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Knowledge, Assertion and Inference

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that three plausible principles are mutually inconsistent:

(KA) One ought to assert only what one knows;

(AP) If it is proper to assert some proposition q , then it is, barring special and not very common circumstances, proper to assert any proposition p from which q has been competently inferred;

(AKN) Some propositions are both properly assertible and known by competent inference from propositions which one does not know.

Each pair of two principles constitute an argument against the remaining principle.

But which principle should one drop?

KEYWORDS

Knowledge, assertion, knowledge rule of assertion, inferential knowledge; counter-closure

1. The knowledge rule of assertion (see Unger 1975 ch.6, or Williamson 2000, ch.11) says that

(KA) One ought to assert only what one knows.

One may not assert what one does not know. This is very plausible. Is one not entitled to criticize a speaker for asserting something just in case they don't know it (despite the fact that there are excuses, mitigating circumstances, etc.)?

2. There is also a plausible principle concerning inference and assertion:

If it is proper to assert some proposition q , then it is proper to assert any proposition p from which q has been competently inferred.¹

One could call this a principle of “counter-closure” of proper assertibility under competent inference (compare Luzzi 2009 for the case of knowledge). If it were false, then even if it was appropriate both to assert q (*Someone is teaching the Introduction*) and to answer the question why one believes this by pointing out that one inferred it from another proposition p (*Jo is teaching the Introduction*), it could then still be inappropriate to assert the latter. This seems very implausible on the face of it.

To be sure, it might be inappropriate for special reasons to assert p even if it is appropriate to assert q : The former but not the latter proposition might, for instance, be impolite. But the circumstances under which the above version of a condition of

1 I will not always explicitly mention here that the inference has to be competent. One could also go into several whistles and bells concerning the claim above but they are not relevant to the main points here.

counter-closure does not hold are special circumstances.² It is very implausible to deny that there are many cases where such special circumstances are not given.

Hence, we can claim that it is proper to “assert the premise”:

(AP) If it is proper to assert some proposition q , then it is proper, barring special and not very common circumstances, to assert any proposition p from which q has been competently inferred.

3. Suppose Saul is singing but I mistake his voice for Paul’s and come to believe, falsely, that Paul is singing. Still, it seems that I can competently infer from this and thus come to know that someone is singing. This suggests that

It is possible to come to know a proposition q by competent inference from another proposition p which one does not know (see Warfield 2005, Klein 2008, Fitelson 2010, and Hiller 2013 but cf. also Luzzi 2009).

Couldn’t someone come to know that a solar eclipse will happen on a certain day even if the basis for this prediction, say, Newton’s theory, is false?³ It is very plausible to claim that there are many cases of knowing a proposition in this way.

2 Circumstances are special in the sense relevant to counter-closure just in case (i) they don’t concern the epistemic status of the belief in p as true, false, known or not known, playing this or that inferential role, and (ii) the obtaining of such circumstances explains why it is not appropriate to assert p despite the fact that p is a premise in an inference to another proposition q which is properly assertible by the subject.

3 For the sake of simplicity, I am leaving aside problems concerning multi-premise inferences (see, e.g., Hawthorne 2004, 46-50, passim); dealing with them would take us off on a tangent. –

But is it also appropriate to assert such a proposition which one knows on the basis of inference from a proposition one doesn't know? To be sure, knowledge is not sufficient for proper assertion, as, for instance, the rules of polite behavior in combination with the facts of life vividly illustrate. However, if nothing else stands in the way of proper assertion apart from the epistemic status of the subject's belief in the relevant proposition and if the subject knows the proposition, then why not also grant proper assertibility of the proposition to the subject? It is very plausible to assume that there are at least some such cases where a proposition is both properly assertible by some subject and known in the above way by the subject.

If knowledge is accepted as a necessary condition of proper assertibility, then why not also accept knowledge plus the lack of special circumstances (like rules of etiquette, etc. standing in the way of proper assertion) as sufficient for proper assertion?⁴ Or should we count the fact that the proposition has been inferred from a proposition one doesn't know as an obstacle to proper assertibility? But why? If this does not keep us from characterizing the subject's belief in the proposition as knowledge then why should it keep us from granting the proposition proper assertibility by the subject?

It is thus quite plausible to accept the following rule of (restricted) permission to "assert what is known but derived from what is not known":

Knowledge from falsehood is just one type of case supporting the principle above; knowledge from mere true belief is another one.

4 Circumstances are special in the sense relevant here just in case their obtaining explains why it is not appropriate to assert some proposition despite the fact that it is known by the subject.

(AKN) Some propositions are both properly assertible and known by competent inference from propositions which one does not know.⁵

4. I do not intend to argue for or against any of these principles here but rather to point to a problem: There is a conflict between (AKN), (KA), and (AP). As is easy to see, not all of them can be true. If it is appropriate for S to assert some proposition q known by S on the basis of inference from some proposition p not known by S, and if (AP) is true and no special and rather exceptional circumstances are given, then it is proper to assert the unknown proposition p . But this contradicts the knowledge rule of assertion, (KA).

Consider the singing example, again. Suppose I come to know that someone is singing and suppose further that it is proper for me (in my circumstances) to assert that someone is singing, and all that despite the inference from the false assumption that Paul is singing. So I tell my friend on the phone who cannot hear what's going on around my place that someone is singing. Nothing wrong with that. Suppose further that my friend asks me why I believe that someone is singing and I assert in response that Paul is singing. It is very plausible to assert the premises of one's reasoning, especially when they lead to a known conclusion; it is also easy to imagine that nothing else (like rules of politeness etc.) stands in the way of the appropriateness of

5 The main argument of this paper also works if one weakens the existential claim (AKN) to a modal claim (AKN-): It is possible that there are propositions which are both properly assertible and known by competent inference from propositions which one does not know.

my assertion that Paul is singing. But this means that I am asserting something false which is ruled out by the knowledge rule of assertion.

5. Thus, the knowledge rule of assertion in conjunction with (AP) constitutes an argument against the idea that one can have inferential knowledge on the basis of unknown premises; the latter idea in conjunction with the knowledge-rule of assertion constitutes an argument against (AP); the latter in conjunction with the idea that one can have inferential knowledge on the basis of unknown premises constitutes an argument against the knowledge-rule of assertion.

So, something has to go. But what? None of the three principles is obviously incorrect and a lot has been said or can be said in their defense. What then should we do about this?

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