Moore Can Be Said

August 2018

Abstract

The knowledge norm of assertion claims that you are warranted in asserting p only if you know p. It's false. Given the right context, Moore sentences of the form "p but I don't know that p" are felicitous, despite being unknowable. What's true is a *conditional* knowledge norm of assertion: you are warranted in asserting p only if *conditional on the conversational presuppositions* you know p.

The knowledge norm of assertion says that you are warranted in asserting p only if you know p (Williamson 2000; Adler 2009; Benton 2011, 2012; Blaauw 2012; Turri 2016a,b). One of the primary pieces of evidence for it is the observation that *Moore sentences* like (1) are infelicitous:

(1) #"It'll rain tomorrow, but I don't know that it will."

Moore sentences are blindspots—consistent claims that cannot be known (Sorensen 1988)—so the knowledge norm offers a simple explanation for why they are infelicitous. One for the knowledge norm, it seems.

But more can be said. Witness:

(2) [Someone who has no clue about tomorrow's weather:]
"Suppose that it'll rain tomorrow. Then it'll rain tomorrow, but I don't know that it will."

(3) [Two students, after learning about skepticism:]
"Let's assume we're brains in vats. What's our predicament, again?"
"We're brains in vats, but we don't know it."

(4) [A teacher quizzing a student:]

   "You're Oedipus on the road to Thebes. What's about to happen?"

   "Although I don't know it, I'm about to kill my own father."

In examples like (2)–(4), a speaker felicitously asserts a sentence that is or implies a Moore sentence of the form "p, but I don't know that p". A similar phenomenon arises for other sentences that are not knowable:

(5) [After further discussing skepticism:]

   "I think skepticism is true. What should we do about it?"

   "How am I supposed to know? No one knows anything."

(6) [Someone wondering whether his interlocutor is a hallucination:]

   "Assuming you're not real, what's happening right now?"

   "I'm an inanimate object that you're talking to."

No one can know that no one knows anything, or that they are an inanimate object. So in each of (2)–(6), we have warranted assertions of unknowable claims.[1] Thus warranted assertion of p does not always require knowledge of p. The knowledge norm is wrong.

But not *far* wrong. The problem is that the knowledge norm assumes that when you assert p, it is p that you are trying to convey to your audience. Usually this is so, of course. But conversations always take place against a background of presuppositions. These presuppositions together determine a *context set*—the set of possibilities that are consistent with the presuppositions, and so are live possibilities for the purposes of the conversation (Stalnaker 1970, 2014). Assertions operate on *top* of these presuppositions—when you assert p, you propose to rule out the $\neg p$-possibilities from the context set. What this picture suggests is that sometimes you may assert p not because you want to convey p to your audience, but rather because you want to convey that *if* what's being presupposed is true, then p follows.

To take a silly example, suppose I—being a Leo—am agonizing to you about how to prepare for the upcoming sun-moon conflict. Although you think astrology is bunk,

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[1]Some might deny that these utterances of declarative sentences are truly *assertions*. If so, they owe us an account of which declarative utterances are truly assertions—and they had better not simply say, "Those to which the knowledge norm applies." I believe the proposal below gives a more illuminating account of what's going on.

you—being a helpful friend—can accommodate my astrological presuppositions and speak within them: "Don't worry too much—it's a minor conflict, and the sun-moon fire trine next month will put you right back on top." Your assertion is perfectly warranted—despite the fact that it's false, hence unknown—because what you are doing is drawing out the consequences of the conversation's (false) presuppositions.

Generalizing: what is required to felicitously assert p is not knowledge of p, but rather knowledge that *if* what's being presupposed is true, then p. Precisely:

> **Conditional Knowledge Norm:** Given a context set C, you are warranted in asserting p only if, *conditional on C*, you know p.[2]

The notion of conditional knowledge used here is analogous to the notion of conditional belief that plays center stage in the belief-revision literature (Alchourrón et al. 1985; Levi 1977). Roughly, you have conditional knowledge of p given C iff: were your knowledge-state to be minimally changed so that you knew C, you would know p. Obviously there are different ways to fill this in, but the basic idea is clear enough for our purposes.

The conditional knowledge norm resolves our puzzle. First, note that since *usually* you won't allow the conversation presuppose p if you don't know p (i.e. if you don't know p even after the speaker has asserted it), *usually* the you will know the propositions entailed by the context set C to be true. When this is the case, you know p conditional on C iff you know p unconditionally. This is why the traditional knowledge norm gets the right verdicts in most cases.

But sometimes you find yourself faced with conversational presuppositions that you don't (take yourself to) know to be true. This is what happens in our cases: suppositions or other conversational moves make it so that the context set C implies some proposition p that the speaker doesn't take herself to know. Conditional on such a C, she has knowledge of p but I don't (unconditionally) know p—thus explaining the felicity of our Moore sentences. For example, take a situation in which you don't know whether it'll rain tomorrow. When you say, "Suppose it'll rain tomorrow", you (temporarily) change the context set so that it now entails that it'll rain tomorrow. Conditional on this claim, you of course know that it'll rain tomorrow. But conditional on this claim you *also* know that you don't know (unconditionally) that it'll rain tomorrow. That's why you are able

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[2]This proposal is inspired by Ichikawa (2017), though the details differ. Cf. Moss 2012.

to follow up your supposition with the assertion, "It'll rain tomorrow but I don't know it." Parallel stories work for our other cases.

Upshot: although Moore sentences are usually infelicitous, they are not always so; these patterns are best explained by replacing the knowledge norm with a *conditional* knowledge norm like that proposed by Ichikawa (2017).[3]

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[3]There are other proposed norms of assertion, e.g. the reasonable-belief norm (Douven 2006; Lackey 2007; McKinnon 2012) or the reasonably-believe-you-know norm (Brown 2008). A parallel argument shows that we should likewise prefer conditional versions of such norms to their standard, unconditional versions.

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