

Lotteries, moles, and a belief-based account of assertion.

This talk is an extract from my thesis on the topic of the norm of assertion, and centres on what I think is the most important counterexample to other current theories. In the thesis I defend a belief-based account of assertion which makes the rule of assertion “Assert only if you have a sufficiently high degree of rational confidence”. So how high is sufficiently high? The answer is that you can assert when your degree of rational confidence is high enough for it to be reasonable for you to form the belief that you know the content of your assertion. So your evidence and your attitude to that evidence have to be strong enough that you can reasonably believe that you know, but it does not require that you actually hold that belief. The situation I discuss is an important motivator for the general type of account, though it does not fully explain why the threshold for “sufficiently high degree of rational confidence” is what I say it is, and I shall not be focussing on that aspect of my account. (I only mention it for the sake of completeness.)

First I shall explain what the issue is precisely: the question is what makes an assertion proper. The answer is that a proper assertion is one that is warranted, so the issue is what warrants assertion. Warrant, as Williamson says, is a term of art and should not be taken to be synonymous with justification. A justified assertion might merely be one for which there is a reason, or which has some measure of justification, but there can be assertions which are justified and not warranted. The best way to look at warrant is to identify it with criticism: it is a good rule of thumb that if your assertion is subject to criticism then it is not warranted, but if there is no relevant sense in which it can be criticised then it is warranted. I should point out here that we are talking about *your act of assertion*, and not just *the content of your assertion*. My account allows that the content of your assertion can be subject to criticism (if it is false, for example), but you can still be warranted in making the assertion itself.

So what sort of thing can warrant assertions? Things that might immediately spring to mind are truth, reasons, belief, knowledge, and accounts based on all of these have been suggested.

The prevailing view is that only knowledge can warrant assertion – you can assert only if you know what you are asserting. (Though you don’t have to know that you know.) This view has the consequence that most of what we assert, we assert improperly; but that is not to say that we fail to assert. If I score a try while offside I am still playing rugby, just not properly; a poker player who has stacked the deck is cheating, but still playing poker. There are a number of motivators for the knowledge account, and I shall discuss the lottery case in a moment, but Williamson, the main proponent of the knowledge account, also looks to our everyday practices for confirmation. When you assert something, a common response might be “How do you know that?”; this implies that we expect people to know what they have asserted.

After explaining the lottery case, I shall go on to describe a case of my own which the knowledge account cannot deal with, but first a word on everyday practices. If “How do you know?” is a common response then surely as, if not more common, would be responses like “Are you sure?”, “Do you really think so?”, or just “Really?”. The first two would lend confirmation to belief-based accounts, and the last a truth-based

account. (“Why do you say that?” could be used to confirm a justification-based account.) Since every type of theory can look to challenges like these to lend support for their theory, we must not put too much stock in our everyday practices. Something like the lottery case provides much more tangible evidence, and is used by Williamson to argue against accounts based on truth. It runs as follows: Alice buys a lottery ticket and her friend Lola, after the draw has been held, but before the results have been announced, tells her that she has not won. Since Lola has no information about the result, her assertion “Your ticket didn’t win” is unwarranted. When Alice finds out that Lola has no inside information, and is basing her statement only on the high probability that Alice’s ticket is not the winning one, Alice is liable to feel resentment towards Lola. That is to say, the assertion will be subject to criticism, and is therefore improper. (Williamson does note that there is a tone in which the assertion might not be criticised, like saying “(Come off it!) Your ticket didn’t win.”) Bear in mind that it doesn’t matter what the probability is, as you can make the lottery as big as you like and the assertion would still be unwarranted. Also, we should imagine that the lottery is more like a tombola than the National Lottery, so there is definitely a winning ticket.

The knowledge account, on the safe assumption that probability alone cannot yield knowledge, can easily explain what is wrong with Lola’s assertion: if knowledge is what warrants assertion, probability alone cannot give one warrant to assert (unless the probability is 1 or 0).

The following example challenges this. (It doesn’t challenge the lottery case, just the conclusion that probability alone can never warrant assertion.) Imagine an elite military unit, whose mission is to keep slipping behind enemy lines in order to gather intelligence. The enemy soldiers patrol their borders randomly, so that for every time the unit crosses the border there is only a 1 in 50 chance that there will be a patrol. The last six times the unit attempted a crossing they were met by enemy patrols and barely escaped with their lives. The commander knows that, unless the enemy is being fed information, there is only a 1 in 50 chance of being caught on any one mission, and knows that only the unit has such information, and so concludes “There is a mole in our midst” (OR “One of my men is a mole”).

Pre-theoretically, it looks like this assertion is warranted: it is very difficult to see how the commander might be criticised for saying this, so it seems that he has asserted properly. In fact, he has almost been forced to make this assertion. If he doesn’t make the assertion and sends his men back into enemy territory, he will be criticised for making such an obviously stupid decision. So are we to conclude that he is in a Morton’s Fork situation, that he is damned if he does and damned if he doesn’t? Surely it is easier (and more plausible) to suppose that the assertion is indeed warranted. But the knowledge account can’t deal with this assertion’s being proper, because he certainly doesn’t *know* that there is a mole.

