

Title: Deriving the Norm of Assertion

Author: Dr Brian Ball

Affiliation: St Anne's College, University of Oxford

Address: St Anne's College, Oxford OX2 6HS, United Kingdom

Email: brian.ball@philosophy.ox.ac.uk

Abstract:

Frank Hindriks (2007) has attempted to derive a (restricted, moral) variant of Timothy Williamson's (2000) knowledge rule for assertion on the basis of a more fundamental belief expression analysis of that speech act. I show that his attempted derivation involves a crucial equivocation between two senses of 'must', and therefore fails. I suggest two possible repairs; but I argue that even if they are successful, we should prefer Williamson's fully general knowledge rule to Hindriks' restricted moral norm.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Timothy Williamson (2000), assertion is governed by a *constitutive* norm, which also serves to *individuate* it. The norm in question is the *knowledge rule*:

(KR) One must: assert that p only if one knows that p.

It is not entirely clear what the nature of the normativity involved in this rule is, nor indeed what is involved in any rule's being constitutive of an act: Williamson says only that the word 'must', as it occurs in KR, "expresses the kind of obligation characteristic of constitutive rules" (Williamson 2000, 241), and that "a rule will count as constitutive of an act only if... necessarily, the rule governs every performance of the act" (Williamson 2000, 239). On the other hand, it is fairly clear that a rule is individuating of an act just in case that act, and that act alone, is subject to the rule. Thus, taken together, the claims that KR is both constitutive and individuating of assertion amount to the suggestion that assertion is *defined* by the knowledge rule, thus:

Assertion is that speech act A such that necessarily, one must: A that p only if one knows that p.

Frank Hindriks (2007) thinks that there is more to assertion than is revealed by this (admittedly somewhat mysterious) account of its essence: in particular, he advocates a "belief-expression" (Hindriks 2007, 399) analysis of the speech act. Moreover, he thinks that because knowledge is the norm of belief, a knowledge rule for assertion can be derived from this account. Kent Bach (2010) puts this line of thought neatly as follows:

[I]t seems unnecessary to posit what Williamson calls a 'knowledge rule' on assertion. It seems to me that the only relevant rule on assertion is belief, since an assertion essentially is the expression of a belief; there is a separate knowledge rule or, rather, norm on belief itself. So the knowledge rule has no independent status — it's the relative product of the belief rule on assertion and the knowledge norm on belief. (Bach 2010, note 22)

I am sympathetic to the thought that the knowledge rule can be derived from more basic considerations surrounding the natures of assertion and belief. However, Hindriks also claims that, when such a norm is derived, it will be seen that it does not govern every possible assertion; and so, the above stated necessary condition for its being a constitutive norm fails. This, I think, is a mistake: there are good reasons to think that the knowledge rule is universally applicable, and any derivation of it should respect this fact. Moreover, Hindriks' own attempted derivation fails.

In what follows I motivate and present Hindriks' argument; and I show that the attempted derivation of a knowledge norm for assertion is unsuccessful. I then suggest two possible repairs to the argument which are in a similar spirit. Finally, I raise some concerns about these revised arguments; most importantly, I argue that the fact that these derivations secure only a restricted version of the knowledge rule is a defect to be avoided in any adequate derivation of this norm of assertion. No such derivation is given here, however; nor is the fascinating question of nature of the normativity involved in constitutive norms in general, or in the knowledge rule in particular, resolved.

II. HINDRIKS' ARGUMENT

Hindriks relies on three principles in attempting to derive his variant of the knowledge rule. The first principle concerns the nature of speech acts. According to Kent Bach and Michael Harnish, performing an illocutionary speech act is a matter of *expressing* a propositional attitude: "For [a speaker] S to express an attitude is for S to R-intend the hearer to take S's utterance as reason to think S has that attitude" (Bach and Harnish 1979, 15); where to R-intend is, in turn, to have a *reflexive* intention whose fulfilment consists in its recognition. Notice that this definition does not require a speaker to have an attitude in order to express it; that is, it allows for *insincere* attitude expression. This will prove important below. In any case, as I read him Hindriks endorses Bach and Harnish's suggestion that the performance of illocutionary speech acts involves the expression of attitudes in this sense; this is the first principle to which he appeals.ⁱ

