

# KNOWLEDGE, ASSERTION AND INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY

J. Adam CARTER and Emma C. GORDON

ABSTRACT: This paper has two central aims. First, we motivate a puzzle. The puzzle features four independently plausible but jointly inconsistent claims. One of the four claims is the sufficiency leg of the *knowledge norm of assertion* (KNA-S), according to which one is properly epistemically positioned to assert that *p* if one knows that *p*. Second, we propose that rejecting (KNA-S) is the best way out of the puzzle. Our argument to this end appeals to the epistemic value of intellectual humility in social-epistemic practice.

KEYWORDS: knowledge, assertion, intellectual humility, epistemic value, social-epistemic practice

## 1. Knowledge Norm of Assertion: Sufficiency

According to proponents of the *knowledge norm of assertion* (KNA), one must assert only what one knows.<sup>1</sup> Specified this way, KNA is a necessary condition on epistemically appropriate assertion.<sup>2</sup> Some philosophers, including Keith DeRose,<sup>3</sup> John Hawthorne,<sup>4</sup> and Mona Simion<sup>5</sup>—and debatably Williamson (2000)<sup>6</sup>—also

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 243.

<sup>2</sup> KNA is sometimes defended as a *constitutive* norm of assertion (e.g., Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits*.) A rule is constitutive norm, for a given type of speech act, A, when being governed by R is part of what it is to be that kind of speech act, A.

<sup>3</sup> Keith DeRose, *The Case for Contextualism: Knowledge, Skepticism and Context (Vol. 1)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> John Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Mona Simion, "Assertion: Knowledge Is Enough," *Synthese* (forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> For discussion on this point, see Matthew A. Benton, "Expert Opinion and Second-Hand Knowledge," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 92, 2 (2016): fn. 3, J. Adam Carter and Emma C. Gordon, "Norms of Assertion: The Quantity and Quality of Epistemic Support," *Philosophia* 39, 4 (2011): 615–635, and J. Adam Carter, "Assertion, Uniqueness and Epistemic Hypocrisy," *Synthese* (2015), doi:10.1007/s11229-015-0766-5, §§2-3.

embrace a *sufficiency* version of the norm which, as Jennifer Lackey<sup>7</sup> formulates it, states:

(SUFFICIENCY CLAIM) KNA-S: One is properly epistemically positioned to assert that *p* if one knows that *p*<sup>8</sup>.

Of course, KNA-S is compatible with the concession that, often times, you *should not*, all things considered, assert what you know. You might know, for example, a secret which you promised not to tell. More mundanely: we know many trivial facts which we shouldn't go around asserting, because they lack relevance in the conversational contexts we occupy. As Lackey puts it, the core idea driving KNA-S is just that, whenever I assert something that I *know* to be the case, "my knowing that this is the case suffices for my having the *epistemic credentials* to make such an assertion." Asserting on knowledge, even if doing so is subject to various kinds of criticisms, is, *epistemically* beyond reproach.

A wide range of objections and alternatives to the necessity formulation of KNA have been proposed and discussed since Williamson's<sup>9</sup> influential defense of KNA.<sup>10</sup> By comparison, it's been relatively more recently that the sufficiency leg, KNA-S, has received critical attention, typically through the form of attempted

---

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Lackey, "Assertion and Isolated Second-Hand Knowledge," in *Assertion: New Philosophical Essays*, eds. Jessica Brown and Herman Cappelen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 251–276.

<sup>8</sup> As Lackey ("Assertion and Isolated," 252) summarises the thrust of the idea: "[...] 'knowledge is sufficient for possessing the epistemic authority for assertion even if it is insufficient for various other kinds of propriety. For instance, while it may be imprudent, impolite, or pointless for me to assert that my colleague behaved foolishly over the weekend, *my knowing that this is the case suffices for my having the epistemic credentials to make such an assertion.*" For a helpful overview of recent defenses and challenges to the knowledge norm's necessity and sufficiency formulations, see Matthew A. Benton, "Knowledge Norms," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2015), <http://www.iep.utm.edu/kn-norms/#SH1d>.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Williamson, "Knowing and Asserting," *Philosophical Review* 105, 4 (1996): 489–523.

