***Epistemic norms of assertion and action***

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**1: Introduction.**

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**1: Introduction.** The purpose of the present chapter is to survey the work on epistemic norms of action, practical deliberation and assertion and to consider how these norms are interrelated. If there are important similarities between the epistemic norms of action and assertion, these may have important ramifications for how we should think about asserting. Thus, we hope that the chapter will indicate how thinking about assertions as a speech *act* might benefit from a broader action theoretic setting.

We will proceed as follows. In Section 2, we provide a survey of epistemic norms of action and practical deliberation. In Section 3, we turn to the epistemic norms of assertion. In Section 4, we consider arguments for and against commonality of the epistemic norms of actions, practical deliberation and assertion. In Section 5, we discuss some of the ramifications of the debates over epistemic norms of assertion such as whether they may be extended to other linguistic phenomena such as Gricean implicature. Finally, we briefly suggest some possible consequences for debates about harmful speech.

**2: Epistemic norms of action and practical deliberation.** Why begin a discussion of the epistemic norms of assertion with a consideration of the epistemic norms of practical deliberation and action? The basic rationale for this division is that assertions are speech acts. As such they may be thought to be subsumable under, or at least informed by, epistemic norms of practical deliberation and action. Of course, this rationale might be challenged and we will consider such challenges. One line of motivation for postulating epistemic norms of action and practical deliberation in the first place is that one may be epistemically criticized for acting on conclusions of lines of practical deliberation that are epistemically irrational. Moreover, one may respond to such criticism by improving one’s epistemic position. In general, the epistemic basis for one’s practical deliberation and actions appears to be subject to normative epistemic evaluation. This may be taken as *prima facie* evidence that it is subject to epistemic norms.

The discussion is typically carried out in terms of the epistemic permissibility of a line of practical deliberation or an action. Moreover, there is wide agreement that there are further non-epistemic constraints on overall rational practical deliberation or action. Someone’s epistemically impeccable practical reasoning to engage in a certain act may be overall unreasonable if the act reflects an inherently irrational aim. Typically, the debates pertaining to the *epistemic* norms of action abstract away from such complications. Rather, they concern the epistemic status of the premises in a line of practical deliberation for a conclusion to act in a particular manner where it is assumed that such an act will be overall reasonable if the epistemic status of the premises is in order. Similarly, in the case of epistemic norms of action, contemporary debates tend to concern the epistemic status of the subject’s reasons for action. Given this general stage-setting, we are in a position to begin a survey of some of the prominent epistemic norms promoted in the literature.

**2.1: Survey of epistemic norms of practical deliberation and action.** We will proceed with discussing the various epistemic norms in terms of the strength of the epistemic position from belief norms to certainty norms and conclude with the view that there are no such norms.

**2.1.b. Belief norms.**

Is a belief that *p* necessary and sufficient to make *p* an appropriate premise in one’s practical reasoning? In that case reasoning based on a mere guess that *p*, a hope that *p*,or other non-doxastic propositional attitudes is inappropriate (see however Gao 2017). Furthermore, as debates about the ethics of belief suggest, there may be strictures on what one ought to believe. These strictures may narrow the range of beliefs appropriate to use in practical deliberation. For example, if one ought only to believe what one knows (Bach 2008; Sutton 2007), reasoning with premises one believes but does not know would entail the violation of an epistemic norm. However, it would not entail that the violated norm pertains to practical reasoning *per se*. The wrongness of using an impermissible belief in practical reasoning would be entailed by the impermissibility of having the belief in the first place. In this way, considerations about the ethics of belief may have ramifications for discussions about epistemic norms of action, possibly adding to the strictness of the demands imposed by a belief norm, while the belief norm as such requires relatively little for its satisfaction.