Hindriks approaches his second principle by way of the thought that "[i]n situations of normal trust, one ought to be sincere" (Hindriks 2007, 401). Hindriks then correctly notes that "in the context of expression analyses of speech acts, [this norm of sincerity] amounts to the obligation to express an attitude only if one has that attitude," (Hindriks 2007, 402). Thus, Hindriks' second principle is the plausible claim that in situations of normal trust, one must express an attitude only if one has that attitude.ⁱⁱ The necessity in question – i.e. the one expressed by 'must' - is explicitly held to be that of a moral norm (Hindriks 2007, 401).

Finally, the third principle is simply the claim that knowledge is the norm of belief; or, as Williamson has put it, "[k]nowledge sets the standard of appropriateness for belief" (Williamson 2000, 47). It is a little unclear what the status of this norm is, just as it was in the case of the knowledge rule (KR). For instance, is it an impersonal norm, to the effect that beliefs ought to be knowledge? Or is it a personal obligation by which a subject should feel bound - that is, should we take it as involving a kind of imperative, e.g., 'See to it that your beliefs constitute knowledge!?'

Bernard Williams (1978, 23-31) gives an argument which might allow the latter interpretation. He asks us to imagine a subject A, who wants to form a belief on the issue of whether p; and he notes that A will have to employ some method for arriving at such a belief. Moreover, since beliefs ought to be true, A will want to form a true belief whether p; and to achieve that result, he will want to employ a method which tends to produce true beliefs – in short, a reliable method. But then, the state at which A will want to arrive is one in which he has a true belief on the issue whether p which has been arrived at by a reliable method; and this means, Williams suggests, that A seeks knowledge whether p. Thus, it seems that one who aims to acquire beliefs in this way will rationally recognize that he ought to (thereby) acquire knowledge. However, as Williams himself notes, "Not all A's true beliefs would be or could be acquired as a result of consciously directed enquiry applied to specific questions" (Williams 1978, 26); and so it is unclear whether this argument could establish that all beliefs are subject to such a personal norm.

Deciding this question is beyond the scope of this brief note. What is clear, however, is that the sense in which beliefs ought to be knowledge is not moral. Indeed, how could it be? It is not a claim about interactions between agents, but rather concerns the doxastic housekeeping of a single agent; it is therefore best regarded as epistemic in character, a fact which will prove important below. In any case, Hindriks' third principle is highly plausible, even if not entirely well understood.

Given his three principles, Hindriks (2007, 403) argues as follows:

- (P1) Asserting that p involves expressing the belief that p.ⁱⁱⁱ
- (P2) In situations of normal trust, one must: express the belief that p only if one believes that p.

Therefore,

- (C1) In situations of normal trust, one must: assert that p only if one believes that p.

But,

- (P3) One must: believe that p only if one knows that p.

Therefore,

- (C2) In situations of normal trust, one must: assert that p only if one knows that p.

The first premise (P1) simply fills in the first principle articulated above by specifying *which* attitude is expressed in assertion, namely belief; while the second premise (P2) applies the general moral norm of sincerity to the expression of this attitude. The intermediate conclusion (C1) clearly follows; and the final premise (P3) is just a schematic articulation of the third principle, the claim that knowledge is the norm of belief.

Hindriks' argument, however, suffers from the fallacy of equivocation, and the final conclusion (C2) accordingly does not follow from the intermediate conclusion (C1) together with the final premise (P3). The reason is that, as we have seen, knowledge is an epistemic, rather than a moral, norm of belief – that is, the 'must' in (P3) expresses an epistemic obligation - yet the conclusion purports to articulate a moral norm.^{iv} This equivocation between two senses of 'must' constitutes a serious – indeed, I believe devastating - flaw in Hindriks' attempted derivation.

