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A Puzzle for Epistemic WAMs

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Abstract

In recent literature, a very popular position about the normativity of assertion claims that standards for epistemically proper assertion vary with practical context, while standards for knowledge do not. This paper shows this claim is strongly incompatible with the received value-theoretic view regarding the relationship between the axiological and the deontic: one of the two has to go.

1. Introduction

Here is a thesis that has made a nice career for itself in recent epistemological literature:

Assertion Sensitivism (SA): The degree of warrant necessary for epistemically¹ proper assertion varies with contextual features, while the degree of warrant necessary for knowledge stays fixed.

¹ Crucially, the results of this paper only concern SA in its epistemic incarnation.

And here is a fairly uncontroversial value-theoretic claim concerning the relation between the axiological and the deontic:

The Norms/Goods Type Association Claim (the Association Claim, or AC for short): Norms of type X are associated with goods of type X.

This paper argues that, surprisingly enough, in spite of the wide spread support they enjoy, the two claims above are incompatible. To do this, I first look at the data that are taken to motivate SA (#2). Further on, I spell out what the SA claim amounts to when taken in conjunction with AC. As it turns out, if AC holds, SA is untenable (#3). Given the wide spread support for AC, I consider several ways out the SA supporter might take. I argue they all fail (#4). In Section #5 I conclude.

2. Assertion Sensitivism

Standards for proper assertability definitely seem to vary with practical context. Consider, for illustration, the following pair of cases:

ASPIRIN-1. You remember having bought aspirin last month. As such, when you head together with your sister towards your place for dinner, and she lets you know she has a minor headache, you flat out assert: *'Don't worry, I have aspirin at home'*.

ASPIRIN-2. You remember having bought aspirin last month. Your sister's two years old baby is having a fever, and needs an aspirin as soon as possible. Plausibly, were your sister to ask you: 'Do you have aspirin at home, or should we go to the pharmacy?' you would be less inclined to flat out assert that you have aspirin at home. You would rather say something along the lines of: *'Well, let's drop by the pharmacy, just in case'*.

It looks as though, in high stakes practical contexts, assertability does not come cheap: intuitively, more warrant is required in ASPIRIN2, but not in ASPIRIN1, for being in a position to properly assert that you have aspirin at home. Let us dub this the Shiftiness Intuition.²

Now, this phenomenon is hardly a newly arrived guest at the epistemology table; however, popularity wise, the golden age of the Shiftiness Intuition began once being employed to defend contextualism about knowledge attributions (e.g. DeRose 2002) or one variety or another of pragmatic encroachment for knowledge (e.g. Hawthorne 2004); let us dub both these views knowledge sensitivism (SK for short). Roughly, the thought goes as follows: very plausibly, knowledge is the norm of epistemically proper assertion; that is, one is in a good enough position to make an epistemically proper assertion that p if and only if one knows that p (KNA).³ If that is the case, however, it follows that the standards for knowledge go hand in hand with the standards for proper assertability. Given that the latter seem to vary with context, so will the former.

For people who like classical invariantism (CI) about knowledge attribution, however, the jump from variation in assertability with stakes to contextualism or pragmatic encroachment seemed rushed. As such, these authors venture to account for the Shiftiness Intuition under a classical invariantist umbrella by arguing for context-sensitivity of proper assertability.

The thought behind the view is, roughly, to explain the intuitive variability in propriety from one ASPIRIN case to the other by keeping the standards for knowledge fixed, and allowing that the degree of warrant for epistemically proper assertion varies with context. In some contexts, less than knowledge is required for epistemically proper assertion, while more

² The term was coined by Fantl and McGrath (2012).

³ The locus classicus for the defence of the necessity claim involved in KNA is Williamson (2000). For support for the sufficiency claim, see Simion (2016b).

warrant may be needed in others.⁴ This view has become known in the literature as a Warranted Assertability Maneuver (WAM)⁵ against knowledge sensitivism.

In this respect, thus, according to SA, although the speaker's epistemic status remains unchanged in the two ASPIRIN cases, the assertion 'I have aspirin at home' would not be epistemically proper in ASPIRIN 2 due to change in the relevant contextual features,⁶ most likely related to the relevant stakes. That is, while the speaker does know that he has aspirin at home in both ASPIRIN 1 and ASPIRIN 2, due to changes in context, it is only in the former but not in the latter that his relevant assertion would be epistemically proper.

