Unsafe Assertions

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DISCUSSION NOTE

UNSAFE ASSERTIONS

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John Turri has recently provided two problem cases for the knowledge
account of assertion (KAA) to argue for the *express knowledge account of
assertion* (EKAA). We defend KAA by explaining away the intuitions about
the problem cases and by showing that our explanation is theoretically
superior to EKAA.

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1. Introduction

According to the simple knowledge account of assertion (KAA), one may
assert P only if one knows that P. John Turri [2011] presents two problem
cases that aim to show that KAA is incomplete. In response, he defends a
modified knowledge account of assertion, the *express knowledge account of
assertion* (EKAA), according to which one may assert P only if one's
assertion that P *expresses* one's knowledge that P. He argues furthermore
that EKAA is supported by independent theoretical considerations. We
defend KAA by explaining away the intuitions about Turri's problem cases
in terms of the *assertoric unsafety* of the assertions in question and by
arguing that our explanation is theoretically superior to EKAA on two
counts.

2. Turri's Argument for EKAA

Turri's main motivation for EKAA are two problem cases for KAA. Here is
one such case:

Spiro
Spiro is a spiteful guy who relishes causing people emotional pain. Out of
spite, he plans to tell Lois that her fiancé just died. Some time before he
embarks to execute his plan, he receives a text message from a reliable
informant reporting that Lois's fiancé has indeed just died. So Spiro
knows that the fiancé died. But this knowledge doesn't motivate him in

the least to tell Lois that her fiancé died. He goes ahead and tells her *out of pure spite*.

[ibid.: 42]

Turri intuits that Spiro's assertion is epistemically impermissible. But KAA fails to rule it as impermissible since Spiro knows what he asserts. EKAA, however, accommodates the intuition. Spiro's assertion expresses his spite, not his knowledge, where 'expressing' must be understood as a non-deviant causal relation between the mental state of knowing and the assertion [ibid.: 42n12].

Turri's second motivation for EKAA is that it fits with broader theoretical considerations in ways that KAA doesn't. EKAA is coherent with virtue epistemology and it fits into a general pattern of normative assessment. Just as 'permissibly A-ing requires more than A-ing while you have the authority to A' [ibid.: 43], permissibly asserting requires more than knowing what one asserts, even though knowledge gives one the authority to assert. In general, permissibly A-ing also requires that you A *in the appropriate way*. Applied to assertion, this means that one's assertion should also *express* knowledge. We find the same pattern with action, as Turri illustrates with the following case: Executioner is authorized to kill Prisoner. But Executioner kills permissibly only if he kills in the appropriate way (for instance, by giving a fatal injection).

3. Unsafe Assertions

As a first step towards defending KAA, we argue that the intuition that Spiro's assertion is epistemically impermissible can be explained away in four stages.

First, for any subject S who asserts P whilst knowing that P, call S's assertion *assertorically unsafe* iff S would also have asserted P without knowing that P. (Assertoric unsafety is different from *epistemic unsafety*, where S's true belief that P is unsafe iff S would have easily believed P without P's being true.) Second, when evaluating an assertorically unsafe assertion one is naturally led to consider those nearby possible worlds in which S asserts P whilst not knowing that P. Third, the assertion in those possible worlds will be intuited to be epistemically impermissible. Fourth, the intuition that the assertion is impermissible in those possible worlds *taints* our intuitions about the assertion in the actual world, so that we mistakenly intuit that the actual assertion is epistemically impermissible.

Spiro's assertion is assertorically unsafe. He would also have told Lois that her fiancé had died *without* knowing it. This leads one to consider those nearby possible worlds in which Spiro asserts without knowing. In these possible worlds, his assertion is intuited to be epistemically impermissible— and rightly forbidden by KAA. This intuited impermissibility taints our intuitions about the actual world so that we mistakenly intuit that Spiro's assertion is impermissible in the actual world as well. But, as a matter of

fact, his actual assertion is epistemically permissible—and rightly licensed by KAA: nothing goes wrong epistemically.

4. Comparisons

As a second step towards defending KAA, we compare our explanation of the intuitions regarding Spiro with the explanation offered by EKAA on the counts of *simplicity*, *coherence with action*, and *coherence with other theories of knowledge*. Along the way, we elucidate our explanation further.

Starting with *simplicity*, we argue that our account is simpler. Whereas Turri needs to introduce the notion of expressing in his account of assertion, we just defend the 'simple knowledge account of assertion', as Turri calls it. Assuming that the simpler account is the better one (*ceteris paribus*), our account is preferable.

