Response to Hindriks and Kooi[i]

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1. INTRODUCTION

Timothy Williamson (2000) has argued that assertion is constitutively, and hence necessarily, governed by a norm to the effect that one must assert only what one knows. Frank Hindriks (2007), however, suggests that not every possible assertion is subject to this norm: rather, his view seems to be that only when sincerity is required are assertions normatively required to be knowledgeable; and he suggests that this restricted normative requirement can be derived from a more fundamental account of the nature of assertion as an act in which belief is expressed. But in my (2014) paper, "Deriving the Norm of Assertion", I claimed that Hindriks' argument in support of the restricted claim that in situations of normal trust one must assert only what one knows fails to establish its conclusion: the reason I gave was that Hindriks equivocates in his use of the word "must", and his conclusion accordingly fails to follow from his premises; and I argued further that it would, in any case, be preferable to have an account of assertion on which it is unrestrictedly and necessarily governed by a knowledge norm. I did not attempt to provide such an account there; though this was since attempted in a separate paper (Ball 2013).

Frank Hindriks and Barteld Kooi (2014), however, suggest that my criticisms of Hindriks' paper are misguided. They make a number of points, but these may, I think, be broadly divided into two categories. On the one hand they suggest that my objection fails to undermine Hindriks' derivation of his knowledge norm; and on the other they attempt to show that assertion really is subject to a restricted and non-constitutive knowledge norm only. I address each of these general themes in turn.

2. EQUIVOCATION UNDERMINES THE DERIVATION

Hindriks and Kooi (henceforth H & K) make a number of points in an attempt to show that my objection to Hindriks' derivation fails. In particular, they claim that (i) Hindriks never attempted a "formal" derivation of his knowledge norm (and so, they imply, my objection is somehow off the mark); (ii) "[a] mere ambiguity does not constitute a fallacy of equivocation" (and my objection is for that reason, they suggest, inconclusive); and (iii) my objection is analogous to one which might be levied against an argument they provide which clearly is successful (and so, they suggest, it is mistaken).

(i) I assume that, whatever else he might have been doing in giving (what H & K are happy to call) his derivation, Hindriks was attempting to explain the fact that assertion is subject to a knowledge norm: that is, he was not merely attempting to convince us *that* it is subject to such a norm; he was trying to show *why* this is the case. And I take it that to succeed in this task it is necessary to show that assertion *must be* subject to such a norm, *given* some other facts (about its nature, for example). If this is right,

then it follows that Hindriks' derivation of his knowledge norm is only successful if, necessarily, its conclusion is true if its premises are.

Of course, there are arguments which are necessarily truth preserving even though they are not formally valid – such, for instance, as the following:

(1) John is a bachelor.

Therefore,

(2) John is unmarried.

There is no way for the premise of this argument to be true and its conclusion false. The reason, of course, is that there is no way for a person to be married and a bachelor. Someone might not know this, however, and might therefore doubt that the conclusion follows from the premise. If so, then the advocate of the argument might add the claim that all bachelors are unmarried as a further premise, thus making the argument formally valid.

My objection to Hindriks' argument can be understood in this light. I did not suggest that Hindriks' conclusion that assertion is subject to a knowledge norm is untrue: nor did I complain that his argument for this claim is not formally valid; rather, I suggested that Hindriks' argument might not be necessarily truth preserving. Perhaps H & K think that the argument *is* necessarily truth preserving:[ii] but given that it is not obviously so, it would be nice if they were to say more about why, given its nature, together with some auxiliary assumptions, assertion *must* be subject to a knowledge norm; for this alone would serve to explain the fact that it is.

(ii) I concede that the mere existence of an ambiguity does not constitute an equivocation. The fact that some word is ambiguous does not imply that it is used, in a given argument, in more than one of the possible senses in which it can be employed. Consider the following argument:

(3) John is at the bank.
(4) Everyone at the bank is fishing.

Therefore,

(5) John is fishing.

The validity of this argument is not impugned by the fact that "the bank" can be used to speak about either the side of a river or a financial institution, so long as it is not employed in these different senses in the course of the argument. But of course, if it is so used, the argument fails.

My claim concerning Hindriks' argument was that "must" was in fact used in two different senses. It is, perhaps, important to see how this equivocation could come about. I do not claim that "must" is ambiguous: that is, I am not committed to its having more than one linguistic meaning.[iii] According to our best semantic theory (Kratzer 1977), "must" is a universal quantifier over possible worlds: that is, to say that it must be that φ is to say that φ is true in every world such that some further condition is

satisfied. How is that further condition determined? The exact mechanism is unclear, yet the following answer will suffice for present purposes: it is supplied by context. Thus, much as "I" can be used on different occasions to pick out different speakers, so "must" can be used on different occasions to universally quantify over different possible worlds. It can therefore make different contributions to the truth conditions of sentences in which it occurs, even without having a different meaning on those occasions: in short, it can be used in a number of different senses.