**2.1.c. Warrant norms.** Some theorists argue that given that we are pursuing *epistemic* norms, a more distinctively epistemic normative requirement than mere belief is called for. Such theorists differ in what they take the relevant epistemic property to be. Epistemic internalists, such as mentalist evidentialists (e.g. Conee and Feldman 2004), will argue that it is evidence. Epistemic externalists, such as process reliabilists (e.g. Goldman 1979), will argue that it is reliably formed belief. To subsume these different views under the same label, we will adopt Burge’s term ‘warrant’ as a genus for a positive (truth-conducive), non-factive epistemic property (Burge 2003). The term ‘entitlement’ may then denote its externalist species whereas ‘justification’ denotes its epistemically internalist species.[[1]](#footnote-1)

According to accounts that proceed in terms of a binaryverdict regardingwarrantedness, a person’s practical deliberation meets the relevant epistemic norms just in case the premises are warranted – i.e., enjoy a positive epistemic status above a fixed threshold. As noted, there is ample room for disagreement about the *kind* of warrant that is required. Moreover, such *fixed threshold* warrant norms (as we shall call them) have been criticized by way of cases in which the subject is warranted in a premise in rational deliberation but nevertheless is not in an epistemic position to act (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008).

Another brand of norms that appeal to warrant centrally appeal to the fact that epistemic warrant comes in degrees. Such *sliding threshold* warrant norms reject that a fixed threshold of warrant determines whether the relevant epistemic norms are met. Rather, what determines whether a subject meets the relevant epistemic norm are varying requirements on the *degree* of warrant she must possess. Gerken articulates the *Warrant-Action* (WA) norm as follows (Gerken 2011; 2017):

**WA**

In the deliberative context, DC, S meets the epistemic conditions on rational use of (her belief that) *p* as a premise in practical reasoning or of (her belief that) *p* as a reason for acting (**if and**) **only if** S is warranted in believing that *p* to a degree that is adequate relative to DC.

Thus, the relevant threshold of warrant is, in turn, determined by the relevant *deliberative context* that the person is in. In some context, an extraordinarily high degree of warrant may be required – even higher than what is required for knowledge. In other deliberative contexts, a lesser degree of warrant will do.

**2.2.d. Truth.** Truth norms are a bit tricky to categorize on the spectrum of epistemic strength. In one sense, they are stronger than epistemic norms that require non-factive warrant (whether it be evidence, reliability or something different). In another sense, truth norms according to which an action is permissible insofar as it rests on true reasons or practical deliberation from true premises are epistemically weaker than warrant norms insofar as they do not require that the agent stands in any positive epistemic status to the relevant reasons or premises.

Support for such a norm might come from the ontology of reasons for action. In ongoing debates about their nature some argue that these normative reasons are factive (Raz 1975; Scanlon 1998). Depending on how one construes factivity such reasons may be true propositions (Darwall 1983; Smith 1994; Scanlon 1998), facts (Dancy 2000), or psychological states with true propositions as their contents such as true beliefs (Mitova 2015). However, since these discussions concern the nature of reasons, it is not clear how they relate to the epistemic norms of action and practical reasoning. For example, one complication, many of these theorists distinguish between normative and motivating reasons – where the latter might be thought to be the ones relevant to reasoning (Dancy 2000).

**2.2.e. Knowledge**. Perhaps the most widely discussed epistemic norms of practical deliberation and

action are knowledge norms. According to the knowledge-first program launched by Williamson, knowledge is an unanalyzable, basic epistemic phenomenon that may be used to analyze or, at least, illuminate other epistemic phenomena (Williamson 2000). Initially, Williamson articulated a knowledge norm of assertion (to be discussed below Williamson 1996; 2000). However, Williamson develops analogies between knowledge and action (Williamson 2000; 2005; forthcoming) and knowledge norms are also upheld for action and practical deliberation. For example, Hawthorne and Stanley provide the following two knowledge principles (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008):

***The action-knowledge principle***

Treat the proposition that *p* as a reason for acting only if you know that *p*.

***The reason-knowledge principle***

Where one’s choice is *p*-dependent, it is appropriate to treat the proposition that *p* as a reason for acting iff you know that *p*.

Fantl and McGrath provide some slightly different formulations (labeled ‘*Action*’in Fantl and McGrath 2009: 49, ‘KJ’ in 2009: 66 and ‘*Actionability*’ in 2012: 65). Their (2012) version reads as follows:

***Action***

If you know that *p* you are proper to act on *p* when the question of whether *p* is relevant to the question of what to do.

***Actionability***

You can know that *p* only if *p* is actionable for you.

Roughly, Fantl and McGrath’s principles have it that (possible) knowledge is epistemically sufficient for actionability, whereas Hawthorne and Stanley’s principles uphold that knowledge is necessary . But Hawthorne and Stanley’s reason-knowledge principle is a biconditional and both directions are important. So, let’s consider a *biconditional* Knowledge Norm of Action (KNAC for short):

**KNAC**

S meets the epistemic conditions on rational use of *p* as a premise in practical reasoning or of *p* as a reason for acting if and only ifS knows that *p*.