One might think that DeRose’s distinction between primary and secondary propriety could be employed here: someone following the rule of assertion asserts properly in a primary sense, but someone who reasonably believes that he is following the rule of assertion asserts properly only in a secondary sense. This distinction can often be used to explain why it seems like someone has asserted properly even though he breaks the rule of assertion. But this approach cannot help the knowledge theorist because the

commander's assertion is not secondarily proper on the knowledge account: when the commander asserts that there is a mole he does not believe that he knows this.

One possible line of response for the knowledge account proponent to take is to explain the permissibility of the assertion by appeal to other norms. The idea here is that while the norm of assertion might be "Assert only if you know", in this situation another rule supersedes the primary norm to make the assertion permissible – something about risk or what's at stake. It still isn't a proper assertion, for it has broken the primary rule, but this does explain why we regard the assertion as permissible, and aren't willing to criticise the commander for making it: he has asserted according to the rules in some secondary sense. So let's say that there is a special norm for asserting when you are a commander of a unit whose mission it is to go behind enemy lines to gather intelligence when there is a 1 in 50 chance of being caught, and this norm outweighs the ordinary norm of assertion. Are we then to assume that there is also a special norm for the commander of a unit whose mission it is to go behind enemy lines to gather intelligence when there is a 1 in 49 chance of being caught? And another for the guy who has a 1 in 48 chance? And so on. There is nothing to conclusively refute this approach to salvaging the knowledge account, it merely has undesirable consequences. If we have one special norm we must admit others with little or no principled basis for doing so; very soon the term assertion would only be properly applied to a minute class of expressions.

My belief-based account deals with this case without the baggage: the assertion is warranted because the commander has a sufficiently high degree of rational confidence. Simple as that. If you think that perhaps his belief that there is a mole is irrational, think how much more irrational it would be to believe that there is not a mole, or to suspend judgement completely.

But if both Lola and the commander have made assertions based entirely on probability, why does one have warrant and the other not? The answer is that Lola has a problem that the commander does not have: the reason that Lola said that Alice's ticket did not win can be extended to other tickets. If Lola can say that ticket #5 didn't win, she can say that ticket #5000 didn't win: her reasons would be the same – the overwhelming unlikelihood of the ticket's having won. But she knows that if she asserts of every ticket that it did not win, she will definitely have asserted a falsehood, since there is a winning ticket. In the elite unit case, the commander can say of each man that he is not a mole without *knowing* that he has asserted falsely. Granted he might *believe* that one of the assertions was false, but he would not *know* this (or claim to know it), for it is possible, though unlikely in the extreme, that there is no mole.

Nonetheless, the knowledge account proponent can still maintain that no assertion here is proper, so we must delve a little deeper and take a look at the men. The commander has served with these men for years, he has access to all of their files and they all have exemplary records: basically, he trusts them all absolutely. So he is very willing to assert "Andy is not a mole", "Brian is not a mole", "Charlie is not a mole", and so on. But he is also willing to assert that there is a mole. Since warrant is based on belief, how can he consciously believe that not one of them is a mole, and also that one of them is a mole?

The answer is that he doesn't hold both of these beliefs. He holds the belief that there is a mole, and he holds individual beliefs about Andy, Brian, Charlie, and so on, but he doesn't hold the belief that none of the men is a mole. But is this possible? Can he believe that Andy is not a mole, and believe that Brian is not a mole, and so on, but not believe the conjunction of all of these beliefs? Basically, is warrant to assert (and therefore sufficiently high degree of belief) closed under conjunction? Can you have warrant to assert A, and to assert B, but not have warrant to assert C, where C is entailed by the conjunction of A and B? It very much seems that you can.

Let's imagine that all the men are as good and as trusted as each other, though in different ways. So when the commander examines the evidence, he comes to the same conclusion about them all individually (though for different reasons in each case) – he is all but certain that each of them is not a mole. Let's say that he's 95% sure that Andy is not a mole, 95% that Brian is not a mole, 95% that Charlie is not a mole, and so on. Let's also assume, purely for argument's sake, that 95% is the threshold for assertion. So he has warrant to assert of each one man that he is not a mole, but he can't assert even of two men that neither is a mole. By the time he gets to Charlie he is 86% sure, and if there's a Dave he goes down to 81%. But do bear in mind that the numbers don't matter, I'm just illustrating my point less abstractly. So he has warrant for each statement, but not their conjunction, so warrant is not closed.

Such considerations are why on my account you don't have to know or be totally sure to assert. If you did then warrant would be closed under conjunction, but the unit case suggests that it isn't. But I haven't quite proved it yet: the knowledge account theorist can still respond by denying that any of the assertions is warranted at all. Though this leads to far too many problems to discuss here, it still needs to be dealt with.

Go back to the original unit situation. They've almost been caught six times, so the commander believes that there is a mole. But let's say that there is no mole, and the six times were indeed pure coincidence. So when he examines the men and their backgrounds, he has warrant to assert of each of them that he is not a mole on any account. Specifically looking at the knowledge account, he actually does know that each of them is not a mole. Thus if warrant is closed, he should have warrant to assert that none of them is a mole. But if having warrant means knowing, he doesn't have warrant to assert that none of them is a mole: he doesn't believe this, so he can't know it. Thus warrant is not closed under conjunction, and therefore the rule of assertion cannot be based on knowledge.