<sup>10</sup> The two most notable alternative norms defended in the literature are the justification norm of assertion (Jennifer Lackey, "Norms of Assertion," *Noûs* 41, 4 (2007): 594–8211; Igor Douven, "Assertion, Knowledge, and Rational Credibility," *Philosophical Review* 115, 4 (2006): 449–485; Jonathan Kvanvig, "Assertion, Knowledge and Lotteries," in *Williamson on Knowledge*, eds. Patrick Greenough and Duncan Pritchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)) and the truth norm of assertion (Matthew Weiner, "Must We Know What We Say?," *The Philosophical Review* 114, 2 (2005): 227–251). See Aidan McGlynn, *Knowledge First?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), Ch. 5, for a helpful recent overview of various challenges to the knowledge norm of assertion.

counterexamples.<sup>11</sup> Such counterexamples have attempted to establish that the following features can coincide:

- i. the impropriety of an assertion is *epistemic*, even though
- ii. one plausibly counts as *knowing* the proposition asserted.

Perhaps the most promising style of counterexample case against KNA-S, plausibly exhibiting features (i) and (ii), features *expertise and isolated second-hand knowledge*. Consider, for instances, Lackey's<sup>12</sup> case DOCTOR:

DOCTOR: Matilda is an oncologist at a teaching hospital who has been diagnosing and treating various kinds of cancers for the past fifteen years. One of her patients, Derek, was recently referred to her office because he has been experiencing intense abdominal pain for a couple of weeks. After requesting an ultrasound and MRI, the results of the tests arrived on Matilda's day off; consequently, all of the relevant data were reviewed by Nancy, a competent medical student in oncology training at her hospital. Being able to confer for only a very brief period of time prior to Derek's appointment today, Nancy communicated to Matilda simply that her diagnosis is pancreatic cancer, without offering any of the details of the test results or the reasons underlying her conclusion. Shortly thereafter, Matilda had her appointment with Derek, where she truly asserts to him purely on the basis of Nancy's reliable testimony, "I am very sorry to tell you this, but you have pancreatic cancer."

Lackey insists that in the above case, Matilda knows what she asserts. After all, she learned that *p* from the reliable, undefeated testimony of Nancy, whom Matilda rightly regards as a competent testifier on the topic at hand. Denying that Matilda knows that *p* opens the door to testimonial skepticism.<sup>13</sup> However, Lackey suggests: "The question we must now consider is whether, under these conditions, Matilda is properly epistemically positioned to flat out assert to Derek that he has pancreatic cancer. And here the answer is clearly no."<sup>14</sup>

Lackey's rationale here can be put simply: Matilda was not epistemically situated to assert that *p* because, in virtue of Derek's recognition of Matilda as an *expert*, there are certain *epistemic expectations* at play that Matilda fails to meet,

---

<sup>11</sup> See Jessica Brown, "The Knowledge Norm for Assertion," *Philosophical Issues* 18, 1 (2008): 89–103, for an important early challenge to (KNA-S).

<sup>12</sup> Lackey, "Assertion and Isolated."

<sup>13</sup> The worry here is that if an individual fails to count as acquiring testimonial knowledge in an epistemically hospitable circumstance—viz., where she is the recipient of reliable testimony from a recognized expert, and in the absence of any defeaters—then the prospects are poor for supposing that testimonial knowledge can be acquired in normal circumstances which are perhaps less hospitable than this especially friendly case.

<sup>14</sup> Lackey, "Assertion and Isolated," 6.

even though she knows (*via* testimony) what she asserts, expectations in place in light of her recognized expertise. Derek would, for instance, plausibly be miffed to learn that Matilda had diagnosed him without ever seeing his charts or examining him. As Lackey puts it, Derek would be within his rights to expect Matilda to have a better cognitive grasp of his medical situation than she actually did. And this despite her knowing that what she said was true.