2. Type Association

Here is one plausible thought: if there's such a thing as an epistemic norm for assertion out there in the first place, it is likely there to make it likely that assertion delivers the epistemic goods we are using it for. And here is a fairly innocent value-theoretic claim to capture this thought: it looks as

⁴ SA also comes in more than one variety; first there are people thinking that assertion is governed by one norm which stipulates that the appropriate amount of warrant for proper assertion varies with contextual features (e.g. Brown (2010), Gerken (2012), Goldberg (2015) MCKinnon (2013), Rescorla (2009)). Another way to be a sensitivist about assertion is to stipulate several norms governing assertion, depending on the context (e.g. Greenough (2011), Levin (2008), Stone (2007)). The subtle differences between the above views are, however, to a large extent, irrelevant for now (but see the next section for refinements). That is because this paper dwells at a higher level of generality: what I am concerned with is the claim that epistemically proper assertability varies with practical stakes, no matter what triggers the variation in propriety in question. Insofar as these authors stand by this claim, they are the proper target of this paper.

⁵ Strictly speaking, there are two ways one can pull a WAM: one can place the source of context sensitivity at the level of the epistemic norm itself (SA), or, to the contrary, defend a fixed norm and argue that pragmatic, Gricean considerations influence propriety in context (e.g. Rysview 2001). This paper is only concerned with the first incarnation thereof.

⁶ It is fair to say that defenders of SA go on separate ways when it comes to listing the relevant contextual determiners; that is, for some of them, practical concerns figure higher on the list (e.g. Gerken 2012),⁶ while others (e.g. Goldberg 2015) focus more on non-practical context sensitivity.

though a norm's pertaining to one type or another has to do with the type of goods it is associated with. Thus, prudential norms will be associated with prudential goods, moral norms will be associated with moral goods, etc. Epistemic norms will thus come together with epistemic goods. Peter Graham puts the point succinctly: "*Epistemic* norms in this sense govern what we ought to say, do or think from an *epistemic point of view*, from the point of view of promoting true belief and avoiding error" (Graham 2012). What we get, then, is the following easy way to individuate normative constraints:

The Norms/Goods Type Association Claim (the Association Claim, or AC for short): Norms of type X are associated with goods of type X.

Again, notice that AC is pretty innocent from a value-theoretic perspective. That is because the *mere association* claim between norms and goods of the same type does not imply any substantial value-theoretic commitment; it holds on both the most notable views regarding the relationship of the good to the deontic.⁷ The teleologist explains the 'ought' in terms of the 'good'; according to this philosopher, the following is true:

AC-Teleology: Norm of type X are there to guide us in reaching goods of type X.

The deontologist reverses the order of explanation: according to 'Fitting Attitude' accounts of value,

⁷ For support of AC: for a good general overview of the relevant literature in value theory, see, for instance, Schroeder (2012); for champions of the teleological direction of explanation, see e.g. Moore (1903), Portmore (2005), Sidwick (1907) and Slote (1989). For the deontological direction, see e.g. Scanlon (1998) Ewing (1947), Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004)).

AC-Deontology: Goods of type X are only valuable because norms of type X give us reasons to favour them.

Anyhow, one way or another, the mere *association* claim holds. Let us now take a closer look at the SA proposal concerning the normativity of assertion and at how it fares in conjunction with the Association Claim. First, what we are talking about is the *epistemic* norm of assertion. The question, then, becomes: what is the relevant epistemic good? Many authors (e.g. David (2005)) regard truth as the fundamental epistemic good. The most prominent counter candidate in the literature is knowledge (Williamson (2000)). For our purposes here, in order to stay on the safe side, we will test the plausibility SA for both candidate goods.⁸ Note, also, that the epistemic interest at stake can be thought to be both at the speaker and at the hearer's end. As such, we will have to look on both sides.

Let us start with teleological order of explanation. By AC, then, SA proponents will also be committed to:

SA-Teleology: The SA norm is there to guide one in reaching epistemic goods.

