell (1994).

If Lackey is right that Matilda is *not* properly epistemically positioned to assert to Derek that he has pancreatic cancer then, given the by and large uncontroversial fact that expert testimony (in the absence of defeaters) is good enough for knowledge¹¹, we have good cause to deny SUFF—that one is properly epistemically positioned to assert that *p* if one knows that *p*. Further, if we deny SUFF, then we of course at the same time undermine the *quantitative view* undergirding all three central assertoric norms).

Two questions now become especially salient. Firstly, is Lackey’s assessment of the case correct? And secondly, if so, then *what* (if not knowledge) is the epistemic credential required to warrant assertion in cases the class of which the DOCTOR case is characteristic? The rest of this section will center around the first question, and the next section will concern the second.

2.2

We turn, then, to our first question: *is Lackey’s assessment of the DOCTOR case correct?* More specifically, is Lackey right that this case demonstrates an instance in which an individual (i.e. Matilda) both:

- (i) has knowledge that *p*
- (ii) is not properly epistemically situated to assert that *p*?

Given that Matilda learned that *p* from the reliable, undefeated testimony of an expert (Diane), she counts as knowing *p*, and so (i) is satisfied. Is (ii) satisfied? On Lackey’s view, Matilda was not epistemically situated to assert that *p* because, in virtue of Diane’s recognition of Matilda as an expert, there are certain epistemic expectations at play that Matilda fails to meet, even though she knows what she asserts. Consider, for one thing, that Derek would plausibly be miffed to learn that Matilda had diagnosed him without seeing his charts or examining him.¹² Derek would be within his rights to expect Matilda to have a better grasp of his situation epistemically than she did.¹³ According to Lackey, the specific epistemic expectation at play here is that Matilda not *merely* have what

¹¹ That we have excellent reason not to deny this uncontroversial assumption is not solely due to the fact that it is considered uncontroversial across the reductionist/non-reductionist debate, but also because of considerations related to skepticism—ones that should be held in mind regardless of what one’s commitments are in the epistemology of testimony. After all, testimony is ubiquitous as a source of human knowledge, and expert testimony (in the absence of defeaters) is testimony at its best. To question whether expert testimony (absent defeaters) is good enough for knowledge is to offer up to the sceptic testimonial knowledge more generally—a considerable and unpalatable concession to the sceptic indeed.

¹² Lackey adds some helpful detail here. She writes: ‘One reason for this is that Matilda is an *expert*—she is an oncologist and Derek’s physician, and such roles carry with them certain epistemic duties. In DOCTOR, these responsibilities may include having reviewed the test results firsthand, possessing reasons for choosing one condition over another, knowing details about the size and nature of the cancer, and so on. But the overarching epistemic duty here is that, *qua* oncologist, Matilda should be able to (at least partially) explain or justify the diagnosis of pancreatic cancer that she is offering to her patient. Moreover, as her patient, Derek reasonably has the right to expect his doctor to fulfill such a duty.’ (2007: 6)

¹³ On this point, Lackey adds further that when ‘asserters are experts who are offering assertions in contexts that call for their expertise... they are expected to be able to defend or offer support for the assertions that they make when occupying such roles.’ (Lackey 2008: 7).

Lackey calls *isolated second-hand knowledge*. Of isolated second-hand knowledge, Lackey says:

There are two central components to this phenomenon: first, the subject in question knows that *p* solely on the basis of another speaker's testimony that *p*—hence the knowledge is secondhand; and, second, the subject knows nothing (or very little) relevant about the matter other than that *p*—hence the knowledge is isolated. The combination of these features, by itself, is not necessarily problematic, even when assertion is involved. But when a subject's assertion that *p* is grounded in such knowledge in contexts where the hearer reasonably has the right to expect the asserter to possess more than merely isolated secondhand knowledge, there is a problem. (Lackey 2008: 5)

In the DOCTOR case, though Matilda knows what she asserts, she is not epistemically situated to assert it because, *qua* expert, Matilda is expected to assert on the basis of more than merely isolated, second-hand knowledge. This, at least, is how Lackey's argument runs.

The argument can be generalized so that we might generate a recipe for counterexamples to SUFF. The counterexamples would have to demonstrate (contra what SUFF maintains) that, as was the case in DOCTOR, one can both:

- (i) know that *p*
- (ii) *not* be properly epistemically situated to assert that *p*

Cases where both (i) and (ii) hold must simply¹⁴ be ones that have the following three features:

- (C1): The speaker knows *p* on the basis of undefeated testimony from an identified expert. (vouchsafes (i))
- (C2): The subject knows that *p* solely on the basis of another speaker's testimony that *p* (i.e. second-hand) (vouchsafes (ii))
- (C3): The subject knows nothing (or very little) relevant about the matter other than *p* (i.e. isolated) (vouchsafes (ii))