The motivation for the knowledge norm derives from both philosophical reflection and empirically informed appeal to folk epistemology which we will briefly consider below. However, it is worth mentioning already here that it is thought to be important in part due to its wide-ranging philosophical ramifications. For example, Hawthorne, Stanley as well as Fantl and McGrath invoke varieties of the knowledge norm in arguments for *pragmatic encroachment* about knowledge (Hawthorne 2004; Stanley 2005; Fantl and McGrath 2009). This is, roughly, the view that the property of knowing is constituted partly by the practical factors of a subject’s situation and depends on how they vary. More generally, knowledge norms are central to Williamson’s knowledge-first program according to which knowledge is the core explanatory notion in epistemology (Williamson 2000; Carter, Gordon and Jarvis 2017). However, they may also be motivated independently of the larger program.

**2.2.f. Certainty.** Certainty norms may take various forms depending on how the core explanatory notion of certainty is understood. Psychological certainty norms amount to a – particularly – demanding brand of belief norms. But even if certainty is understood epistemically, distinct representations give rise to distinct norms. On a traditional notion that is often associated with Descartes, a certainty norm would require an infallible epistemic state (Descartes 2008). However, since this would seem to delimit the scope of epistemically reasonable action considerably, a more viable option may be to understand certainty as a factive but gradable notion, as suggested by Unger (1984; see also Vollet 2017).

But although gradability might make a certainty norm of practical reasoning look slightly more palatable such a norm is viewed as misguided by many. An exception is Unger (1975) who argues that S is only reasonable in acting if something is subjectively and epistemically certain for her. Meanwhile, according to Unger (1975), nothing is ever certain for anyone. So, rather than advancing prescriptions for practical reasoning, Unger concludes that we should be sceptics about rationality.

**2.3. Some key arguments.** The debates over epistemic norms of action and practical deliberation have many dimensions (Littlejohn and Turri 2014; McHugh, Way and Whiting *forthcoming*). Here we will survey a selection of the debates.

**2.3.a. Ordinary language assessments.** As already noted, knowledge norms are partly but centrally motivated by appeal to the prominence of ‘knowledge’ in ordinary epistemic assessment. Hawthorne and Stanley have provided a much discussed case, *RESTAURANT*, in which Hannah goes down the wrong street on her hunch that the restaurant for which they are looking is there. In this case, it is natural for Sarah to complain “you shouldn’t have gone down this street, since you didn’t know that the restaurant was there.” (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008: 571). Hawthorne and Stanley remarks that it “… is considerably more natural to appraise behavior with the verb ‘know’ than the phrase ‘justified belief ’, or even ‘reasonable belief ’” and take this to motivate a knowledge norm (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008: 573).

This type of philosophical reflection has been supplemented with empirical evidence. In particular, Turri has conducted a series of experiments that suggests that folk epistemological assessment of action and decision are factive and guided by ascriptions of knowledge (Turri 2015b, 2016a; Turri and Buckwalter 2017. For criticism, see Gerken forthcoming).

Opponents have responded by arguing that warrant norms are equally capable of accounting for cases such as *RESTAURANT* (Brown 2008b; Gerken 2011, 2015; McKinnon 2015; McGlynn 2014). Likewise, opponents have provided more principled reasons against taking ordinary language assessment or folk epistemological judgments as a precise guide to the structure of epistemic norms. For example, Gerken argues that the use of ‘knows’ in ordinary discourse may serve as a reasonably accurate but biased *heuristic proxy* for more complex epistemic assessments (Gerken 2017).

**2.3.b. Warranted false belief and Gettier-style cases.** Proponents of non-factive epistemic norms of action and practical deliberation have argued that knowledge is not necessary for action. For example, they cite cases in which the agent is extremely well warranted in believing a proposition that turns out to be false (Brown 2008b). Similarly, critics of factive norms and, in particular, critics of KNAC have emphasized that agents in Gettier-style cases appear to meet the epistemic norm although the subject does not know.