Spelling out the norm, and on a truth goal assumption, then, we get:

SA-Teleology^{truth} One should proportion the degree of warrant supporting one's assertion to contextual features to the aim of making a true assertion/ generating true belief in one's hearer.

⁸ Note, also, that the argument can be run in a parallel fashion for a justification goal (and the results are likely to coincide with the results for the knowledge goal, insofar as what is meant is knowledge-level justification). Also, see below for a discussion of what is the case on the assumption of an epistemic goal that itself varies with practical stakes, such as 'providing actionable information'.

But surely SA proponents would not want to stand behind this formulation, since it is blatantly false: pragmatic factors do not influence truth-conduciveness. Furthermore, I doubt that (many of) the supporters of SA themselves, given the classical invariantist motivations behind the view, would want to stand behind such formulation. Here is Gerken, for one: "...epistemic warrant is determined by traditional truth-related factors and not by pragmatic factors (Gerken 2012, 377).

In the light of all this, maybe we should just move on; maybe the real problem is the truth goal. Let us turn to knowledge⁹ as the main epistemic good, then, plug it into the SA-Consequentialism and see what happens to the framework:

SA-Teleology^{knowledge} One should proportion the degree of warrant supporting one's assertion to contextual features to the aim of making a knowledgeable assertion/ generating knowledge in one's hearer.

Unfortunately for the SA proponent, this formulation, although not strikingly false, amounts to what she was trying to avoid in the first place; that is, context sensitivity of knowledge. Here is how: in the speaker's case, the route to SK is pretty straightforward: if, in order to come to know, the speaker is in need of more epistemic support in high-stakes contexts than in low-stakes ones, we are back in the SK yard.

While on the hearer's side a similar result might be less obvious, notice that what the claim amounts to, as a fact of the matter, is that the hearer needs an epistemically better source in high-stakes scenarios than in low stakes ones in order to gain knowledge. Surely, given the strict invariantist motivations behind SA, this is an unacceptable result, since it dissolves the view, in its original formulation, by collapsing it into SK; what the SA claim would amount to, under this formulation, would be a view

⁹ Note that prominent defenders of CA (e.g. Goldberg 2015) explicitly support generating testimonial knowledge as the main epistemic role of assertion.

according to which one needs a degree of warrant that is suitable to one's practical context in order to be knowledgeable.

If that is the case, SA seems to not be very nicely compatible with a teleological value-theoretic framework. On one hand, this is rather unfortunate; after all, ideally, one does not want one's preferred account of the normativity of assertion to commit one to very substantive value-theoretic claims. On the other hand, given the dubious name consequentialism has made for itself on independent grounds, maybe this should not worry the SA champion too much, however. Let us change the framework, then, and go for the deontological incarnation of the Association Claim. Consider, first:

SA-Deontology^{truth}: Truth is an epistemic good because the SA norm gives us reason to favour it.

It is a bit mysterious, however, in virtue of what exactly does SA give us reason to favour truth rather than, say, falsehood. After all, it looks as though, independently of whether I am right or wrong about whether p is the case, according to SA, the important thing is that I don't assert it unless I have a contextually appropriate amount of warrant. As such, SA seems to be completely indifferent when it comes to whether I am in possession of the truth or not, and therefore fail to favour it in any way.

SA-Deontology^{knowledge}: Knowledge is an epistemic good because the SA norm gives us reason to favour it.

Again, this formulation is either false, or it collapses SA into SK. Recall that SA asks for less warrant in low stakes scenarios and more warrant in high stakes; as such, it gives us no particular reason to favour classical invariantist knowledge over other epistemic standings characterized by less, respectively more warrant. If, however, knowledge itself is sensitive

to practical context, as SK would have it, the SA norm is able to provide us with reason to favour it.

To sum up, then: if the (value-theoretically innocent) Association Claim between norms and goods of a particular type holds, SA comes out untenable for the main candidates for the central epistemic good in the literature. On both available AC directions of explanation, in a truth-goal framework, its claims turn out false, or, at least, highly implausible. In a knowledge-goal framework, the position collapses into context sensitivity of knowledge, which was what its proponents were reacting against in the first place.