My contention was that Hindriks used "must" to quantify over the morally permissible worlds in his conclusion and one of his premises, yet he used it to quantify over the epistemically permissible worlds in another premise; and that since, for all that Hindriks said, these might not be the same worlds, his argument fails to establish that its conclusion necessarily holds true if its premises do. Now, H & K claim that "the distinction… between moral and epistemic norms does not bear on the soundness" (2014: xx) of Hindriks' derivation. But I fail to see how this could be so, given the above characterization of an explanatory derivation: for it shows that, for all that Hindriks has said, the argument might not be necessarily truth preserving.

(iii) H & K compare my criticism of Hindriks' derivation to the charge of equivocation being levied against the following form of argument:

(6) S knows that Socrates was married.
(7) S knows that bachelors are unmarried.

Therefore,

(8) S knows that Socrates was not a bachelor.

More specifically, they suggest that it might be objected to this argument that it employs two senses of "know" – one on which it means *knows a posteriori* and one on which it means *knows a priori* – and that the worlds that are consistent with what S knows in the one sense may not be the same worlds as those which are consistent with what S knows in the other. But the argument is clearly acceptable, and the objection is therefore just as clearly erroneous. Similarly, they suggest, *mutatis mutandis*, Hindriks' argument and my objection to it.

H & K are clearly right that this objection to the above argument is erroneous; but they are not right in thinking that my objection to Hindriks' argument is analogous. The reason is that the word "know" does not admit of the two uses indicated above, whereas the word "must" does admit of a number of uses, including the ones that I suggested Hindriks employed. Thus, a better analogy would be with the objection that the following argument (presented by one of Child's parents at bedtime) equivocates:

(9) Child must brush his teeth.
(10) Child must be asleep.

Therefore,

(11) Child must brush his teeth and be asleep.

But the objection here is clearly legitimate: in the first premise "must" is being used to express a deontic modal (and so to quantify over some set of permissible worlds), and in the second it is being used to express an epistemic modal (and so to quantify over some set of epistemically accessible worlds); but of course Child is neither required to brush his teeth and sleep, nor is he doing both for all that Child's parents know. I suggest that while the conclusion of Hindriks' derivation is not so obviously mistaken as the conclusion of this argument, nonetheless the argument is equally fallacious.

3. ON THE NATURE OF THE KNOWLEDGE NORM

H & K raise a number of points in connection with the nature of the knowledge norm governing assertion which are, I believe, worth discussing. These points may be placed into two broad categories: (iv) those surrounding a simplified derivation of a knowledge norm from an approximating account of the nature of assertion; and (v) those surrounding morally permissible lies.

(iv) H & K suggest that if asserting were a matter of expressing a belief in a sense (presumably causal) that entailed possession of that belief, then it would be a simple matter to show that the knowledge norm is not constitutive of assertion. For it would then be possible to derive the knowledge norm in a very straightforward manner. In particular, they seem to have in mind that one might argue as follows:

> (12) Necessarily, one asserts p only if one believes p.
> (13) One must believe p only if one knows p.

Therefore,

> (14) One must assert p only if one knows p.

This argument is clearly valid: for if every possible world is one in which one either believes p or does not assert p, and every possible world which is also epistemically permissible is one in which one either knows p or fails to believe p, then every possible world that is epistemically permissible is one in which one either knows p or does not assert p.[iv]

H & K continue, however, suggesting that the claim that the knowledge rule follows from certain others "by itself entails the conclusion that Hindriks seeks to secure, i.e. that the knowledge requirement is not constitutive of assertion" (2014: xx). But this does not seem to me to be correct. If there are assumptions pertaining to the nature of assertion from which a knowledge norm follows, then although that norm may not be primitive, or fundamental, it nevertheless would seem to be essential to it, and therefore constitutive of it – assuming, of course, that the assumptions in question are true. Indeed, this is why I suggested that in my criticism of Hindriks' paper that I would like an account of the nature of assertion from which the knowledge norm follows; and it is just such an account that I have attempted elsewhere to supply. In short, the norm might be, and I believe is, both constitutive and derivative.

H & K also suggest (in footnote 3), quite bizarrely to my mind, that those, like myself, who would like an unrestricted knowledge norm of assertion, ought to embrace the derivation just given. But this derivation begins with a premise which is obviously false, and which H & K recognize to be such; and no

explanation of a truth which begins with a falsehood can be satisfactory. I therefore decline the invitation to adopt the above explanation for the existence of a knowledge norm governing assertion.

(v) H & K say that "an assertion can be criticized for falling short of knowledge and for being insincere. The case of the virtuous liar suggests, however, that the epistemic criticism simply does not apply when the moral criticism does." (2014: xx) This is puzzling. How could the case of a virtuous liar – i.e., that of someone who "by hypothesis… do[es] not violate a moral requirement" (2014: xx), and is therefore *not* subject to (legitimate) moral criticism for being insincere – possibly show anything about which norms we are subject to when we *can* be legitimately morally criticized for insincerity? It is clear that it could not. Accordingly, although this interpretation does not accord with Hindriks' stated version of the norm of assertion, I take it that H & K's position is not that a subject cannot be criticized for asserting a proposition which she does not know in those cases in which she *ought* to be sincere, but rather that a subject cannot be so criticized when she is *in fact* insincere, whether or not this is morally unacceptable. And indeed, H & K themselves say that "the epistemic obligation [to know p] applies to beliefs [that p] non-derivatively, and it transfers only to assertions [that p] that are sincere" (2014: xx).