A common response to such objections consists in arguing that the agent is in fact violating the epistemic norm but that she is excused for doing so (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008; Littlejohn forthcoming). Critics have questioned such an excuse maneuver in various ways (Gerken 2011; Schechter 2017; Hughes 2017; Boult 2017; Madison forthcoming). In response, knowledge-first proponents have begun to develop accounts of excuses (Kelp and Simion 2017; Littlejohn forthcoming; Williamson forthcoming). However, the appeal to excuses remains a highly controversial issue.

**2.3.c. Insufficiency of knowledge?** To argue that knowledge is insufficient for action, Brown provides a case, *SURGEON*, in which a student who does not understand why the surgeon consults the patient’s record before removing a kidney is told: ‘Of course, she knows which kidney it is. But imagine what it would be like if she removed the wrong kidney. She shouldn’t operate before checking the patient’s records.’ (Brown 2008b: 176). One defense of the sufficiency of knowledge for action consists in arguing that while the surgeon meets the epistemic requirements on acting, she violates extra-epistemic professional obligations (for discussion, see Neta 2009). To circumvent this objection, Gerken provides a similar case, *MINEFIELD*, which does not involve professional obligations (Gerken 2017: 143).

Another defense of KNAC’s sufficiency condition consists in arguing that due to the high stakes the surgeon does not know. This assumption reflects a pragmatic encroachment theory of knowledge according to which practical factors such as stakes may partly determine whether a subject knows (Hawthorne 2004; Stanley 2005; Fantl and McGrath 2009). Interestingly, KNAC itself is widely invoked in motivating pragmatic encroachment theories (Fantl and McGrath 2009; 2012). So, this may be an internally coherent response although it hinges on a controversial thesis – pragmatic encroachment – that some proponents of knowledge norms are keen to avoid (Williamson 2005). Another response, due to Ichikawa, has it that such cases generally hinge on an equivocation between having a reason and having sufficient reason (Ichikawa 2012, 2017).

**Epistemic denialism**

Against epistemic accounts of norms of practical reasoning and action epistemic denialists argue that appropriate practical reasoning is not even partly characterized by epistemic norms (Fassio 2017) or that there is no epistemic norm of action (Simion 2018).

One argument for denialism (Fassio 2017) builds on a general distinction between a norm’s satisfaction conditions and its regulation conditions, where the former define when a norm is satisfied, and the latter describe subsidiary conditions one must fulfil to ensure that the norm is satisfied. In traffic, for instance, not breaking the speed limit is a norm while looking at the speedometer from time to time is a regulation condition. Using this distinction Fassio proposes that the norm of practical reasoning is the Reasons norm,RN, and that epistemic standards for practical reasoning only concern instrumental assessments relating to RN’s regulation conditions (Fassio 2017: 2145):

RN

It is appropriate for S to use *p* as a premise in her practical reasoning about whether to *F* iff *p* is a reason to *F/not-F*.

Fassio notes two reasons why this norm is not epistemic. First, while appropriate premises must be true, someone reasoning based on *p* may comply with RN without believing that *p*. A non-doxastic attitude such as guessing that *p* may suffice. Second, the motivation for RN comes from broad considerations which connect to a broad notion of normativity as opposed to a narrowly epistemic notion.

Another denialist argument due to Simion (2018) rejects the common assumption that a norm is necessarily epistemic if it determines the level of epistemic support required for proper action. Simion thinks that this assumption amounts to a category mistake because only those types of action characteristically aimed at epistemic goals, e.g., perceiving, judging, describing, may be governed by epistemic norms.

A possible response to Fassio’s argument is that practical reasoning does have an epistemic goal, although perhaps not a purely epistemic goal, since practical reasoning aims to determine what to do all things considered (Alvarez 2016. However, this response would not address Simion’s argument which only concerns action as such). Given that this is the aim, RN’s factivity requirement may still be grounded in considerations, which are at least partly epistemic. Another issue is whether ‘epistemic norm’ has a single precise meaning. The delineation of epistemic norms might not be sharp enough to prohibit more inclusive views of what it takes for a norm to be epistemic. Even if denialist arguments do not ultimately succeed they raise important questions about the delineation of epistemic normativity.