If the foregoing rationale is correct, then KNA-S is false. It's *not* the case that one is properly epistemically positioned to assert that *p* so long as one knows that *p*. Along with Lackey, several others have attempted to fashion counterexamples to KNA-S along the similar lines.<sup>15</sup> We have ourselves in previous work<sup>16</sup> taken such a line. In doing so, we argued that in cases like DOCTOR, the epistemic credential required for epistemically appropriate assertion was *understanding* rather than merely knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

In recent work, however, Matthew Benton<sup>18</sup> has raised some potential problems for the purposes of appealing to DOCTOR-style expertise cases in the service of rejecting KNA-S.<sup>19</sup> As Benton puts it, "the cases used thus far are unstable, and refinements are needed to clarify exactly what principles are being tested and exactly what our intuitive judgements are tracking in such cases." He continues:

... do we expect of experts that when speaking as experts they are giving their own expert opinion which has been formed by engaging their expertise in a first-hand manner with the relevant evidence or data? (If we do, is that expectation reasonable?) Do we expect that experts always have an obligation to explain to a non-expert what is behind the formation of their opinion? Are there any

---

<sup>15</sup> E. J. Coffman, "Two Claims about Epistemic Propriety," *Synthese* 181, 3 (2010): 471–488; Rachel R. McKinnon, "What I Learned in the Lunch Room about Assertion and Practical Reasoning," *Logos & Episteme* 3, 4 (2012): 565–569; Mikkel Gerken, "Same, Same but Different: The Epistemic Norms of Assertion, Action and Practical Reasoning," *Philosophical Studies* 168, 3 (2013): 725–744; Adam Green, "Deficient Testimony Is Deficient Teamwork," *Episteme* 11, 2 (2014): 213–227.

<sup>16</sup> Carter and Gordon, "Norms of Assertion."

<sup>17</sup> Jennifer Lackey, "Deficient Testimonial Knowledge," in *Knowledge, Virtue and Action: Putting Epistemic Virtues to Work*, eds. Tim Henning and David P. Schweikard (London: Routledge, 2013). has indicated that she does not regard understanding as the epistemic credential lacking in cases like DOCTOR.

<sup>18</sup> Benton, "Expert Opinion."

<sup>19</sup> Cf., Jennifer Lackey, "Assertion and Expertise," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 92, 2 (2016): 509–517, for a reply to Benton, in which Lackey defends her original counterexamples to KNA-S. See also Simion, "Assertion," for another line of criticism against Lackey's DOCTOR case.

conditions under which experts may defer to the authority of other experts for a second-hand opinion, or a communal consensus, for the purpose of providing timely efficient testimony to non-experts? Such questions await further investigation.

We don't think Benton's questions pose an insuperable problem to defending DOCTOR-style expertise cases as genuine counterexamples to KNA-S.<sup>20</sup> Though these criticisms, we think, invite critics of KNA-S to look beyond DOCTOR-style expertise cases in forming the crux of the critical argument. In what follows, we want to suggest how considerations to do with *epistemic humility* might support a novel line against KNS-S, one that appeals in some way to expertise, but in a very different way than previous arguments in the literature, and which are immune from Benton's criticisms. Setting up the point about humility will involve putting several pieces together.

The first step will be to examine a kind of disagreement pattern that some philosophers have taken to recommend epistemic relativism. We want to suggest that closer thinking about such cases motivates a puzzle: an inconsistent set of claims, one of which is KNA-S. Once the puzzle is set up, we'll show why, with reference to intellectual humility, it's KNA-S that needs to go.

## 2. Deep Disagreements

Suppose that two individuals, Cat and Kim, disagree about the proposition *p*: that there is a soul that animates the human body.<sup>21</sup> Call this their *first-order disagreement*. But suppose their disagreement runs deeper. Cat and Kim also disagree about what kind of evidence is even relevant to settling whether *p*. Kim, whose philosophical hero is Jaegwon Kim, thinks that Kim's analytic philosophy of mind is the only kind of authoritative evidence for the truth of *p*. By contrast, Cat thinks that the Catechism, and only the Catechism, is an authoritative source about *p*. Call this disagreement about what kind of evidence is relevant to settling whether *p* their *second-order disagreement*. Define a *deep disagreement* as a disagreement featuring both first- and second-order disagreement.

Steven Hales<sup>22</sup> suggests that in the face of arguments of this form, where the disagreement runs at both the first- and second- order, there are five principal prospects for resolution:

- i. keep arguing until capitulation;

<sup>20</sup> For further discussion on this point, see Carter, "Assertion, Uniqueness."

