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Published in:
Journal of Philosophical Research

DOI:
[10.5840/jpr201472412](https://doi.org/10.5840/jpr201472412)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2014

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Hindriks, F., & Kooi, B. (2014). Reaffirming the Status of the Knowledge Account of Assertion. *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 39, 87-92. <https://doi.org/10.5840/jpr201472412>

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Article in *Journal of Philosophical Research* · July 2014

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REAFFIRMING THE STATUS OF THE KNOWLEDGE ACCOUNT OF ASSERTION

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ABSTRACT:

Suppose that someone who asserts a proposition ought to know that proposition. Is this a deep truth that concerns the nature of assertion? Timothy Williamson (1996, 2000) provides a positive answer to this question when he argues that this obligation features in the rule that is constitutive of assertion. Hindriks (2007) criticizes this claim and defends a different understanding of assertion as the linguistic expression of belief to which we refer as ‘the expression account of assertion.’ Hindriks does not deny, however, that typically people ought to know that which they assert. He argues that a knowledge rule can be derived from the expression account of assertion *together with* the claim that *belief* is governed by a knowledge rule. As a knowledge requirement applies to it only derivatively, the fact that assertion is governed by a knowledge rule does not concern the nature of assertion.

The key claim that Hindriks defends, then, is that the knowledge requirement applies directly to belief and only derivatively to assertion. His argument for this claim entails that the derived knowledge rule of assertion features a knowledge requirement only for situations in which it is impermissible to lie. Brian Ball criticizes the presented derivation—henceforth ‘the Derivation’¹—arguing that Hindriks commits a fallacy of equivocation. The knowledge rule of belief features an *epistemic* norm, whereas the derived conclusion “purports to articulate a *moral* norm” (Ball 2014, xx, our italics). Ball goes on to claim that “[t]his equivocation between two senses of ‘must’ constitutes a serious—indeed devastating—flaw in Hindriks’s attempted derivation” (ibid.). In this reply, we argue that this charge is mistaken. A mere ambiguity does not constitute a fallacy of equivocation. As Charles Hamblin explains, more needs to be done in order to establish that this fallacy has been committed:

In many contexts the two subsenses of moral words [e.g. moral and legal duty] can be conflated without risk, so that a charge of Equivocation needs to be backed

up with a demonstration that the context is one in which the distinction is necessary. (1970, 15)

Ball does not provide such a demonstration. And we argue that the distinction that Ball makes between moral and epistemic norms does not bear on the soundness of the Derivation presented in Hindriks (2007). The upshot is that it surfaces unscathed from Ball's critique.

I. THE RATIONALE OF THE DERIVATION

The Derivation starts from the expression account of assertion. On this account to assert that P is to linguistically express the belief that P. The second premise of the Derivation is the knowledge rule of belief (one must: believe that P only if one knows that P). One might think that these two premises already facilitate the derivation of a knowledge rule of assertion. There is one complication, however. Since lies are assertions, the term 'express' must be read in such a way as to allow for the possibility of expressing a belief that one does not have (Bach and Harnish 1979).

Suppose this complication did not arise and to express a belief does entail that the agent possesses that belief. In that case, to assert that P would be a matter of expressing the belief that P, which would entail that the agent making the assertion possesses the belief that P. When this conclusion is combined with the knowledge rule of belief, a knowledge rule of assertion follows (one must: assert that P only if one knows that P). This by itself entails the conclusion that Hindriks seeks to secure, i.e., that the knowledge requirement is not constitutive of assertion (2007, 404).

Alas, things are not this simple. The fact that an agent expresses the belief that P does not as such entail that the agent possesses the belief that P. Given the possibility of lying, one can merely maintain that the speaker wants to give the hearer the impression that she believes that P (*ibid.*, 15).² Does a knowledge requirement apply to lies? It appears not. Wouldn't it be odd to criticize someone who lies for not knowing that which she asserts? After all, she believes the opposite. A liar can be said to be insincere. It should be noted, however, that she does not necessarily violate the knowledge rule of belief. For all we know, the epistemic standing of her state of belief is impeccable.