We can perhaps see the nature of the problem more clearly by treating the two modal operators ('must') occurring in the argument as universal quantifiers over possible worlds.^v More specifically, we can regard a sentence of the form *one must φ* as having the form *it must be that one does φ*; and we can then translate the initial 'it must be that' by the phrase 'in every accessible world' - with the result, of course, that we read *one must φ* as *in every accessible world one does φ*. Furthermore, we may say that a world w2 is *morally accessible* (or *permissible*) from the point of view of w1, for a subject S, if and only if it contains no violations of S's moral obligations in w1; and it is (*normatively*) *epistemically accessible*, or as I will also say, *epistemically permissible*, from the point of view of w1, for a subject S, if and only if it contains no violations of S's epistemic obligations in w1.^{vi} The source of Hindriks' equivocation is then apparent: in the second premise of his argument (P2), and in his intermediate conclusion (C1), the accessible worlds – those quantified over by 'must' - are those in which no *moral* obligations are violated; but in the third premise (P3), the accessible worlds are those in which no *epistemic* obligations are violated. The premises, however, give us no reason to believe that all of the morally permissible worlds are epistemically permissible worlds – that is, worlds in which one conforms to the norm of belief by believing p only if one knows p. Thus, for all the premises claim, one might believe p in some world that is morally permissible given the situation of normal trust one is in, and so assert p in conformity with the moral norm expressed in

the intermediate conclusion (C1), and yet fail to know p, having violated one's epistemic obligations in that world. Yet it is precisely this – asserting p while failing to know p in some world that is morally permissible given the situation of normal trust that one is in - which the conclusion rules out. In short, Hindriks' final conclusion (C2) does not follow from his premises.^{vii}

III. REPAIRING THE ARGUMENT

To say that Hindriks' conclusion (C2) does not follow from his premises is not to say that it is not true, nor is it to say that it does not follow from the nature of assertion together with some auxiliary premises; indeed, the above diagnosis of the failure of Hindriks' attempted derivation suggests a strategy for repair. What is needed is an additional, or alternative, premise guaranteeing that all of the morally admissible worlds in which one makes an assertion are ones in which the epistemic norm of belief is respected (at least insofar as the object of the assertion is concerned).^{viii} There are broadly two ways in which one might achieve this effect, thus repairing Hindriks' argument while retaining something of its spirit.

The first strategy begins with the thought that knowledge itself is a mental state, or propositional attitude (Williamson 2000, 21). Combining this with an expression analysis of illocutionary speech acts, one might then claim that assertion involves not (merely) the expression of belief, but the expression of knowledge.^{ix} This, in turn, yields a modified first premise for the argument:

(P1.2) Asserting that p involves expressing the knowledge that p.

Since the moral norm of sincerity is perfectly general, a suitable version of the second premise will also hold:

(P2.2) In situations of normal trust, one must express the attitude of knowing that p only if one knows that p.

But then, the claim corresponding to Hindriks' intermediate conclusion (C1) will already be the final conclusion (C2), and there will be no need to appeal explicitly to the epistemic norm of belief as an additional premise.^x

The second strategy follows Bach and Harnish's (1979, 42) account of assertion, to yield a different variant on the first premise:

(P1.3) To assert that p is to express both the belief that p and the intention that one's hearer believe that p.

Again, since the Williams-inspired norm of sincerity is perfectly general, we get an instance of it applying to the expression of an intention:

(P2.3) In circumstances of normal trust, one ought not to express the intention that one's hearer believe that p unless one has such an intention.

Together, these two premises yield:

(C1.3) In circumstances of normal trust, one ought not to assert that p unless one has the intention that one's hearer believe that p.

At this stage, as in the original argument, we appeal to the norm of belief:

(P3) One must: believe that p only if one knows that p.

But now, rather than applying this norm to the speaker, we apply it to the hearer. In order to do this effectively, we must make the further plausible assumptions that:

(P4) In situations of normal trust, one ought (morally) not to undermine others' epistemic obligations;

and

(P5) Hearers know what they are told, on the basis of being told it, only if speakers know what they assert.

These together yield the intermediate conclusion:

(C3) In situations of normal trust, one ought not to have the intention that one's hearer believe that p unless one knows that p.

Hindriks' conclusion (C2) then follows: in situations of normal trust, one ought not to assert that p unless one knows that p.

IV. REMAINING CONCERNS

Although these arguments are clearly successful on their own terms – both are valid – one might, nevertheless, have some reservations about them. I consider the arguments in turn raising concerns specific to each before presenting a more general worry that affects both revised derivations.