<sup>21</sup> This case is based (with some amendments) off of Hales' ("Motivations for Relativism as a Solution to Disagreements," *Philosophy* 89 (2014): 63–82) case of 'Jack and Diane.'

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

J. Adam Carter and Emma C. Gordon

- ii. compromise;
- iii. locate an ambiguity or contextual factors;
- iv. accept Pyrrhonian skepticism;
- v. Adopt *relativism* (e.g. Cat and Kim are 'both right;'  $p$  is true relative to Cat's perspective,  $\sim p$  is true relative to Kim's perspective, and there is no further sense in which either is right in a 'perspective-independent' way).

Hales, a relativist, opts for (v) (i.e., relativism), though his reasoning for reaching the relativist conclusion won't concern us here.<sup>23</sup> What will be relevant for our purposes is that Hales thinks that when disagreements are deep in the sense described, they are rationally *irresolvable* in the following sense: they constitute dialectical positions from which there simply *is* no appropriately neutral common ground from which either side could rationally persuade the other.

Regardless of whether *all* deep disagreements (understood as a function of first- and second- order disagreement) are rationally irresolvable in Hales' sense, let's grant Hales that at least *some* deep disagreements are rationally irresolvable. (Of course, it's a further question whether relativism would be the best conclusion to draw from such situations, once the point about rational irresolvability is granted<sup>24</sup>).

But often times, deep disagreements, which cut at the first- and second-order, are not *irresolvable*. They are simply *not resolved* and for reasons that can be avoided. To appreciate this point, it will be helpful to consider the conversational dynamics of deep disagreements.

---

<sup>23</sup> For an extended discussion of this kind of argument for relativism, see J. Adam Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), Ch. 4. See also Harvey Siegel, "Epistemological Relativism: Arguments Pro and Con," in *A Companion to Relativism*, ed. Steven Hales (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 199–218. for a summary of arguments for relativism which take on this dialectical structure; Siegel calls such arguments 'no neutrality, therefore relativism' arguments.

<sup>24</sup> The most well-known such argument, which appeals to a dialectically entrenched position and moves from this position to epistemic relativism, is put forward in Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, where Rorty discusses the famous collision between the opposing 'epistemic grids' of Galileo and Cardinal Bellarmine. Rorty's diagnosis of the case is that the matter of who is correct with respect to Copernican heliocentrism doesn't have an absolute answer, but only a relative answer. Rorty's rationale on this point has been a critical focus of anti-relativists, such as Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006). See also Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, Ch. 4..

### 3. A Puzzle for KNA-S (and a Solution)

Consider now three dialogues, each which features a deep disagreement in the sense articulated in §2.

#### Dialogue 1: Cat vs. Kim

**Cat:** We've both established that we believe different things on this topic. But, perhaps we can find a common ground from which rational persuasion is possible.

**Kim:** Okay, let's try.

**Cat:** Contemporary analytic philosophy of mind, as well as Catholicism have both been sources which humans have a history of following on the matter of whether there is a soul, do you agree?

(!) **Kim:** *Yes, but since there is no soul, many of these folks are just wrong.*

**Cat:** ...

#### Dialogue 2: Feldman vs. Goldman<sup>25</sup>

**Feldman** We've both established that we believe different things on the matter of reliabilism versus evidentialism about epistemic justification. But, perhaps we can find a common ground from which rational persuasion is possible.

**Goldman** Okay, let's try.

**Feldman** Well, to begin with, reliabilism and evidentialism both seem to capture something right about the nature of epistemic justification, do you agree?

(!) **Goldman:** *Yes, but unlike evidentialism, reliabilism is actually true, and so any intuitiveness about evidentialism must be compatible with the truth of reliabilism.*

#### Dialogue 3: Doctor vs. Demon Mystic

**Demon Mystic:** We've both established that we believe different things on the matter of whether small pox is the result of a demon. But, perhaps we can find a common ground from which rational persuasion is possible.

**Doctor:** Okay, let's try.

---

<sup>25</sup> For Goldman's and Feldman's representative views on reliabilism and evidentialism, respectively, see for example Alvin Goldman, "What Is Justified Belief?," in *Justification and Knowledge*, ed. George S. Pappas (Dordrecht: Springer, 1979), 1–23; *Knowledge in a Social World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999); Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)..