Turri might object that, even though we give a simpler account of *assertion*, we pay the price of giving a more complex account of our *intuitions*. We reply, first, that the notion of assertoric unsafety is a notion everyone needs to account for the possibility that asserters who assert permissibly can nonetheless be untrustworthy asserters. For even if an asserter in fact expresses her knowledge that P, there can still be reason to distrust her *qua* asserter if she had resolved to assert P *no matter what*, e.g., also without knowing that P. We reply, second, that our taint-of-unsafety account is just an instance of a widely documented fact about human psychology that Gendler [2006] has called *imaginative contagion*. When people imagine other possible worlds, their assessment of what is permissible in the actual world becomes contaminated by what would have been permissible in the possible worlds they imagine. For instance, when asked to imagine a library, people will start to behave more quietly than the actual circumstances call for. Or, after having been led to think about rudeness, people will tend to interrupt a conversation sooner than when they were led to think about politeness [ibid.: 193–4]. There is sufficient evidence, then, that considering other salient possible worlds contaminates our intuitions about permissibility.

Turning to *coherence with action*, we argue that our account coheres with intuitions about action better than EKAA. Assuming that the account that best coheres with action is the better one, our account is preferable.

For the sake of argument we concede to Turri that there might be a difference between 'permissibly A-ing' and 'A-ing with authority', as Turri's executioner case is supposed to illustrate. But *contra* Turri, in order to establish clear coherence between action and EKAA, the executioner case shouldn't have been one where Executioner is authorized to act yet only permitted to act in the appropriate way. Such a case is analogous to an assertion that is authorized but impermissible because made in an inappropriate way, e.g., while screaming. A properly analogous case would have been one where Executioner kills Prisoner without the kill's *expressing* the authority. But the kill in such an analogous case seems to be both authorized and permissible:

Modified Executioner Case (MEC)

> Executioner is authorized by Boss to kill Prisoner. At the designated time and place, Executioner gives Prisoner the fatal injection, but does so solely out of a deep hatred for Prisoner.

Executioner has acted permissibly; he acted in the appointed way. Even if Boss would come to know about Executioner's motive, Boss couldn't fire him on the grounds of having acted impermissibly. The underlying problem brought out by MEC is that, although 'permissibly A-ing' may indeed require that one A in an appropriate way, 'expressing' doesn't describe a *way* of A-ing, the presence or absence of which makes an intuitive normative difference. Crucially, however, since according to Turri the absence of expressing in cases of assertion does make an intuitive normative difference, we conclude that the coherence between action and EKAA is less than optimal.

Pro our account, it does provide a convincing treatment of MEC. We say that Executioner's killing was permissible but unsafe. In nearby possible worlds, Executioner might have killed without being authorized, and this makes him an unstable executioner, not to be trusted with the life of prisoners. Indeed, it is this *unsafety* for which Executioner might be reprimanded. Thus, we conclude that our explanation of *Spiro* in terms of assertoric unsafety finds similar treatment in *properly analogous* cases of action. An assertion that doesn't express knowledge yet is made while knowing is permissible but unsafe. An action that doesn't express authority yet is made while being authorized is permissible but unsafe.

Concluding with *coherence with other theories of knowledge*, we argue that Turri's account shows only a partial analogy with virtue epistemology and that the same is true of our account. Assuming that the account that best coheres with other theories of knowledge is the better one, neither account is preferable over the other on this count.

Turri points to a structural analogy between EKAA and virtue epistemology: 'Knowledge is true belief manifesting virtue, and [permissible] assertion is speech manifesting knowledge' [2011: 42]. But this analogy captures only part of what is central to virtue epistemology: a virtuous believer manifests virtue not only (a) by having true beliefs *because of* her intellectually virtuous character (or: by 'expressing' this character), but also (b) by being a *reliable* believer, i.e., someone who has mostly true beliefs and would not easily have had those same beliefs had they been false (or: by having epistemically safe true beliefs). Turri's expressing condition is analogous with (a) but not with (b). It guarantees that asserters assert things because they know, but not that they would not have made those same assertions had they not known. For an assertion that expresses knowledge can still be assertorically unsafe if the asserter had resolved to make the assertion regardless of whether she knew or not. The analogy between EKAA and virtue epistemology that Turri points to is thus at best partial.

Our notion of assertoric (un)safety is analogous with (b). A virtuous believer is a *reliable believer*. Analogously, an assertorically safe asserter

would be a *reliable asserter*: someone who asserts things she knows and who wouldn't easily have asserted these things had she not known them. The notion of assertoric safety fits into a unified perspective on reliable *acquisition* of knowledge (where epistemic safety is crucial) and reliable *distribution* of knowledge (where assertoric safety is crucial). Hence, our account is also partially analogous to virtue epistemology. EKAA doesn't have a dialectical advantage here.

We conclude that our account outperforms EKAA. It is simpler. It finds a more natural companionship in action. And it coheres with virtue epistemology just as well. There is no need to abandon KAA.[1]

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