**3: Epistemic norms of assertion.** The motivation for an epistemic norm of assertion resembles the general motivation for epistemic norms - one may be epistemically criticized for an assertion and one may respond to such criticism by citing or improving one’s epistemic position. As with action generally, this may be taken as *prima facie* evidence that assertive speech acts are such that their epistemic basis is subject to epistemic norms. Moreover, Williamson takes the relevant epistemic norm of assertion (which he takes to be knowledge) to be constitutive in the sense that it helps determine what kind of a speech act assertion is (Williamson 1996, 2000; McKenna 2015). As in the case of action and practical deliberation, the issue is generally taken to be the epistemic permissibility of assertion. For example, saying that one meets the epistemic requirements on assertion does not entail that one meets all requirements of assertion.

**3.1: Survey of proposed epistemic norms of assertion.** As above, we will discuss the various epistemic norms of assertion in terms of the strength of the epistemic position they require. We will start with belief norms and end with certainty norms.

**3.1.b. Belief norms.**

According to proponents of a belief norm of assertion, an assertion that *p* is epistemically appropriate if the speaker believes *p*. Such an account is proposed by Bach (2008) based on the view that different types of speech acts are generally expressions of different types of attitudes (Bach and Harnish 1979: ch. 3). According to Bach, since assertions essentially express belief, an assertion as such is epistemically appropriate when the speaker has the belief the assertion expresses. Meanwhile, as noted above, Bach also thinks there is a knowledge norm of belief, which means that asserting and believing *p* without knowing *p* will be inappropriate, because one ought not to believe *p* without knowing it. Other norms of assertion might be similarly obtained by combining the belief norm with different alternative accounts of the ethics of belief.

**3.1.c. Warrant norms.** As in the case of action and practical deliberation, there are two types of warrant norms of assertion. The first type is (at least in their official statements) *fixed threshold* warrant norms according to which the asserter meets the epistemic norm just in case her warrant exceeds a fixed threshold level. For example, Douven sets forth the following (Douven 2006: 449):

***Rational Credibility Rule***

One should assert only what is rationally credible to one.

Lackey, in turn, argues that one may be in an epistemic position to assert that *p* without believing (and by the belief condition on knowledge, without knowing) that *p*. Consequently, she prefers the following *Reasonable to Believe Norm of Assertion* – RTBNA (Lackey 2007: 608):

**RTBNA**

One should assert that *p* only if (i) it is reasonable for one to believe that *p*, and (ii) if one asserted that *p*, one would assert that *p* at least in part because it is reasonable for one to believe that *p*.

Similarly, Kvanvig argues that “the propriety of an assertion is a function of one's justification for the content of the assertion rather than a function of whether one knows the content to be true.” (Kvanvig 2009: 145. See also 2011). As stated these norms appear to be *fixed threshold* norms insofar as they do not – in their official statements – give the gradability of the relevant types of warrant (rational credibility, reasonableness and justification) a role. While the accounts are compatible with the idea that rational credibility, reasonableness and justification are gradable properties, this fact does not play a role in the statement of the accounts.

In contrast, the degree of warrant is emphasized to be central to whether the epistemic norm is met in subsequent developments. Specifically, some theorists who promote explicit *sliding threshold* norms argue that conversational context determines the degree of warrant required for assertion. For example, Gerken’s Warrant-Assertive Speech Act norm (WASA. See Gerken 2012, 2017):

**WASA**

In a conversational context, CC, in which S’s assertion that *p* conveys that *p*, S meets the epistemic conditions on appropriate assertion that *p* (if and) only if S’s assertion is appropriately based on a degree of warrant for believing that *p* that is adequate relative to CC.

McKinnon provides a similar Supportive Reasons Norm (SRN. See McKinnon 2013, 2015):

SRN

One may assert that *p* only if:

(i) One has supportive reasons for *p*,

(ii) The relevant conventional and pragmatic elements of the context are present, and

(iii) One asserts that *p* at least in part because the assertion that *p* satisfies (i) and (ii).

Finally, Goldberg articulates Epistemic Norm of Assertion (ENA. See Goldberg 2015):

**ENA**

S must: assert p, only if S satisfies epistemic condition E with respect to p.