**Demon Mystic:** Well, to begin with, western science and witchcraft have both have long histories and have had thousands of practitioners, do you agree?

(!) **Doctor:** *Yes, but small pox is not the result of a demon.*

**Demon Mystic:** ...

Now, for some observations about these three dialogues. Firstly, notice that there is at least some kind of *impropriety* (in Dialogue 1-3) to all three of the (!)-assertions, by Kim, Goldman and the Doctor, respectively. We needn't take a stand on what kind of impropriety just yet. It should be plain enough that in none of the asserters, in asserting (!)-style assertions, is being a cooperative speaker in the conversational context<sup>26</sup>. Secondly, *some* of the (!)-style assertions are *known*. This is obviously the case with the doctor's (!)-style assertion, in Dialogue 3—viz., the doctor's assertion that small pox is not the result of a demon. Now, according to KNA-S, any impropriety of the (!)-assertions simply *cannot be epistemic when these assertions are known*.

In light of these observations, we want to motivate a puzzle. The puzzle is a quadrilemma. Four claims which are independently plausible, but jointly inconsistent.

### Quadrilemma

- 1) There is an impropriety to the doctor's (!)-assertion in Dialogue 3
- 2) The doctor's (!)-assertion in Dialogue 3 is known.
- 3) The impropriety of the doctor's (!)-assertion in Dialogue 3 is *epistemic*.
- 4) (KNA-S): One is properly epistemically positioned to assert that *p* if one knows that *p*.

We take it that a proponent of KNA-S is going to accept both (1) and (2), as we do, but then reject (3) while maintaining (4). Our strategy is different. Our way out of the puzzle will be to reject (4), viz., to show that it is KNA-S, rather than the claim that the impropriety of the doctor's (!)-assertion in Dialogue 3 is *epistemic*, that must go. So, it is incumbent upon us to provide a good reason to think that (3) is *true*.

So why should the impropriety of the doctor's assertion in Dialogue 3 be regarded as *epistemic* rather than merely something else? After all, the agent

---

<sup>26</sup> Compare here with Mikkel Gerken, "Discursive Justification and Skepticism," *Synthese* 189, 2 (2012): 373–394, that in some conversational contexts, *dogmatic* assertions—viz., assertions which the asserter refuses to back up with reasons—are inappropriate in virtue of not being, in the conversational context, appropriately cooperative.

clearly *knows* what she asserts, even if the assertion seems to beg the question. An answer to this question—and thus to our way out of the puzzle—involves some set up. Let's begin with an analogy.

Consider that in some dialectical contexts, it can be both practically as well as epistemically rational to *assume* things we *don't* actually know. Take first practical rationality: relative to the practical goal of distributing justice in a fairest possible way, it's best to begin by assuming the accused party is innocent. Correspondingly, if the practical aim is fair distribution of justice, the policy of assuming at the outset that the accused is *guilty*, and must prove her innocence, is practically criticizable.

But assuming things we don't know can be rational in a way that's not merely practical, as it is in the case of distributive justice. It can also be *epistemically* rational to *assume* things we don't know. Here is a standard example, familiar from recent discussions of the factivity of understanding in epistemology. As Elgin<sup>27</sup> has argued, often times, assuming or taking for granted a literally false scientific idealization can be instrumental in the facilitation of scientific understanding.<sup>28</sup> The case she offers to this effect is the ideal gas law, which it is advantageous to take for granted despite its falsity in order to understand the physical behavior of gas. Note that, relative to our epistemic aims (e.g. facilitating understanding), a policy of *refraining* from utilising idealisations in this way is epistemically criticizable. This is so even though what the ideal gas law claims is not true.

Think of *bracketing what you do know* as the inverse counterpoint to assuming what you don't know. We want to now suggest a parallel. We've just outlined how that it can be both practically as well as epistemically rational to *assume things we don't know* (and, correspondingly, it can in such circumstances be either practically and/or epistemically criticisable to *not* assume things we *don't* know). Likewise, as the parallel goes, it can be both practically as well as *epistemically* rational to *bracket*—i.e., literally, to *not* assert<sup>29</sup>—things we *do*

---

<sup>27</sup> Catherine Z. Elgin, "Is Understanding Factive?," in *Epistemic Value*, eds. Adrian Haddock, Alan Millar, and Duncan Pritchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> For a similar recent argument to this effect, see Benjamin T. Rancourt, "Better Understanding Through Falsehood," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (2015), DOI: 10.1111/papq.12134.