In support of their suggestion that only sincere assertions are subject to criticism for failing to be knowledgeable, H & K ask rhetorically, "Wouldn't it be odd to criticize someone who lies for not knowing that which she asserts?" (2014: xx) I concede that it would indeed be odd to do so (when one knows that the speaker is lying); but it does not follow that such criticism would be illegitimate, or incorrect. Indeed, on the assumption that assertion is subject to an unrestricted knowledge norm, the oddness of the criticism can be explained by standard Gricean mechanisms (Grice 1975). For there are two ways in which an assertion might fail to be knowledgeable: it might be insincere; or the speaker might believe, and yet fail to know, what she asserts. But if one knows that a speaker is insincere, then criticizing her for failing to know what she asserts is less than fully cooperative; in particular, it violates the maxim of quantity – be as informative (or perhaps better: as precise) as possible. Accordingly, issuing this criticism would be in some way (pragmatically) inappropriate, or odd, even though (from a semantic point of view) perfectly correct.

According to H & K, a virtuous liar can be "faultless both in moral and epistemic respects" (2014: xx); and they take this to further support the suggestion that only sincere assertions are subject to criticism for failing to be knowledgeable. But the point does not serve their purpose: for while it may well be true that such a liar is faultless in both of these ways, it doesn't follow that she is faultless in every respect whatsoever. For example, the speaker may not be faultless in legal respects – perhaps she inhabits a country with unjust laws, and had to violate those laws in order to do what was morally right. More pertinently, she may not be faultless in assertoric respects: that is, she may well have violated a *sui generis*, constitutive norm governing assertion such as the knowledge rule.

Indeed, a (Monty Python-style) variation on Kant's case of the murderer at the door can serve to illustrate the point. Suppose the murderer asks, "Do you know where your friend is?" and you respond with the Moore-paradoxical assertion, "He is not inside… but I don't know that." Clearly something has gone wrong even though (a) it is morally acceptable for you to be insincere with the murderer (as you are in the first conjunct), and (b) your beliefs violate no epistemic norms (you know the second conjunct

and do not believe the first, but rather its negation, which you also know). The hypothesis that assertion is subject to a constitutive and unrestricted knowledge norm explains what is wrong in this case.

In fact, I raised the case of the murderer at the door because, I believe, it gives us good reason to think that there is a universally applicable knowledge norm on assertion. My argument for this was, in effect, the following. If there is a universally applicable knowledge norm on assertion, then (arguably) assertions which are not knowledgeable are *pro tanto* morally wrong. But in that case even those of us who think, *contra* Kant, that it is, all things considered, morally permissible to lie to the murderer at the door can explain the Kantian intuition that it is morally wrong to do so: for we can say that there was something that this judgement correctly tracks, namely, the *pro tanto* moral obligation not assert that which one does not know; and this is so even if the Kantian mistakes this obligation for an all things considered one.

The alternative view, however, on which there is only a *prima facie* obligation not to assert that which one does not know, is unable to explain the Kantian intuition in this case: for a *prima facie* obligation is one which might turn out not to be an obligation; and, in the case of the murderer at the door, this is just how it does turn out. There is accordingly nothing about which the Kantian judgment could be taken to be correct; and this judgment therefore cannot be accounted for charitably on the view H & K prefer.

4. CONCLUSION

A derivation of a knowledge norm for assertion should explain why this speech act is subject to such a norm; and to do so it must be necessarily truth preserving. I accordingly can see no sense in which my objection to Hindriks' derivation is off target or incomplete; and given the disanalogy between my objection to this argument, and Hindriks and Kooi's imagined objection to their toy argument surrounding knowledge of Socrates' marital status, I do not see that it is mistaken either. As for the nature of the knowledge norm itself: its being derivative does not imply that it is not constitutive of assertion; only its failing to be necessarily universally applicable could do that. Yet I have argued that even virtuous liars, who present the most difficult sort of case for the advocate of the unrestricted, constitutive knowledge norm, make assertions which are nonetheless governed by a norm of this kind.

5. REFERENCES

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[ii] They might not. Perhaps they think that the argument is only truth preserving across some restricted range of possibilities, so that the argument is inductively strong, rather than deductively valid. This might explain why they resist the term "formal" in connection with "derivation": for it might be thought that, given the existence of predicates such as "grue" (Goodman 1955), there can be no formal logic of induction. But if this is the case, I don't see that the derivation provides an explanation of the fact that assertion is subject to a knowledge norm rather than a reason to believe that it is. But, to repeat, it is not in doubt that assertion is subject to such a norm, so a plausibility argument such as this seems out of place.

[iii] Thus, ambiguity is neither necessary nor sufficient for equivocation.

[iv] I assume that "only if" expresses a *material* conditional as it occurs here; and, of course, that "necessarily" and "must" can be aptly modeled as universal quantifiers over worlds.