Goldberg also develops the epistemic condition, E, such that it is fixed by context. Consequently, these sliding threshold warrant norms share the feature that the degree of warrant required for assertion may exceed or fall below the degree of warrant required for knowledge depending on conversational context. McKinnon’s appeal to supportive reasons has an epistemically internalist character whereas Gerken and Goldberg’s norms align with epistemic externalism. However, Gerken also articulates an internalist species of WASA, DJA, which requires that the warrant in question is *discursive justification* which is, roughly, justification that the speaker can articulate. This is fairly close to McKinnon’s supportive reasons. But whereas she takes them to be universally required, Gerken only takes them to be required in certain conversational contexts – including many contexts of scientific testimony (Gerken 2012, 2015). In contrast, (Goldberg 2015) proposes a more thoroughgoing epistemic externalism with important dialectical qualifications regarding philosophical disagreement (2012, Goldberg 2015, last section).

**3.1.d. Truth.**

Compared to warrant norms of assertion the truth norm is both more demanding, in virtue of being factive rather than non-factive, and less demanding by not requiring asserted propositions to be warranted. A truth norm only requires assertions to be true in order to be epistemically appropriate. Weiner (2005) argues that only a truth norm is compatible with a conception of assertion which remains philosophically interesting. On this approach, while there might be additional conditions on epistemically appropriate assertion only truth is a fundamental condition (Weiner 2014).

Similarly, Whiting (2013) sets forth the following norm:

(T) One may assert that *p* if and only if it is true that *p*.

However, Whiting distinguishes between there being warrant to assert and having warrant to assert where he claims that the latter requires knowledge. So, a question arises as to whether the account differs from a knowledge norm. Whiting argues that it does (Whiting 2013: 863).

**3.1.e. Knowledge.** The knowledge norm originates with Unger (1975) and is influentially defended by Williamson (1996; 2000) who explicates (The Knowledge Rule) of assertion as follows (Williamson 2000: 243):

One must: assert *p* only if one knows that *p*.

DeRose appeals to the knowledge norm in motivating contextualism about ‘knows’ (DeRose 2002: 180):

...one is positioned well-enough to assert that P iff one knows that P.

Likewise, Hawthorne (Hawthorne 2004: 23):

[t]he practice of assertion is constituted by the rule/requirement that one assert something only if one knows it.

Finally, Stanley joins the party (Stanley 2005: 11, italics removed):

one ought only to assert what one knows.

Since both the necessity and sufficiency of knowledge has been debated it will be useful with a biconditional version of the knowledge norm of assertion (KNAS)

**KNAS**

S is in a good enough epistemic position to assert that *p* iff S knows that *p*.

Some variations of the knowledge norm have been proposed. For example, Turri highlights that it is central that the assertion expresses knowledge and promotes *the express knowledge account of assertion* (Turri 2011: 41):

you may assert Q only if your assertion expresses knowledge that Q.

Despite these variations, knowledge norms exemplify a dimension of Williamson’s knowledge-first program that centrally uses knowledge in the pursuit of an explanation of central aspect of the speech act of assertion (Benton 2014; Blaauw 2012; DeRose 2009; Kelp 2016; Turri 2011).

**3.1.e. Certainty.**

Certainty has also been proposed as a norm of assertion. According to Stanley (2008), two kinds of certainty are needed for an assertion to be epistemically proper: subjective certainty, which requires a speaker’s belief that *p* to be held with sufficient confidence, and epistemic certainty, which requires the evidence for *p* to be sufficiently strong (Stanley 2008: 48):

***The Subjective Certainty Norm for Assertion***

Assert that *p* only if you are subjectively certain that *p*.

***The Epistemic Certainty Norm for Assertion***

Assert that *p* only if you are epistemically certain that *p*.

Stanley also argues that Williamson’s knowledge norm can be derived from the conjunction of these two certainty norms.

Petersen (forthcoming) defends another certainty norm, EPCN, which requires a speaker’s belief that *p* to be related to evidence that makes the proposition an epistemic (propositional) certainty:

**EPCN**

Assert that *p* in context *c* only if your belief that *p* is based on evidence sufficient to make *p* an epistemic propositional certainty relative to *c*.

Stanley argues that a certainty account may be invoked in arguments that compromise a central aspect of the motivation for epistemic contextualism (Stanley 2008; DeRose 2009).