The point can be made more precise in terms of Kant's axe murderer, which Ball introduces into the discussion. Suppose the murderer comes to your door and asks whether a friend of yours is inside and you know that his goal is to murder your friend. You deny that your friend is inside knowing full well that this is not true. Now suppose that you do so because you judged correctly that your situation is one in which you should be untruthful and lie. You are, as we shall say, "a virtuous liar."

By hypothesis you do not violate a moral requirement. At the same time, it would be silly to say that you violate an epistemic requirement. After all, you know perfectly well that your friend is inside. You are faultless both in moral and epistemic respects. Presumably you would be perplexed when asked why your lie did not live up to the standard of knowledge. It was never meant to do so. Of course, we could go on and inquire what you in fact believe about the whereabouts of your friend. With respect to a subsequent sincere assertion about this matter, we would have

a ground for critique if it turned out that you do not know that which you assert. What this reveals is that the underlying problem at issue is with not knowing what you believe rather than with not knowing what you assert.

All this reveals 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. A liar who is criticized for not knowing that which she says is likely to be annoyed with the charge that she does not know that which she asserts. It would make sense for her to say: "Of course, I do not know that which I asserted; in fact, I knew it to be false." In our ears, it would be silly to insist that this person has violated an epistemic obligation. The explanation for this is simple: the epistemic obligation applies to beliefs non-derivatively, and it transfers only to assertions that are sincere.

The possibility of insincere assertions serves as a further argument against the claim that the knowledge rule is the constitutive rule of assertion. We have already established that a knowledge rule of assertion can be derived from a knowledge rule of belief, which implies that the knowledge requirement applies to assertions only derivatively. The case of lying reveals that, rather than necessarily, the knowledge requirement applies to assertions only contingently. In fact, sometimes assertion does not come with a knowledge requirement at all. Ball denies this: "there are good reasons for thinking that the knowledge rule is universally applicable, and any derivation should respect this fact" (2014, xx). We would be curious to know what these allegedly good reasons are.

Ball presents only one consideration in support of his claim. He supports his intuition that a permissible liar is obliged to know that which he asserts by claiming that, even if it is not ultimately wrong, to lie is always "*pro tanto* wrong" (xx). A *pro tanto* obligation retains its force even when it is outweighed (Scanlon 1998, 50). We beg to differ. It is at best *prima facie* wrong. A *prima facie* obligation is an apparent obligation that can on closer inspection turn out to be either a genuine or a fake obligation (Scanlon 1998, 51). And fake obligations lack force altogether. The claim that the obligation is a *prima facie* obligation rather than a *pro tanto* obligation is supported by the case of the virtuous liar. Note that we do not dispute that the virtuous liar has epistemic duties. The point is rather that, when he lies, his epistemic duty does not pertain to that which he asserts, but to that which he believes.³

II. EPISTEMIC AND MORAL NORMS

It is far from trivial to present a formal derivation of the knowledge rule. No such thing was attempted in Hindriks (2007), and Ball does not attempt to do so either. Instead, Ball criticizes the Derivation on conceptual grounds. Ball points out that the knowledge rule of belief is an *epistemic norm*. The derivation, however, also features a *moral norm*. This is the norm of sincerity, which applies to expressing a belief (in situations of normal trust, one must: express the belief that P only if one believes that P). The norm of sincerity plays an important role in the Derivation, as is evidenced by the fact that the qualification 'in situations of normal trust' also

features in the conclusion. The conclusion is a knowledge rule of assertion (in situations of normal trust, one must: assert that P only if one knows that P). As we will see, it is unproblematic that the knowledge rule is grounded both in a moral and in an epistemic norm.