Cases in which (C1-C3) hold, then, will be counterexamples to SUFF. Before considering and replying to some objections to this counterexample-style argument against SUFF, let's consider a parallel case Lackey offers in which (C1-C3) also hold:

RECOMMENDATION: Josie, who was asked to support a philosophy student applying to Ph.D. programs, wrote in her letter of recommendation for his applications, "Mitchell has very polished writing skills." While Josie does indeed know this about the student, her knowledge is grounded purely in the isolated, reliable testimony of her trustworthy colleague. Josie herself has had Mitchell in class for only a few weeks, and has yet to see any of his writing. (Lackey 2008: 13)

Notice that the same structural features (i.e. C1-C3) that were present in DOCTOR are

¹⁴ We are claiming here that satisfaction of C1-C3 would ensure that (i) and (ii) hold. We're not claiming that satisfying C1-C3 are *necessary* for satisfying (i) and (ii) and thus generating a counterexample to SUFF. We leave open the possibility that other cases where one or more of C1-C3 are not satisfied and yet (i) and (ii) are satisfied. We maintain only that the satisfaction of C1-C3 is *one* 'recipe' for guaranteeing counterexamples to (i) and (ii)—and this is the recipe that is followed by Lackey's examples.

present in RECOMMENDATION. Josie satisfies C1 because she knows that Mitchell “has polished writing skills” on the basis of reliable undefeated testimony from a fellow professor with expertise on the matter. C2 is satisfied because Josie knows about Mitchell’s writing skills *only* on the basis of what her colleague told her, and C3 is satisfied because Josie knows absolutely nothing about Mitchell’s writing skills (*other* than what her colleague told her). Consequently, and contra-SUFF, both (i) and (ii) hold: Julie knows that Mitchell has polished writing skills but she is *not* epistemically situated to assert that he does. Julie’s hearer (i.e. the recipient of the letter) has epistemic expectations about Julie’s grasp of what she, *qua* expert, asserts, and—given that Julie has merely isolated second-hand knowledge on the matter—Julie in fact fails these expectations.

It would appear, then, that DOCTOR and RECOMMENDATION are counterexamples to SUFF and, by extension, they are also cases that undermine the *quantitative view* that our three theories of epistemic assertoric norms presuppose. We will shortly be considering the question of *what* (if not knowledge) is the epistemic credential required to warrant assertion in cases the class of which the DOCTOR and RECOMMENDATION cases are characteristic¹⁵—i.e. cases where C1-C3 hold. First, however, let’s consider some objections to the claim that these sort of cases should lead us to abandon SUFF¹⁶.

2.3.1

Peter Milne (2010) has recently argued against several recent criticisms¹⁷ of the knowledge norm, and presented several different challenges to Lackey’s *isolated second-hand knowledge* cases against SUFF. We will discuss the strongest of them here. Milne’s central objection to rejecting SUFF via counterexample the way Lackey has is the claim that the fault of the asserter (in her counterexample cases, such as DOCTOR and RECOMMENDATION) is not, as Lackey maintains, *epistemic*, but rather, *social*. Milne highlights the DOCTOR case as an example.¹⁸ Here’s Milne:

Social roles can require, in some normative way, that someone asserting *p* must be in a position to provide evidence of a certain kind, and be in a position to assert the relevant evidential propositions (as Shieber

¹⁵ We take this up in some detail in § 3.

¹⁶ At this point, we could point out that further weakening the sufficiency claim of the knowledge norm would make it immune to these sorts of counterexamples. We could amend the sufficiency claim to read only that one has the *quantity of epistemic support* required to properly assert that *p* if one knows that *p*—this is compatible with the claim that knowledge isn’t sufficient to have the quality of epistemic support demanded by proper assertion. However, (i) this represents an *extreme* weakening of the sufficiency claim of the knowledge norm (as it clearly concedes that knowledge is not qualitatively sufficient for epistemically proper assertion), and (ii) a high-stakes practical context case can be construed as a counterexample to this ultra-weak knowledge norm, i.e. as showing that knowledge isn’t even sufficient for possessing the *quantity* of epistemic support required for proper assertion. It seems as though proper assertion in high-stakes cases might require *more* than knowledge, so even the very weak version of SUFF is lacking in plausibility.

¹⁷ Sheiber (2009), Koethe (2009) and Judith Jarvis-Thompson (2008).