<sup>29</sup> Bracketing a claim, *p*, in a context, *C*, involves at least not asserting *p* in *C*. Note that we are not maintaining the stronger claim that it is epistemically criticisable in the context of deep disagreements to fail to bracket in a stronger sense, where a failure to bracket a claim *p* is unpacked as a failure to *suspend judgment* about *p*. For a recent discussion on the relationship between suspending judgment and inquiry, see Jane Friedman, "Why Suspend Judging?," *Noûs* (forthcoming).

know (and, correspondingly, it can in such circumstances be epistemically criticisable to *not* bracket (e.g. *literally, to assert*) things we *do know*).

A practical case to illustrate this point will easy to generate. Relative to the practical goal of not offending someone, it's best to not assert your knowledge that that person is mentally slow. (Correspondingly: relative to the practical goal of not offending someone, the policy of asserting your knowledge that the person is mentally slow is practically criticisable).

We want to suggest that we need to look no further than Dialogue 3 for a case where it's *epistemically* criticisable to not bracket (literally, to *assert*) what one *does* know, precisely because it's epistemically appropriate to bracket what you know.

Consider that, in Elgin's case of the ideal gas law, assuming what we don't know can, in certain contexts, help facilitate an *overarching* epistemic good: understanding. This is why the *practice* of assuming false idealizations in science is an epistemically advantageous practice; this practice helps facilitate our overarching epistemic goals, which is why *refraining* from utilizing idealizations in this way is epistemically criticisable.

Consider now the following question: can the practice of *bracketing* (e.g., literally *not asserting knowledge*) in a given circumstance, *C*, be a not merely practically, but also an *epistemically* rational practice, one which is required to facilitate overarching epistemic goals? If so, then by parity of reasoning, *refraining from not asserting knowledge* (e.g. *literally asserting knowledge*) in such circumstances is epistemically criticisable. We shall now sketch an affirmative answer to this question.

To this end, recall the remark at the end of §2—thus far not yet defended—that often times, deep disagreements (in the sense intimated by Hales, are not *irresolvable*, despite neither party making any headway. Rather, we suggested, many such disagreements are simply *not resolved* and for reasons that can be avoided. We're now in a position to put together some pieces to show how this is so, and in a way that we think reveals why asserting knowledge in certain circumstances can be *epistemically* criticisable.

Specifically, what we want to suggest is that at least some deep disagreements can avoid being such that they are never resolved by the parties involved *precisely by both parties embracing a kind of epistemic humility*, where each agrees to *attempt* to locate appropriately neutral (and discriminatory) common ground (i.e. the kind common ground by appeal to which rational

persuasion is possible).<sup>30</sup> Intellectual humility, like humility more generally, involves, as Kallestrup and Pritchard<sup>31</sup> put it, a kind of “[...] act or posture of lowering oneself in relation to others.” One way to do this is to set aside what one regards as one’s epistemic entitlement to assert what one knows in the attempt to find common ground. Such an attempt requires, specifically, that we must bracket (i.e. literally, not assert) certain things we know, when doing so undermines mutually beneficial efforts to establish appropriately neutral common ground.

To bring this idea into sharp relief, compare now two practices which we can call, for convenience sake, *anti-epistemic humility* and *epistemic humility*, each of which is a possible strategy we might employ when making speech-act moves within a deep disagreement.

PRACTICE 1: ANTI-EPISTEMIC HUMILITY: In circumstances where deep disagreement persists, don’t refrain from asserting what you know just because doing so would contravene the possibility of locating appropriately neutral common ground.

PRACTICE 2: EPISTEMIC HUMILITY In circumstances where deep disagreement persists, *refrain* from asserting what you know to the extent that asserting what you know contravenes the possibility of locating appropriately neutral common ground.