One concern about the first revised argument is its starting point, the claim that knowledge is a mental state. This is controversial (Fricker 2009); and if it is false, then those sympathetic to expression analyses of speech acts may not want to appeal to it in their account of assertion. Suppose, for instance, that knowledge is to be understood as something like epistemically permissible (or *fully* justified) belief.^{xii} Then if assertion is, or involves, the expression of knowledge, it is not obviously a naturalistically acceptable kind: for in characterizing it, we appeal to a kind, knowledge, which in turn is understood in normative terms; but this is not likely to be a welcome result for expression theorists, who might be thought to be aiming for reductive naturalistic analyses of the various speech acts.^{xiii} Indeed, if knowledge is not a mental state – that is, if it does not consist in a wholly *psychological* relation to a proposition – then it is not clear that it can be expressed in Bach and Harnish's sense at all (which involves providing evidence that one has some *attitude*); so the first derivation may turn out to be a non-starter.

This is clearly not a concern for the second repaired argument above, which does not rely on the claim that assertion involves the expression of knowledge. But unlike the first argument, this

second one appeals explicitly to the epistemic norm of belief; and as we saw above, it is unclear exactly what the force of this norm is. If accepted, then, our second argument will have helped us to make some progress towards accounting for the fact that knowledge is the norm of assertion; but it will not have fully explained it.^{xiii} That is, the second derivation feels incomplete from an explanatory point of view, and it accordingly leaves something to be desired.^{xiv}

One final worry concerns Hindriks' conclusion (C2) itself; it is therefore quite general. According to this conclusion, knowledge is a *restricted* norm of assertion: that is, one is required to assert only what one knows *only in certain circumstances*, namely, those of normal trust. Hindriks rightly notes that the claim that assertion is subject only to such a restricted knowledge rule is incompatible with Williamson's claim that KR is a constitutive norm which governs every possible assertion. But Hindriks also thinks that his restricted norm is more plausible than Williamson's unrestricted one, which he accordingly sees no need to derive in full generality. This, I think, is a mistake.

Kant (1987) famously argued that if a friend were hiding in one's home from someone seeking to murder him, and the murderer were to knock at the door and ask whether one's friend was inside one would not be morally permitted to lie in an attempt to shelter the friend: the moral prohibition on lying is perfectly general. Williams (2002) argues that this is preposterous, and that it is clear that one would be morally not only permitted but indeed obliged to lie in such a case. It is because he takes Williams' intuition in this case to be correct that Hindriks (2007, 401-02) prefers a restricted version of the knowledge rule to Williamson's unrestricted knowledge rule (KR); for the former, unlike the latter, is not violated in such a case, the linguistic exchange in question not taking place in a situation of normal trust.

Like Hindriks, I find Williams' verdict on the case far more plausible than Kant's. Yet I find the suggestion that there is something wrong with asserting what one doesn't know, even if one is not in normal circumstances of trust, to be plausible, not "counterintuitive" (Hindriks 2007, 402).^{xv} We might put this by saying that it is always *pro tanto* wrong to lie, even if it is not ultimately wrong, all things considered. On the assumption that assertion is governed by an *unrestricted* knowledge norm we have the resources at our disposal to explain this fact – that it violates this norm, we may say, counts against an act morally; but without any such unrestricted norm in place, it is unclear how this fact can be accounted for, if at all. Thus, contra Hindriks, there is an advantage in positing an unrestricted knowledge rule: it allows us to account for all of the relevant intuitions, Kant's as well as Williams', in cases such as that of the murderer at the door.