¹⁸ Milne writes: ‘...Lackey speaks of Derek feeling epistemically cheated if Matilda cannot back up her assertion in the way expected of an oncological expert (Lackey *forthcoming*, pp. 6-7) ... Lackey does nothing to show that the defect, if such it is, is epistemic.’ (Milne 2010: pp. 15-16).

would have it one must in responding to the question, ‘How do you know?’). But it is a mistake to think that it follows from this that epistemic entitlement to asserting p must, in this case, include possession of that evidential basis. Criticism faced for asserting p on the basis, say, of isolated second-hand knowledge is not epistemic. It is failure to perform the social role that is criticised. (Milne 2010: 16)

What Milne has overlooked here is that ‘passing-the-buck’ of criticism to the violation of some social role will only lead to having the buck passed right back to the epistemic shortcomings of the asserter who occupies such a role. This is because, contra what Milne suggests, the relevant order of explanation is backwards. This much is evident in Lackey’s rather detailed observation (2009: 25-28) that the ‘social role’ criticism is easily dispelled once it’s recognized that:

... the assertions involving isolated secondhand knowledge are not epistemically problematic because various institutions say that they are wrong; rather, the institutions say that they are wrong because such assertions are epistemically problematic. (Lackey 2009: 25)¹⁹

In DOCTOR and RECOMMENDATION, the knowledgeable asserter fails to satisfy the epistemic expectations of the hearer, and *that’s* why the assertions are epistemically inappropriate—not because they violate the norms of some institutional role they occupy as opposed to violating the epistemic expectations that make various social roles more or less epistemically credible. This particular worry, then, can be put to rest.

2.3.2

Before moving on, we also want to quickly show why Lackey’s counterexamples to SUFF cannot be set aside simply by appealing to the idea that what’s wrong with the assertions (of the protagonists in the counterexample cases) is *not* some epistemic defect but rather the violation of some Gricean²⁰ conversational norm. Perhaps, as the argument might go, Matilda’s assertion is incorrect because she has *implied* by her assertion that she has a better grasp of Derek’s medical situation than she actually does (having not seen his charts or examined him); perhaps, likewise, Judith’s assertion is incorrect because she *implies* by her assertion that she has taught Mitchell and read his work.

Objections of this style are misguided, but our reasoning here is different from that of Williamson (2000) when he simply waves away Gricean-style objections to the knowledge norm by claiming them to be examples in which the knowledge norm is satisfied but is simply overridden by other, non-epistemic norms (such as Gricean conversational norms). As we see it, Gricean-style cases (or, indeed, any other sort of

¹⁹ To see why this point is plausible, Lackey asks us to consider what would happen if the institutions changed such that it was no longer improper to offer assertions grounded purely in isolated secondhand knowledge. If, for instance, the medical profession changed so that diagnoses from specialists could be grounded entirely in a single instance of reliable testimony, this institution would no longer serve the epistemic purpose for which it was created. Patients would no longer regard the medical verdict of an expert as having a certain kind of epistemic authority, and thus they would cease to consult with specialists to obtain precisely the specialized information that the medical profession intended these doctors to provide. (Lackey 2009: 23)

²⁰ See Grice 1969, ‘Utterer’s Meaning and Intentions’, *The Philosophical Review*, 78: 147–77 and especially Grice (1989) *Studies in the Ways of Words*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

case) would be pertinent to the knowledge norm, and potentially undermining of it, if and only if, the cases show that it is due to a lack of *epistemic* warrant that the assertion at issue is improper. Of course, many ‘Gricean-style’ cases are ones in which an assertion’s impropriety is entirely *non-epistemic*. For example, you might have plenty of epistemic warrant to tell Lyle Lovett that there are plenty of singers with voices purer and faces more symmetrical. It would not be proper to assert this (i.e. to Lovett’s face) even though you have ample epistemic grounds for what you asserted. Here, the impropriety of your assertion owes to the violation of a Gricean conversational norm, and not of any rule according to which certain epistemic grounds are required to warrant proper assertion.

That said, it’s important to note that violating a Gricean conversational norm is perfectly compatible with lacking the epistemic warrant to properly assert. This compatibility could certainly occur (for example) in cases in which someone (i) misleads someone else (and therefore violates the Gricean norm according to which misleading statements are improper) *and* (ii) lacks appropriate epistemic credentials to assert. A natural way for this to happen in everyday discourse will be when someone misleads someone else (thus violating the Gricean norm not to mislead) *specifically by implying that they have greater epistemic warrant for their assertions than they actually do*.

That, we contend, is precisely what seems to be going on in our counter-cases to SUFF. A Gricean (non-misleading) norm is violated *because* one lacks certain epistemic credentials expected of them in virtue of occupying various roles of expertise. We can dispel, then, the mistaken (though initially appealing) idea that the objections we considered to SUFF can be shrugged off as *simply* cases where Gricean norms are violated. We’ll agree with this much and add that the Gricean norm (of not misleading) is violated *because of* the impoverishment of the asserter’s epistemic situation—this, itself, is sufficient to explain the impropriety of the assertion.

With SUFF dispelled, then, we have no reason to think that the strategy for answering the question ‘what is the norm of assertion?’ should be as the *quantitative* view suggests—i.e. by asking *how much* epistemic support (for the proposition’s being true) is required to warrant assertion. Perhaps we should be asking a different question. Lackey alludes to such a question—the question of what *kind* of epistemic support (as opposed to *how much epistemic support*) warrants assertion.²¹ Lackey herself does not pursue this question; our next section, however, will be entirely focused on considering just this question’

3.