As mentioned above, Ball claims that Hindriks commits a fallacy of equivocation when he employs not only an epistemic norm but also a moral norm in the Derivation. By this Ball must mean that the different senses of ‘must’ in the Derivation lead to misunderstandings or mask argumentative weaknesses (see Van Laar 2010). However, the fact that a term has two senses need not weaken an argument involving the term. Suppose, for instance, that one distinguishes empirical knowledge from conceptual knowledge. Now consider the following argument: one knows that Socrates was not a bachelor because one knows that he was married and because one knows that all bachelors are unmarried. Someone could criticize this inference by saying that it constitutes a fallacy of equivocation, since two senses of ‘know’ are used. However, this would be rather uncharitable. Admittedly, the knowledge mentioned in one premise is empirical whereas the knowledge in the other premise is conceptual. In spite of this, the argument is unproblematic as it stands and does not lead to misunderstandings, even though we derive empirical knowledge on the grounds of both empirical and conceptual knowledge.

Just as the distinction between two senses of ‘knows’ does not affect the validity of the argument just mentioned, the distinction between two sense of ‘must’ does not render the Derivation fallacious. Even though the *norms* differ in kind, there is no need to postulate two kinds of *obligations*. And given that we need only assume one kind of obligation, the Derivation goes through. The last part of the Derivation turns out to be a simple hypothetical syllogism under the scope of an unambiguous deontic operator. In other words, the differences between the two norms are irrelevant for the derivation. The only thing that matters for the Derivation is that norms provide people with reasons that provide the basis for obligations. What matters for the Derivation is the fact that people have a certain obligation in particular conditions. It is immaterial what the underlying point is.

Ball attempts to clarify his point by providing an analysis of the two senses of ‘must’ in terms of possible worlds. Even though standard deontic logic (based on Kripke semantics) is certainly not unproblematic, we see, by analogy to the case of knowledge, that the criticism is unfounded. Knowledge too can be seen as a modal operator and can be given semantics using possible worlds (Hintikka 1962). One may wonder whether the set of “conceptually accessible” worlds coincides with the set of “empirically accessible” worlds and conclude that they are different. This only indicates that there are different sources of knowledge, not that arguments featuring two kinds of knowledge are problematic due to equivocation. By analogy we hold that there are different sources for obligations, yet this does not lead to misunderstandings regarding the nature of the knowledge rule, or weaken the Derivation that was used to establish it.

We would like to thank Brian Ball for giving us the opportunity to elaborate on this. Hindriks (2007) focused on the question whether the knowledge requirement is the constitutive rule of assertion. One of the arguments offered was that

the requirement does not apply to insincere assertions. The case of the virtuous liar serves to bolster this claim and shed further light on the scope of the epistemic requirement of assertion.

ENDNOTES

1. See Hindriks 2007 and Ball 2014 for the details of the derivation.
2. At some point Ball introduces the following premise in an attempt to save the idea underlying the Derivation: “To assert that *p* is to express both the belief that *p* and the intention to induce the belief that *p* in the hearer” (xx). Ball mentions Bach and Harnish (1979, 15) in support of this premise. This is surprising given that Bach and Harnish analyze someone’s expressing a belief in terms of intending the hearer to take his utterance as a reason for believing he has the belief. Note that, given the meaning of ‘to express’ in this context, one can express an intention that one does not have. This does not serve the purposes of Ball’s alternative derivation. On the analysis of ‘to express’ just mentioned, on which Hindriks (2007, 400–401) relies, expressing a belief does entail having the intention.
3. The obvious option for someone who is not convinced by this and who believes—as Ball does—that the knowledge rule applies to assertion universally is to accept the derivation mentioned above that does not feature the norm of sincerity. Someone who makes an assertion would then be faced with two distinct requirements: an unqualified knowledge rule and a qualified norm of sincerity. So even if the Derivation were faulty, we would see no reason to embrace either one of the two proposals for “repairing” the argument. A simpler alternative is already available.

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