Let’s return to the setting of Dialogue 3—featuring the doctor and the mystic, and compare the efficacy of Practices 1 and 3, respectively, beginning with Practice 1. A first observation is that Practice 1 already seems to be in full effect; the doctor simply asserted that small pox is not caused by a demon, while fully aware that this is not something that the mystic interlocutor in light of her commitments is in a position to rationally accept. As the doctor is well aware, from the mystic interlocutor’s perspective, the natural next move will be to simply deny what the doctor has just asserted, and each side will be no closer to any possibility of resolution than before. Let’s consider some further things the doctor, employing Practice 1 might *knowledgably* assert. “Demons cause no diseases; the small pox demon you believe in does not exist and so therefore lacks causal powers; the wider epistemic practice you subscribe to, one which adverts to demonic explanations, is epistemically inferior to—and much worse at tracking

---

<sup>30</sup> For some helpful recent discussions on epistemic humility, see Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Allan Hazlett, "Higher-Order Epistemic Attitudes and Intellectual Humility," *Episteme* 9, 3 (2012): 205–223. and Jesper Kallestrup and Duncan Pritchard, "From Epistemic Anti-Individualism to Intellectual Humility," eds. John Greco and Eleanore Stump, *Res Publica*, Philosophy and Theology of Intellectual Humility (forthcoming).

<sup>31</sup> Kallestrup and Pritchard, "From Epistemic Anti-Individualism."

the truth than—Western science.” Each of these knowledgeable assertions contravenes the possibility of finding common ground, and thus contravenes the possibility of rational persuasion, by simply inviting the interlocutor to deny, from her epistemic perspective, each statement in turn.

The result of employing Practice 1 is thus that cases like Dialogues 1-3 in §3 really are in practice *irresolvable* in that the conversational dynamics of disagreements which embrace Practice 1 take patterns that move away from a potential scenario wherein both parties walk away believing truly.

By contrast, Practice 2, unlike Practice 1, offers a different possibility. Suppose the doctor (fully cognizant that demons cannot cause small pox), appreciates that asserting this knowledge is utterly hopeless *vis-à-vis* the aim of bringing the mystic interlocutor around to a true belief. The doctor, embracing Practice 2, accordingly *brackets* this knowledge, and further, refrains from asserting other items of information the doctor knows but which the doctor also has reason to believe the mystic interlocutor will, from within her own perspective simply deny. Instead, the doctor investigates what points of agreement can be found, including simple laws of logic, such as non-contradiction, modus ponens, and basic epistemic principles such as what Boghossian<sup>32</sup> calls ‘observation,’ viz., that one is *prima facie* epistemically justified in believing the appearances of perception.

We don’t purport to embrace unrealistic optimism here. Again, we grant Hales’ point that in some, and perhaps even many, circumstances where individuals begin by embracing epistemically antipodal positions, an attempt to find some Archimedean epistemic norm from which rational persuasion is possible will simply not transpire. This can be for a number of reasons: cognitive biases, lack of endurance, or—perhaps—there is no appropriately neutral epistemic norm available to each which appropriately *discriminates* between the two rival positions. For example, it might be that in Dialogue 3, both the doctor and the mystic discover that they can both non-question-beggingly appeal to the proposition that the tautological inference rule (A, therefore, A) is truth-preserving. Though it might also be that in virtue of the utter neutrality of such a rule, it cannot be used in the service of rationally advancing either position over the other.<sup>33</sup>

It is with all of these concessions in mind that we want to maintain that Practice 2 is nonetheless epistemically advantageous in light of (unlike Practice 1) not *foreclosing* the possibility of rational resolution, whereby both sides end up

---

<sup>32</sup> Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*.

<sup>33</sup> See Carter, *Metaepistemology and Relativism*, Ch. 4, for a sustained discussion of this issue.

believing truly. The problem with Practice 1, as we've seen, is that *if* rational were possible—and so if it were possible that the doctor could employ a practice which would facilitate the mystic's eventually forming a true belief about the origins of small pox—Practice 1 would prevent this from transpiring.

Putting all of this together, a simple rationale materialises for why the impropriety of the doctor's (!)-assertion in Dialogue 3 is *epistemic*.<sup>34</sup> Its impropriety is epistemic because, as we hope to have now shown, in short: following the assertive practice characteristic of Practice 1, rather than Practice 2, is *epistemically* criticisable. Deep disagreements *pursued via the anti-epistemic humility policy* are genuinely irresolvable. The strategy *guarantees* deadlocks which foreclose the possibility of rational truth acquisition with respect to the target proposition. Deep disagreements *pursued via the epistemic humility policy*, one which encourages bracketing rather than asserting one's knowledge in certain circumstances, needn't be irresolvable. They might be result in both sides ultimately believing what's true.