We will now turn to examine *what*, epistemically speaking, the protagonists in the isolated second-hand knowledge cases lack.

²¹ We have not taken a stand at this point on whether all assertions would be answerable to the *same* epistemic norm governing their appropriateness or whether different epistemic norms might govern different classes of assertions. So, in asking this question, we do not intend to imply that some particular norm (of a particular quality) should govern all assertions uniformly. Whether one should is a point we will take up later in the paper.

We now intend to advance a positive thesis—specifically, we want to argue that the lack of appropriate epistemic credentials to assert in these cases owes to the fact that the speakers lack (the relevant sort of) *understanding*. Firstly, however, it is important to make clear what kinds of understanding are contenders for what appears to be missing in cases of isolated secondhand knowledge. We can then go on to explore whether any of these specific sorts of understanding seem to be required of (and yet lacked by) the speakers in cases like DOCTOR and RECOMMENDATION (i.e., cases which share features (C1-C3) from the previous section).

3.1

There are three obvious candidates in the mainstream literature on understanding in epistemology. To begin with, there is what is usually called *propositional understanding* (e.g. Kvanvig 2003: 191-192), represented by such sentences as ‘I understand *that* X’. Secondly, in sentences that take the form ‘I understand *why/when/where/what* X’, we find *non-holistic* or *atomistic* understanding (e.g. Pritchard, 2010: 75), or what is sometimes called *understanding-wh*²² (e.g. Brogaard, 2005: 6). Finally, there is what has been termed *objectual understanding* (Kvanvig 2003: 191-192) (or, less commonly (e.g. Pritchard 2010: 75), *holistic understanding*). This is the sort that we attain when we have understanding of some subject matter, such as music theory, quantum physics, or another person about whom we have a comprehensive amount of accurate information. It is expressed in sentences that take the form ‘I *understand* X’. Which, then, of these main three forms of understanding is missing in the cases of isolated secondhand knowledge that we have discussed? We will argue that in fact more than one of these forms of understanding is absent, but that it is a particular instance of *one* of these types of understanding that makes it such that the speaker lacks the correct epistemic credentials to assert.

We might at first be tempted to respond to, for instance, the DOCTOR case by saying ‘Matilda knew that Derek had cancer, but the problem was that she didn’t *understand* that Derek had cancer!’. We might then think that this reaction means that it is *propositional understanding* that is missing in these cases (of which DOCTOR is paradigmatic). However, our line here is actually that so-called ‘propositional understanding’ is no kind of understanding at all, and that it is a philosophically uninteresting construal of what it is to understand. We take it that what appear to be attributions of propositional understanding occur only in cases where one of two different sorts of misspeaking is occurring. Either (i) the speaker means that the subject of her sentence *knows* some proposition, or (ii) the speaker is hedging²³ for reasons of doubt or

²² It is worth noting here that some (e.g. Pritchard, 2010) suppose that one type of understanding-wh, specifically *understanding-why*, is paradigmatic and also the most interesting breed of understanding.

²³ An example of hedging of this sort might be ‘I understand that the train leaves at seven o’clock’, which means something closer to ‘I believe that the train leaves at seven o’clock, but I have at least some cause to doubt this’. Another example is ‘I understood that you would be home earlier’, which is intended to soften the potentially confrontational fact that the hearer’s behaviour did not meet the speakers expectations. We base these examples on similar cases from Kvanvig (2003), who uses them for a different purpose (i.e. to explain away apparently *non-factive* uses of understanding).

social convention. Clearly, since (i) the problem with cases of isolated secondhand knowledge is by definition *not* that the speaker *lacks* knowledge, and (ii) it simply doesn't make sense to think that what is lacked is whatever epistemic state features in cases of hedging, we can therefore dismiss propositional understanding as an implausible candidate for the epistemic credentials appropriate for assertion in such cases as DOCTOR²⁴.

As we have seen, what is problematic in cases like DOCTOR and RECOMMENDATION is the *quality* of the speaker's epistemic credentials (something intimately connected with the evidence they have in support of their assertion). Given this fact, another claim that might seem intuitively attractive is that the type of understanding missing in those cases is most likely to be the most comprehensive and desirable type that it is possible to possess. Since having objectual understanding amounts to having understanding of a subject matter, it is reasonable to say that it would be, *ceteris paribus*, the sort of understanding that is comprised of the largest amount of true beliefs, and also the sort that requires a grasp of the largest amount of relations between beliefs. Should we, then, allege that the speakers in cases like DOCTOR and RECOMMENDATION lack the adequate epistemic credentials because they lack *objectual* understanding?