What SA seems to need is a complementary pluralistic account regarding the epistemic goal, tightly connected to contextual practical determiners. That is, roughly, a view on which the epistemic goal varies with practical stakes, such as: the goal of assertion is providing actionable information.¹⁰ On such a view, variation in warrant for proper assertion would just track the variation in epistemic goal, which, in turn, would track the variation in epistemic needs given the practical context.

Now, to my knowledge, this view is still in need of defence in its own right; thus, as things stand, it can hardly be employed to the support of SA, given that its theoretical up- and downsides are completely underexplored.

I will bracket this however, and, for the sake of maximal charity, try to have a look at how such a picture would work.

A few serious worries arise even from just this rough sketch for the view. First, note that holding this practical-context variant view about the epistemic goal in general might get SA into trouble when it comes to the normativity of belief; that is, if some variety of (the very popular) norm commonality assumption is true about assertion and belief, SA will be in danger of collapsing into SK, if they will also hold that the epistemic goal –

¹⁰ Jessica Brown and Sandy Goldberg (in personal communication) suggested the WAM-er might want to take this route.

and therefore the epistemic norm - of belief also varies with practical factors. To see why this is the case, note that many (if not most) people¹¹ in the debate stand behind something like the following deontic thesis for belief (DTB):

DTB: A belief is epistemically permissible iff epistemically justified,

where the justification at stake is taken to be knowledge level justification. If epistemically permissible belief varies with stakes, however, on DTB, so does knowledge-level justification, and therefore knowledge itself. We are back to SK.

As far as I can see, there are three ways to go at this point in order to avoid this result: ¹² either (1) restrict the view to assertion and deny the commonality assumption (and therefore either the normative import of the extremely widely endorsed belief/assertion parallel, or the parallel itself) (which, I take it, is a fairly serious theoretical cost, or in need of independent support). (2) Hold that epistemically permissible assertion goes hand in hand with practically permissible belief, not with epistemically permissible belief; The problem with both (1) and (2) is that they will allow for intuitively strange situations whereby a speaker's assertion that p will count as epistemically permissible (in virtue of its degree of warrant being good enough for hearer's practically permissible belief), although they do not believe that p themselves, in virtue of not having enough warrant to epistemically permissibly believe that p.

(3) Deny that the status at stake in DTB is knowledge-level justification, rather than some practically sensitive variety of epistemic justification for belief. This is an epistemically normative pluralistic picture for belief: a belief might be epistemically justified even if it is not a justification that is strong enough as the one that is required for

¹¹ See, e.g. (Williamson 2000), (Simion, Kelp & Ghijssen 2016a).

¹² Manny thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

knowledge. The standards of epistemic justification/permissibility for belief might therefore be context-sensitive, even though the standards for *knowledge level* justification/permissibility are not context-sensitive. The former track actionability, the latter do not. A few things about this. First, while I grant that this picture occupies a position in the logical space, I want to strongly emphasize that it is not defended anywhere in the literature, and hardly a straightforward, theoretically neutral way to go. Therefore, I take it, it requires very serious defence in order to be taken seriously. Here are a few reasons for this: First, because it needs to deny the widely accepted DTB. Second, because it needs to stipulate normative pluralism where all the competing views do not – so it scores worse on simplicity grounds. Third, because on this view, one can have a knowledgeable belief that one should, epistemically, not hold which is rather counter-intuitive. Fourth, most crucially, the defender of such an account will want to avoid the following results: on her view, given that epistemic permissibility of belief varies with practical stakes, believing a falsehood, or something one has no justification whatsoever for, when nothing hinges on it, or in return for one million dollars would be *epistemically* perfectly fine. That seems like quite a theoretical cost. In a similar vein, when nothing of importance is at stake for the hearer – say, for instance, we are just making conversation about the weather – it should turn out to be *epistemically* fine to assert with no warrant whatsoever. All this, of course, does not seem right.