Indeed, it is easy enough to see where Hindriks goes wrong in arriving (only) at his restricted norm of assertion: he suggests (2007, 401) that the circumstances he is interested in - situations of normal trust - are identified in part by their inclusion of a moral element. This is fine if one wants to derive a moral norm – for what one ought (morally) to do depends on the nature of the situation one is in; but the unrestricted norm Williamson postulates, and which I have argued we would like to derive, is not moral. Accordingly, we should stick with the more modest suggestion that the situations over which 'must' quantifies in the knowledge rule (KR) are, as Hindriks himself puts it, "the circumstances that are presupposed by co-operative communication" (2007, 401).^{xvi} In this way we might hope to derive the fully general knowledge rule (KR) on the basis of more fundamental considerations regarding the nature of assertion.^{xvii}

V. CONCLUSION

I am sympathetic to the thought that there is more to assertion than is revealed by Williamson's knowledge rule (KR); however, I have shown that Hindriks' attempted derivation of a variant of this rule from an expression account of assertion fails due to equivocation. I have suggested two possible repairs to his argument, but I have also raised concerns about them; most fundamentally, I have suggested that it is important to derive a knowledge rule governing assertion which is fully general, governing every possible act of this kind. More work remains to be done, however, on the nature of the normativity involved in such a rule.^{xviii}

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ⁱ He never articulates this as a general principle; but it seems reasonable to assume that he would endorse it, given that he accepts the particular instance governing assertion considered below – and in any case, it will prove useful to have this fully general proposal available.

ⁱⁱ Although it is plausible, this claim is not obviously true; nor is it clear that Williams (2002) endorses it, as Hindriks (2007, 401) seems to suggest. In particular, Williams (2002, 114) claims that one might be morally permitted to lie to a person with whom one has hitherto had trustful relations; from which it follows that one cannot also be obliged to be sincere with that person (even in situations of normal trust). Moreover, one of the main themes of the section in which Williams discusses the issues with which we have been concerned here seems to be that '[s]incerity is a disposition, and it cannot be understood just as the disposition to follow a rule... in the traditional sense of a requirement which is relatively simple and does not leave most of the work to be done by judgement' (Williams 2002, 120-21). This suggests that Williams does not think that any rule such as Hindriks' second principle could give the content of our moral obligations surrounding sincerity.

ⁱⁱⁱ In fact, Hindriks makes a stronger claim than this, namely: “To assert that P is to utter a sentence that means that P and thereby express the belief that P” (Hindriks 2007, 400). However, that belief is the only attitude which must be expressed in making an assertion is controversial even amongst advocates of expression theories, as we shall see; moreover, it is not essential to Hindriks’ argument. A second point is that one might recognize that producing some utterance is required in order to make an assertion, and yet deny that what one utters must be a sentence meaning that p: for instance, John MacFarlane (2011, 80-81) has suggested that one might make a non-literal assertion; and Kent Bach (1994) holds that many of the claims that we make are inexplicit or even semantically incomplete. Again, since the contentious claim is not essential to Hindriks’ argument I have dropped it from my reformulation thereof.

^{iv} Hindriks (2007, 403, footnote 13) suggests that any norm which is subject to the qualification ‘In situations of normal trust’ is a moral norm. His conclusion (C2) being subject to just such a qualification, the normativity involved must therefore be intended as moral in character.

^v This treatment of modal expressions in formal languages has been common in logic and philosophy since the late 1950s, and especially since Saul Kripke’s (1963) work. Angelika Kratzer (1977) then adapted this approach to deal with these expressions as they occur in natural language, since which time it has also become widespread in linguistics circles.

^{vi} Notice that this is not the same as the usual *descriptive* notion of epistemic accessibility, viz., that of being consistent with what a given subject knows. Notice also that the notions of accessibility I employ here might be further relativized, in the first case to a type of action A, and in the second to a proposition p; thus, we might speak of the worlds in which no moral obligations regarding A are violated, and those in which no epistemic obligations with respect to p are contravened. I leave the formulation of such restricted accessibility relations to the interested reader.

^{vii} It might be suggested that the conclusion should not be read in the way I have proposed as articulating a moral norm, and that the gist of Hindriks’ argument is quite simply as follows: we have an obligation, qua speakers, to assert only what we believe; and we have an obligation, qua epistemic agents, to believe only what we know; thus, we have an obligation to assert only what we know – and it doesn’t much matter what kind of obligation that is. My point, however, is that Hindriks’ argument gives us no reason to believe that we have an obligation of any interesting kind to this effect. The analysis of ‘must’ in terms of quantification over worlds makes this clear: sure, there will be some range of worlds throughout which we assert only what we know, and if we treat ‘must’ as a universal quantifier over these worlds, his conclusion will express a truth; but these worlds may not be those which are accessible under any reasonable accessibility relation, in which case the ‘must’ in the conclusion will not express any intuitive notion of obligation. Reading ‘must’ as expressing a moral necessity avoids this worry (as would reading it as expressing an epistemic one - though this would be utterly implausible for other reasons). The problem with rejecting this reading of the conclusion is to provide some plausible alternative account of the normativity it involves and on which it follows from the premises.