On closer inspection, it becomes obvious that we should not. It is a mistake to claim that speakers like the ones in the isolated secondhand knowledge cases should not assert unless they have objectual understanding of the relevant subject matter—somewhat surprisingly, having objectual understanding of the relevant subject matter would not automatically make their assertions permissible. As we will now show, objectual understanding is neither necessary *nor* sufficient for assertion in cases of isolated secondhand knowledge. To see why this is the case, first consider that in DOCTOR, it seems as though the relevant subject matter that Matilda would have to understand would be cancer²⁵. Consider also that it is also a plausible assumption that one necessary condition of understanding a subject matter is the possession of all the beliefs that are central to that subject matter. Assuming that this is correct, then, no matter *which* precise beliefs are central to understanding the subject matter of cancer, if objectual understanding is the norm of assertion here then it is obvious that Matilda needs to know *much more* than the specific results of Derek's tests. Indeed, she must have true beliefs

²⁴ Fully defending this claim about propositional understanding is beyond the scope of this paper. However, if you are not convinced by our brief outline of the 'misspeaking' theory, you might see its plausibility if you notice that when one tries to spell out the difference between propositional understanding and knowledge, one immediately starts offering up features that are almost uncontroversially possessed of atomistic and/or objectual understanding—chiefly, a grasp of the relations that cohere separate (but related) true beliefs.

²⁵ We think that cancer is the most plausible subject matter here because (i) it is uncontroversially considered a subject matter in itself (e.g. in medical school and textbooks), and (ii) other available options such as 'medicine' and 'Derek's cancer' seem too large and too ad hoc respectively to be the subject matter required here. However, even if we are mistaken and one of these other options is actually the relevant subject matter, it is still the case that objectual understanding of either is neither necessary nor sufficient for permissible assertion of Derek's diagnosis. In the former case, this is because (like 'cancer'), the subject matter of 'medicine' is unwarrantedly large. In the latter case, it is because making the subject matter as small as 'Derek's cancer' to avoid our claim about necessity and sufficiency means that the type of understanding in the relevant norm of assertion actually collapses into atomistic understanding—specifically, understanding *why* something is the case.

about many things entirely unrelated to his particular case for it to be appropriate for her to assert the diagnosis to him.

This is too strong a demand to make regarding the permissibility of assertions. Suppose that Matilda knows everything about Derek's results and has expertise on the matter of cancer diagnosis, but that she does not, on balance, have objectual understanding of *cancer*. In this set of circumstances, it doesn't seem though she is still criticisable for asserting to Derek that his diagnosis is pancreatic cancer. Now, imagine that the test results are reported by someone who is perfectly competent at accurately interpreting results that show the irrefutable presence or lack of cancer in all its possible locations, but build in the idea that this person doesn't have the understanding *of* cancer that (say) an oncologist would have. We do not think that Derek would feel cheated if he had this results reported by this person, and learned these facts about the person. He might not go to this person for advice on treatment, or to grasp the harder topic of why cancer occurs in human beings, but he would surely have no problem with this person being the one to first report his diagnosis to him. He would not require that the asserter of the diagnosis also grasp how the disease arises, how often (and in what manner) it can be cured, and all the other central facts of which the subject matter of cancer is comprised. We would even go so far as to say that he would probably even have no quibble with the person asserting the diagnosis if, in the domain of cancer, they *only* had a very specialized, specific and narrow ability to correctly interpret results of tests for pancreatic cancer. All of the foregoing considerations show that objectual understanding is not necessary for assertion in cases of isolated secondhand knowledge. What would irk Derek in DOCTOR (we will argue) is if Matilda, the asserter of his diagnosis, didn't have understanding that is more specific.

Interestingly, nor does objectual understanding turn out to be *sufficient* for assertion in these types of cases. Matilda might understand cancer—in fact, we could even change the case to make her one of the world's foremost experts—but if she is not personally familiar with the finer details of Derek's diagnosis and is reporting on the basis of merely knowing (by way of reliable, results-based testimony) *that* he has cancer, then the intuition remains that she is doing something wrong when she asserts the diagnosis to Derek. He would be irked if this expert asserting his diagnosis did not understand more about *his* particular case of cancer, no matter how much she happened to know about the field more generally. So, now that we have seen that objectual understanding is neither necessary nor sufficient for permissible assertion in these kinds of cases, we can justifiably put objectual understanding aside as a plausible candidate for the epistemic credential that is importantly missing in DOCTOR and RECOMMENDATION. It *is* missing, yes, but its presence would not make the protagonists' assertions permissible.