One can maybe try to address this problem by setting a minimal threshold for (epistemically) permissible assertion/belief.¹³ One way to do this in a non-ad-hoc manner would be by arguing for some pragmatic considerations in favour of the relevant threshold. For instance, one could think that something like the maxim of Relevance would recommend against making assertions devoid of any practical importance to begin

¹³ On Greenough's (2010) view, for instance, knowledge is the minimal threshold for permissible assertion.

with.¹⁴ Or, alternatively, one could think that, in virtue of the maxim of Quality, asserting that p carries the implicature that there is some reason to believe that p. As such, on this view, in no-stakes cases, while asserting in the absence of any warrant is strictly speaking epistemically proper in virtue of it being practically proper, it comes across as intuitively inappropriate due to considerations pertaining to the pragmatics of language.

Alas, though, this move will not get the champion of the variant goal view too far either. After all, one can easily imagine cases where the amount of warrant is problematically raised rather than lowered. Take, for instance, a case where I am offered one million dollars to withhold belief unless I am certain (as in Cartesian certainty) that p. In this case, the defender of the variant goal view will have to say that, if I see that there is a table in front of me, and therefore I believe that there's a table in front of me, my belief is *epistemically* impermissible. Again, this does not sound right.

What the defender of this account seems to be in need of, then, would be a principled way to separate the 'good' prudential considerations from the 'bad' ones; I submit that there is reason to believe there is no easy, non question begging answer for this problem in sight.

4. Objections and Replies

One reply that might come from the SA camp, though, could go along the following lines: the SA champion could argue that the variability in warrant is required for belief generation. In high stakes scenarios, the thought would go, the hearer might be extremely cautious and ask the speaker to

¹⁴ Mikkel Gerken (p.c.) suggested this might be the way he might want to go about this issue.

back her assertion. In this case, being in possession of an amount of warrant appropriate to the situation would put the speaker in a position to be able to meet this demand, and thus successfully generate the relevant belief in her hearer.

The problem with this move, however, is that, on the present formulation of SA, it will not do. That is, as it stands, SA only ask speakers to be in the possession of the relevant degree of warrant, not to also have access to it so as to be able to back their assertion if needed.

Notice, also, that adding the necessary access requirement would render the view fairly implausible; after all, surely small children can produce epistemically proper assertions, in spite of the fact that they don't have very well developed reflective capacities. Furthermore, most of our knowledge is stocked in memory and, for most of it, we do not really remember how we came to acquire it to begin with. I, for instance, surely do not remember how I got to know that Berlin is the capital of Germany. Does that mean I cannot make the relevant assertion? The answer, according to this enhanced version of SA will have to be 'no'.

Two options are still available to the SA defender at this point: first, she could make the need for discursive justification context-dependent also, such as to only encounter the cognitively unsophisticated asserters problem when the stakes are high. This more restricted version seems to enjoy more plausibility. Gerken's view, for instance, explicitly requests that, in some contexts, but not all, one should be able to back one's assertion with appropriate support.

Alternatively, she could argue that the need for more warrant in high stakes than in low stakes scenarios pertains to hearers not believing what the speaker says unless they not only know the content of their assertion, but they also know that they know – which, in turn, requires

more warrant than mere knowledge.¹⁵ This picture, in turn, would have nothing to do with the standards for knowledge; quite to the contrary, it explicitly allows that those standards remain fixed.

There are, however, good reasons to believe that the prospects for this sort of move are rather dim. To see this, let us take another look at the envisaged SA champion's reply: the variability in warrant is required for belief generation, not for its truth. In high stakes scenarios, the hearer might be extremely cautious and ask the speaker to either back her assertion with the contextually appropriate discursive justification or, alternatively, to know that they know. Were the speaker not able to do so/not to have knowledge of knowledge, the hearer would not believe the content of the assertion, and, as such, the aim of generating of true belief/knowledge would be missed.

Now, note that, for all is said above, we are dealing with a descriptive, empirical claim: the thought is that, as a matter of fact, there is a chance that the hearer requests discursive justification/knowledge of knowledge for believing. But, of course, this cannot be what is meant to be relevant to the normative claim of SA; after all, maybe hearers are not in their epistemic right to do so, in which case no obligation for the speaker should follow. Just because hearers might, for instance, require speakers to wear red hats if they want to be believed, it does not follow that we will have a red-hat-wearing norm of proper assertion thereby, at least surely not an epistemic such norm. Similarly, just because, in high stakes cases, hearers usually require speakers to know that they know or, alternatively, to offer contextually appropriate discursive justification, it does not follow that we will have any such requirement on the speaker's side. Surely the SA defender does not want to say that any absurd claim hearers might have is going to affect the content of the epistemic norm governing speaker's speech acts.