^{viii} Unfortunately this repair isn’t available to Hindriks, without some revision (rather than addition) to his views; for he says, “there are no moral grounds for criticizing someone for not knowing that which he asserts” (Hindriks 2007, 403). In fact, it is hard to see how this claim is consistent with the conclusion (C2) of his argument (see note iv above). But in any case, the above claim seems just plain wrong: if one’s interlocutor is relying on what one says on some important matter, then even if one asserts only what one believes, one can be criticized for not having done enough to ensure that what one believes is true before going ahead and asserting.

^{ix} Hindriks himself (2007, 403) suggests something like this view.

^x It might, however, be appealed to in explaining why human communities have a practice of expressing knowledge (which is what assertion is on this view), and thus in support of the first premise (P1.2). I will not attempt to reconstruct that line of thought here.

^{xi} See my (2013) paper, “Knowledge is Normal Belief”.

^{xii} See my (forthcoming) paper, “Speech Acts: Natural or Normative Kinds?”.

^{xiii} This should be especially clear if it should turn out that the norm of belief is impersonal; for the norm of assertion appears to be a kind of personal obligation.

^{xiv} Thanks to Mahrhad Almotahari for discussion on this point. Note also that there is a further concern which might be voiced about the second revised derivation, namely, that the premise (P5) that it invokes concerning the transmission of knowledge by testimony is controversial – see Graham 2000 for an argument against it. I will not discuss this issue here; but it would need to be addressed by the proponent of this argument.

^{xv} Of course, in order to accommodate Williams’ verdict on Kant’s case I must also recognize that the downside of violating the unrestricted knowledge rule can be morally outweighed by other considerations.

^{xvi} Hindriks (2007, 401) takes the morally individuated situations of normal trust to be the circumstances presupposed by co-operative communication; and he cites Williams 2002 in support of this suggestion. However, when Williams mentions circumstances of the latter type, he does not speak *in propria persona*, but attributes the view that there are such to Grice “and other theorists” (Williams 2002, 110). He then asks, “what are those circumstances?” (Williams 2002, 110) before suggesting that in our search to describe them, “we are not really looking for one particular kind of circumstances” (Williams 2002, 111). A reading of Williams on which he is skeptical of there being a type of situation that is presupposed by co-operative communication therefore strikes me as worthy of exploration. (Of course, Williams does discuss some circumstances which might be described as situations of normal trust, and he characterizes them in moral terms; but they cannot, on the skeptical – or perhaps better, nihilistic - reading of Williams I am suggesting, be identified with those presupposed by co-operative communication.) Indeed, even if we think there are situations of co-operation presupposed by linguistic communication, these need not be morally exemplary in any way: they might simply be those of “co-incident self-interest” (Hindriks, 2007, 401), for example. Finally, and most importantly, we should recognize that there are two types of situations that are at issue in our discussion: those in which conversations occur; and those in which our normative obligations in those situations are fulfilled. We must, I think, keep this distinction firmly in mind if we are to make progress in understanding the norm of assertion.

^{xvii} Hindriks himself notes (2007, 402, note 12) that when lies are morally wrong, this is to be explained in terms of their intended perlocutionary effects, whereas assertion is an illocutionary act. This suggests that the normativity of the knowledge rule governing assertion should concern illocutionary intentions and effects; and we may conjecture that this is what explains the fact that the normativity involved in the knowledge rule is not moral, though may contribute to determining the moral worth of a speech act.

^{xviii} Thanks to Mahrad Almotahari and Corine Besson for reading earlier versions of this material, and to the audience of my talk at the ILCLI International Workshop on Semantics, Pragmatics and Rhetoric SPR-11.