We contend that the sort of understanding lacked in these cases (and others that take the same form) is one kind of *atomistic* understanding. Specifically, we think it is *understanding-why* that is absent. This is something that Matilda blatantly lacks in a number of different formulations—for example, she doesn't understand *why* the asserted proposition (i.e. that Derek has pancreatic cancer) is true. However, we do not think that this is the *important* item of atomistic understanding that is lacking. As in the case of objectual understanding above, to ask her to understand why the asserted proposition is true would be to ask for quite a bit too much. To understand why 'Derek has pancreatic

cancer' is true, she would have to know why Derek *developed* cancer—for example, she might have to know a story involving his having a parent who died of the disease, as well as his having a *helicobacter pylori* infection and a persistent problem with obesity. The sentence 'Derek has cancer *because...*' is not a sentence that one is able to fill out simply by having become fully, personally acquainted with Derek's test results and having concluded that those results are indicative of pancreatic cancer (while excluding all other potential diagnoses). It is not a sentence that Derek would reasonably expect the bearer of his test results to be able to complete unless they happened to know more about his life or habits. Further, to have atomistic understanding of why 'Derek has cancer' is true, Matilda would not necessarily even *have* to be acquainted with the specifics of his test results, and so having this item of atomistic understanding present in the DOCTOR case would not just automatically make it such that Matilda's assertion is permissible. It is possible that she might just have atomistic understanding of why Derek has cancer by way of being a personal friend of Derek's, or even a friend of his sister's, for example. Were this to be the case, Matilda would therefore know enough about the casual story to understand why he has cancer, whilst still lacking the credentials required to permissibly assert his diagnosis. It must, then, be a different item of atomistic understanding that is required and lacking in DOCTOR.

Specifically, we think that Matilda importantly lacks atomistic understanding of *why Derek's condition was diagnosed as it was*. In DOCTOR, she knows *that* he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, but not what grounds Nancy (who had seen the test results herself) had to assert this diagnosis. To permissibly assert, it is intuitive that Matilda needs to at least know about the specifics of Derek's test results (in order to know that his results are consistent with pancreatic cancer, and to know that his results rule out any competing diagnoses to that of a cancer diagnosis). If she understood why his condition was diagnosed as it was, she would know the details of his test results, and she would be able to complete the sentence "Derek was given a pancreatic cancer diagnosis because ____" in a way that is appropriately informative and not merely tautological. Similarly, in RECOMMENDATION, for Josie's assertion to be permissible she needs to know the relevant specifics about Mitchell's writing, in order to know *what* is polished about his writing (whether it be his impressive vocabulary, his use of imagery, something else entirely, or a combination of many different features). What Josie lacks is understanding of *why Mitchell's writing was described as it was*.

A given item of atomistic understanding (whether it be understanding of where, when, what or why *p*) is plausibly thought to feature some central true belief. In DOCTOR, that true belief is that Derek's results exclusively indicate pancreatic cancer. However, we also posit that to have atomistic understanding, the central true belief must be based on the *relevant type of familiarity* (e.g., in this case such familiarity as that which arises from seeing his test results, or perhaps hearing the exact details of what the ultrasound and MRI showed, and so on). We take it that this aforementioned relevance has something to do with the role played by the agent (i.e., a role that leads to the justified expectation that they have relevant insight rooted in a certain type and degree of familiarity).

What, then, does this familiarity have to involve? Given the natural differences in the institutional roles occupied by testifiers, a sweeping definition that permits all correct sorts of familiarly and yet excludes all types that are insufficient is simply not plausible.

For example, if a judge asserts that a person from his court is innocent of the charges laid against her, the relevant familiarity upon which the judge's belief is based might involve seeing evidential documents, hearing witness testimony, or some combination of both. However, if a high school maths teacher asserts that a pupil's answer should be five and not four, she must be familiar with the equations and sorts of problems that she is teaching and evaluating answers to—in virtue of being a maths teacher, she takes on the epistemic expectation that she be familiar with not just what counts as a right answer in high school level maths, but also why a given answer is wrong or right when it is²⁶.

The norm of assertion that is violated in cases of isolated secondhand knowledge, then, is *atomistic understanding of why p (the asserted proposition) is evaluated as being as it is*. Cases featuring weak experts are ones that also support the existence of this norm. A strong expert, we might say, is a leader in their field, and so one of whom we already have especially high epistemic expectations that they have some sort of a special *objectual* understanding when they say anything related to that field (because of their extensive expertise). A weak expert, on the other hand, might be someone like a recent PhD in physics. Suppose, then, that the weak expert makes some controversial assertion, p , about quantum mechanics. In virtue of the role the recent PhD occupies (e.g. that of a university lecturer), the norm of assertion to which he must adhere is, again, that of understanding why p is evaluated as being as it is²⁷. We contend, then, that this kind of atomistic understanding will also be norm of assertion in many cases involving a speaker who occupies an institutional role that carries with it the expectation of weak expertise.