¹⁵ See (Williamson 2005) for an account along these lines. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this.

What seems to be needed is a normative claim alongside the empirical one; for any obligation to follow on the speaker's side, it must be the case that, on top of them being in the habit to do so, hearers are also epistemically permitted to ask for discursive justification/knowledge of knowledge. What is needed, then, is a norm that makes the requirement for knowledge of knowledge/discursive justification permissible. Furthermore, given that we are interested in the epistemic norm of assertion, the relevant norm on the part of the hearer also needs to be epistemic, rather than prudential or moral.

In a nutshell, then, what we need is an (importantly) epistemic norm that makes it permissible for hearers to only believe what the speaker says if the latter has knowledge of knowledge/ contextually appropriate discursive justification. This, however, will easily threaten to drive the SA defender back in the trouble he was trying to avoid to begin with. Here is how: again, it is widely accepted that a belief is epistemically justified (where what is at stake is the justification required for knowledge) if and only if it is epistemically permissible (DTB).¹⁶ Therefore, a stakes-variant epistemic norm of belief will readily result in stakes variation for knowledge. Of course, one can have a stakes-variant prudential norm of belief, for instance. However, again, this prudential norm on the part of the hearer would only be able to generate a prudential norm on the part of the speaker; what we are searching for, though, is the distinctively *epistemic* norm of assertion. The two will, of course, often come apart: it might be epistemically perfectly fine, for instance, to tell your boss that he's bald if you know it to be the case, but, prudentially speaking, it is definitely better to keep quiet (Brown 2011).

One last option for the SA defender that still needs to be discussed is her possible retreat from direct to indirect practical stakes sensitivity. According to this account, the reason why we need more warrant in high

¹⁶ See e.g. Williamson (2000), Simion, Kelp and Ghijsen (2016a).

stakes than in low stakes is because more error possibilities become salient. As such, proper assertability is only indirectly sensitive to practical stakes, through its being sensitive to the (genuinely) epistemic need for dismissing salient error possibilities. Patrick Greenough's (2011) view affords this way out. According to Greenough, assertion is governed by different norms in high stakes and low stakes scenarios. That is, in high stakes, but not in low stakes, the speaker must also be able to cite explicit evidence against all those not-p possibilities which are salient in the high-standards in play.

The assumption that needs be discussed here, however, is the claim that this need is a genuinely epistemic one. To what epistemic aim, does one need to be able to dismiss the relevant error possibilities? One plausible answer is that the latter constitute themselves in normative defeaters and, as such, the hearer (epistemically) should not believe the speaker's assertion unless suited defeater defeaters are offered. This reply, indeed, seems to be innocent of any pragmatic normative consequences for belief. Note, however, that this reply will not do its job in supporting SA's claim against KNA, i.e. the claim than more than knowledge is needed in high stakes context for proper assertability. After all, plausibly enough, the same normative defeaters that forbid the hearer from believing will also (normatively) act on the speaker's epistemic standing. As such, the defender of KNA can easily help herself to the same explanation of the Shiftiness Intuition here: the reason why the speaker needs to be able to dismiss relevant error possibilities constituting themselves in normative defeaters is because, otherwise, he fails to have knowledge, and therefore is not permitted to assert by KNA.

5. Conclusion

This paper has identified a strong incompatibility between a very popular view concerning the normativity of assertion – what I have dubbed assertion sensitivism – and a fairly uncontroversial value-theoretic thesis concerning the association between norms and values of the same type. I have argued that assertion sensitivism, as a thesis about the *epistemic* normativity of assertion, is untenable in conjunction with the Association Claim. To show this, I have picked the most popular candidates for the main epistemic goods in the literature, and showed how SA’s claims either turn out false, or collapse the view into knowledge sensitivism, i.e. the position champions of SA were trying to avoid to begin with.¹⁷

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¹⁷ Many thanks to Jessica Brown, Mikkel Gerken, Sandy Goldberg, Patrick Greenough, Chris Kelp and two anonymous referees for *Synthese* for very helpful comments on this paper.

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