To the extent that this foregoing is on the right track, we are in a position now to agree with the proponent of KNA-S that claims (1) and (2) of the quadrilemma are true. However, we have good reason now to embrace (3). And

---

<sup>34</sup> We wish to here raise and address a potential line of objection, which proceeds as follows: our quadrilemma (and in particular, our suggestion that (2) and (4) conflict with (3)), depends on a contested conflation of two kinds of epistemic impropriety which should be kept separate. One the one hand, there are epistemic assessments which hinge on consequentialist considerations about what epistemic goods one will attain by asserting, and on the other hand, there are epistemic evaluations we want to make based on whether one is well-positioned enough, given one's current epistemic state, to assert. As this line of objection goes, (2) and (4) conflict with (3) only if the kind of cases we've offered have established epistemic impropriety in the latter sense. But, we've only established epistemic impropriety in the former sense. Therefore, (2) and (4) are not incompatible with (3). In response, we submit that while the doctor's assertion in Case 3 is criticisable on consequentialist grounds, it is not criticisable only on consequentialist grounds. We have also suggested the doctor is not well-positioned enough, given the doctor's current epistemic standing *and* the epistemic standing of her interlocutors, to assert what she does. If epistemic impropriety of an assertion should be sensitive only the two-place relation between an individual and her current epistemic position, then the doctor's assertion would not be epistemically improper, or criticisable (and thus (3) would not be in tension with (2) and (4) of the quadrilemma. However, if the epistemic impropriety of an assertion should be a matter of a three-place relation between an individual and her current epistemic position and the epistemic position of her interlocutors, then she is. We have attempted to motivate the latter picture as at least a viable way of thinking about epistemic impropriety of assertion as the more traditional two-place relation picture. And so we are submitting a rationale on which (2) and (4) are genuinely in tension with (3). Thanks to Aidan McGlynn for pressing us on this point.

J. Adam Carter and Emma C. Gordon

(1-3) entail that we must give up (4), the claim that one is properly epistemically positioned to assert that  $p$  if one knows that  $p$  (KNA-S).

Quadrilemma (resolved)

- (1). There is an impropriety to the doctor's (!)-assertion in Dialogue 3
- (2). The doctor's (!)-assertion in Dialogue 3 is known.
- (3). The impropriety of the doctor's (!)-assertion in Dialogue 3 is *epistemic*.
- (4). ~~KNA-S: One is properly epistemically positioned to assert that  $p$  if one knows that  $p$ .~~

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

Our previous<sup>35</sup> argument against (KNA-S) submitted that the epistemic credential that's *missing* in cases of expert testimony on the basis of isolated second-hand knowledge (i.e., such as DOCTOR) is *understanding*, and that understanding of the sort that's needed to assert in such a circumstances is not entailed by the possession of any particular items of propositional knowledge. Though we are still optimistic that the previous argument succeeds, or could succeed with some further modification in light of recent challenges from Benton<sup>36</sup> our aim here has been to pursue a different strategy altogether, one which challenges (KNA-S) by drawing from considerations to do with the social-epistemic value of *humility* as opposed to expertise. We've suggested that (KNA-S) is false precisely because certain conversational contexts featuring deep disagreements are ones where asserting one's knowledge is criticisable in a distinctly epistemic way. Our argument to this effect reveals how it is that engaging in the best kind (e.g. most truth-conducive kind) of social epistemic practices requires that we embrace, in certain circumstances, a kind of epistemic humility whereby we deliberately refrain from asserting what we know.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Carter and Gordon, "Norms of Assertion."

<sup>36</sup> Benton, "Expert Opinion."

<sup>37</sup> Thanks to Jesper Kallestrup, Duncan Pritchard and Aidan McGlynn for helpful comments on a previous draft. This paper has benefitted from two grants awarded by the Templeton Foundation—the 'Intellectual Humility MOOC' (Gordon) and 'Philosophy, Science and Religion Online' project (Carter) hosted at the University of Edinburgh's Eidyn research centre.