Although it has been uncontroversial to make the (usually tacit) assumption that what is most relevant is the *quantity* of epistemic support for an assertion, we have now seen that assertions grounded in knowledge or in extremely high degrees of justification can sometimes nonetheless be epistemically inappropriate. Since we have shown that the *quality* of epistemic support possessed by an assertion is also important, we submit that to make progress in theorising about norms of assertion we must focus on quality *as well as* (or perhaps even largely instead of) quantity of support. An important upshot of our view here is that one can plausibly reject the knowledge norm of assertion whilst nonetheless endorsing atomistic understanding as a norm of assertion, and this is a state of affairs that

²⁶ Note that the expected familiarity we have of the maths teacher (in virtue of her occupation of that role) is *not* that she explain why an answer is wrong by explaining both where mistakes are *and* why the axioms themselves are true (a deep philosophical problem). It is common sense that we don't expect such a thing of maths teachers (particularly at that level), but rather merely expect that they know the relevant axioms and how to apply them (and expect that they be able to correct students on the basis of whether they applied these axioms correctly). We can therefore dispel the potential objection that, in virtue of being able to explain why some student gave the wrong answer, the maths teacher would also have to be able to explain why the fundamental truths of mathematics are what they are (or any of the sorts of questions that philosophers of maths might ask). The relevant familiarity apposite to her institutional role is not so demanding, but it is nonetheless demanding enough to make her assertion epistemically unwarranted when she could say nothing more to a student about why his answer is wrong than 'the answer key says so.'

²⁷ For a strong expert, the norm of assertion would be different because we hold strong experts epistemically accountable to a greater extent and in a different sort of way. For example, we expect that when Stephen Hawking says p that, because of his role as world-class leader in the field of quantum mechanics, he would be able (if challenged) to locate p within much broader and deeper contexts of explanation than, say, the recent PhD in our above example—contexts of the sort that would require, we think, *objectual understanding* of quantum mechanics (something that runs much deeper than what we expect someone to possess simply in virtue of occupying the position of university lecturer in physics).

this has significant and interesting further implications. For one thing, it supports the claim that understanding and knowledge are interestingly different. It also supports the related thesis that understanding might bear epistemic value that knowledge lacks. The suggestion here is that—at least regarding certain types of assertions—the failure of knowledge to qualify as ‘sufficient’ epistemic credentials to warrant assertion in some cases motivates the thought that understanding is of a higher quality qua epistemic state (because certain kinds of understanding *would* warrant assertion in these cases). We do not intend to argue for any of these further claims here, and nor should we be taken to endorse them, but we think it at least worth noting that they are potentially fruitful avenues for further research.

3.2

An obvious objection to the proposal we have been advancing in this section is that, in some cases, the relevant epistemic credential to warrant assertion *really does* seem to be merely knowledge, or reasonable belief.²⁸ Therefore, our opponent could say, even if understanding *is* the epistemic credential of which we need to be in possession to make proper assertions in some cases, it is *not* resultantly also the case that all proper assertions demand understanding. In sum, the proposal that *understanding is the norm of assertion* is false.

We accept this wholeheartedly. Indeed, we do not wish to advance the very strong claim that understanding is *the norm* of assertion. Generalised to all assertions, this claim is false. It is important to see that our claim is rather that understanding is the norm of assertion for a *restricted class of assertions*—this much alone is sufficient to show that the quantitative thesis is false and that any proposed norm of assertion that is logically dependent on said thesis is therefore also false. What we’ve argued for, specifically, is that the quantitative view is false precisely because, for some cases of assertion, understanding (i.e. not merely an increased quantity of epistemic support but rather a different *kind* of epistemic support) is the norm that correctly governs assertion. In light of our accepting that understanding is the norm of only *some* assertions, we would want to side with those who take there to be multiple epistemic norms of assertion, and we allow that understanding is the norm of just *one* class of assertions (while some justification-focused norm, for example, is the norm of a different class of assertions)²⁹. We will now turn to look at a further thesis that we are thereby committed to—one that, if right, stands to undercut another important and misleading assumption motivating the contemporary debate.

²⁸ Obviously, there are indeed many proper assertions for which any kind of understanding is not a necessary condition—for example, ‘the bird is yellow’ (an assertion of perceptual knowledge) does not require being able to fill out any further claim including the word ‘because’ before that particular assertion counts as permissible.

²⁹ Notice that we are not trying to name or rigidly define the wider class governed by atomistic understanding as a norm of assertion—that is a further task that we clearly do not need to accomplish here. Here, our goal has simply been to show *that* there are cases where atomistic understanding is the norm of assertion.

4.

In this final section, we build upon our conclusions in §2 and §3 by taking critical aim at the almost unanimously endorsed position we call the *universalisability of (epistemic) assertoric norms* (hereafter, UAN). This is the view that:

Universalisability of (epistemic) assertoric norms (UAN): Some epistemic rule *R* governs some assertions only if it governs all assertions uniformly.

A denial of UAN would allow for the possibility that some epistemic rule governs some assertions whilst some other rule governs other assertions. That UAN, rather than its denial, is correct, is taken for granted by all those who purport to defend some unique epistemic rule (e.g. the knowledge norm, justification norm or truth norm) as one that they take must exhaustively account for how all assertions are epistemically constrained. Put simply: to assume UAN (as most all have) is to assume that if one norm governs some assertions, then it governs them all equally. This is something we've denied in §3 by arguing that only *some* assertions are constrained by the atomistic understanding norm. Unsurprisingly, those who assume UAN are presupposing that there is some way that assertions are normatively constrained (from an epistemic point of view), and so, by UAN, they seek one norm that they suppose must therefore exclusively constrain all assertions (such as the KNA, JNA or TNA).³⁰ But *why* exactly should we presuppose UAN, rather than to deny it (or remain neutral with respect to it), prior to investigating which epistemic norm (or norms) constrain assertions? This is far from clear.

The *modus operandi* whereby UAN is taken for granted owes in no small part to Williamson's (1996) defence of the knowledge norm, one that has effectively set the tone for much of the contemporary debate. Perhaps—and treading charitably—it would suffice to say “Following Williamson's precedent, I'll assume UAN” so long as it could be demonstrated (or is obvious) that Williamson has offered some compelling argument for UAN. However, as Jessica Brown (2008) observes:

“Williamson provides *no argument* for the assumption of uniqueness when he introduces it” (Brown 2008: 97; my italics)

Brown is indeed right on this point. Williamson thinks merely *ceteris paribus* that a simple (unique) account—one that would constrain any assertion by constraining them all uniformly—should be preferred to a more complex account whereby not all assertions are answerable to the same epistemic norm. Says Williamson:

³⁰ A point of nuance is worth noting here: denying that some epistemic norm must constrain all assertions if constraining some assertions is compatible with an endorsement of some norm that governs all assertions. After all, one could endorse some epistemic norm N1 as one to which all assertions are answerable along side some other epistemic norm N2 to which only *some* assertions are criticisable. Were one to endorse such a position, she would be denying UAN even while maintaining N1 as an epistemic norm to which all assertions are answerable. This sort of position (which features a denial of UAN) is unavailable to the mainstream debate in virtue of its presupposing that there can not be ‘partial scope’ epistemic norms—such as the atomistic understanding norm we considered—which only constrain some restricted class of assertions.

“There might be several rules of assertion. There might be one...Nevertheless, a simple account of assertion would be theoretically satisfying, if it worked.” (Williamson 2000: 242).

Williamson thinks the knowledge account works, and that *a fortiori* a simple account works. However, because we’ve shown rigorously in §1-3 that the knowledge account *doesn’t* work (by showing that *some* assertions require atomistic understanding as the requisite epistemic credential to warrant assertion), we’ve effectively undercut this particular avenue of support for UAN.³¹ Williamson might have a further argument³² available in favour of UAN were he able to positively show something to be *wrong* with more complex accounts, other than *that* they are complex. Alas, though, Williamson admits that, in arguing for knowledge account (1996; 2000), he is effectively “shirking the examination of more complex accounts” (2000: 242), and so he gives us no other argument. Consequently, we have no positive reason to accept UAN that could serve to offset the overwhelming reasons we’ve shown for denying it.

As it turns out, then, the observation that atomistic understanding governs at least some (though not all) assertions carries with it some weighty outcomes. They are, in brief sum, that:

- (i) Regardless of whether knowledge is necessary to warrant assertion, knowledge is not *sufficient* to warrant assertion (i.e. SUFF is false). (§2)
- (ii) It is *not* the case that the question “What is the norm of assertion?” is best answered by determining how much epistemic support is required to warrant assertion. (i.e. the *quantitative view* is false). (§3)
- (iii) It’s not the case that some epistemic rule governs some assertions, then that rule governs all assertions (i.e. UAN is false). (§4)

An upshot of these results is that, when tackling the problem of specifying some epistemic norm (or norms) of assertion, we should adopt a radically different *modus operandi* than that which has been traditionally assumed from the outset by traditional approaches. The right approach, we’ve shown, would be one that countenances the fact that *quality*, and not just quantity, of epistemic support is relevant to discussions of assertoric norms. Furthermore, we should enter the debate without the prior presupposition that any epistemic norm would govern some class of assertions only if

³¹ Also, as a point to note, even if Williamson successfully defended the knowledge rule (which we’ve contended that he doesn’t), this would not in itself prove UAN because (as was suggested in fn. 24) the admission of one epistemic norm that governs all assertions is compatible with a further endorsement of some other epistemic norm that governs only some assertions.

³² Jessica Brown (2008: 98) considers the sort of argument Williamson would have had to provide, but doesn’t, to this end. She notes aptly that: “Williamson might offer a different defence of the uniqueness assumption. He might argue that if we can explain all the data concerning assertion by the assumption that it is governed by a unique constitutive rule, then it is gratuitous to assume that assertion is governed by more than one constitutive rule. He may say that the onus is on the proponent of a more complex account of assertion to point to data which cannot be explained on his simple account. Only if the proponent of the more complex account is able to do this is there any reason to suppose that assertion is governed by more than one constitutive rule.” (2008: 98)

universalisable so as to constrain all assertions uniformly. This is a considerable departure from the assumptions presently guiding the contemporary debate.

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