**3.2.a. Ordinary language assessments.** The debates about the epistemic norms of assertion have in large part concerned ordinary language assessments. In particular, proponents of knowledge norms have emphasized the ubiquity and naturalness of using ‘knowledge’ in ordinary epistemic assessments, questions and prompts. For example, Williamson argues that in response to an assertion one may naturally query ‘how do you know?’ and that this indicates that knowledge is the norm of assertion (Williamson 1996; 2000). As in the case of action and practical deliberation, such appeals have been supported experimentally (Turri 2013, 2015a, 2016b, 2017a-b; Turri and Buckwalter 2017. For criticism and empirical evidence to the contrary, see Kneer 2018; Reuter and Brössel forthcoming; Gerken forthcoming). More generally, proponents of knowledge norms may appeal to the fact that we acquire the word ‘knowledge’ early in our developmental trajectory and make heave use of it throughout life (Nagel 2013 but see McGlynn *forthcoming*). Gerken, in turn, argues that the use of ‘knowledge’ in ordinary epistemic assessments is best understood as a cognitively cheap and reasonably accurate *communicative heuristic*. Specifically, he argues that knowledge ascriptions may serve as *cognitive proxies* for more complex epistemic evaluations (Gerken 2015; 2017).

Several authors raise the concern that one might also naturally use other epistemic notions such as, for example, ‘are you certain that *p*?’ in response to assertions that *p*. Some takes this to compromise the appeal to ordinary language (Brown 2008a, b, 2010; Gerken 2011, 2017; Kvanvig 2009; Lackey 2009; McGlynn 2014; McKinnon 2015). On the other hand, proponents of certainty norms take such uses to motivate certainty norms (Petersen forthcoming; Vollet 2017. See also, Stanley 2008: 49).

Another much discussed issue is the use of the term ‘knowledge’ in prompting information. Several proponents of knowledge norms of assertion note that it is natural to prompt assertion with ‘do you know?’ As noted, several philosophers including (Kvanvig 2009; McKinnon 2012: 2015) have argued that such appeals overgeneralize insofar as they might just as well motivate, for example, certainty norms. In response, Turri argues that from an abductive point of view, the knowledge norms best explains the arrays of epistemic assessments and emphasize the infelicity of ‘Do you have a reasonable belief about what time the meeting starts?’ (Turri 2010b: 461). However, McKinnon (2015) responds in some detail to Turri’s abductive arguments and argues that a knowledge norm is not well supported by the wider range of phenomena. Gerken provides another response to Turri by suggesting that in cases where it cannot be presumed that the subject has warrant strong enough for knowledge, such as a horse race, it is fairly natural to prompt as by ‘Do you have a reasonable belief about which horse will win?’ (Gerken 2017: 165). McGlynn, in turn, challenges the speech act theoretic basis for Turri’s appeal to prompts (McGlynn 2014: 92ff).

Moreover, both McKinnon and McGlynn argue that there are lax everyday contexts in which less warrant is required for assertion and or for responding to challenges to assertion (McKinnon 2015; McGlynn 2014). However, there are moves available for proponents of knowledge norms. For example, Williamson has claimed that in such contexts, the knowledge norm is indeed violated although violation is tolerated in such contexts (Williamson 2000: 259). So, the discussions of challenges and prompts exemplify the lack of consensus that characterizes the appeal to ordinary language in general.

**3.2.c. Against necessity and sufficiency of knowledge.** The dialectic that pertains to purported counterexamples to the view that knowledge is necessary and sufficient for epistemically proper assertion mirror the debates about norms for practical deliberation and action

Cases of warranted false belief and Gettier-style cases have been taken to provide counter-examples to the necessity of knowledge for assertion (Brown 2008a; Coffman 2014; Gerken 2017). However, knowledge-first theorists have responded by varieties of an excuse maneuver according to which the subject fails to meet the epistemic norm of assertion but is excused for doing so or meets another “secondary” norm (Williamson 2000; DeRose 2002). Predictably enough this response has been criticized. For example, Lackey has argued that the distinction between primary and secondary norms is “spurious” (Lackey 2007. See also Kvanvig 2009). Likewise, much criticism has been directed at the appeal to excuses (McKinnon 2015; Gerken 2011; Schechter 2017; Boult 2017). Consequently, theorists appealing to excuses have begun to develop more substantial accounts thereof (Littlejohn *forthcoming*; Williamson *forthcoming*; Kelp and Simion 2017). However, the issue remains very much in dispute.

In the case of sufficiency of knowledge for epistemically reasonable assertion, linguistic analogies of cases such as *SURGEON* and *MINEFIELD* have been set forth (further cases are provided by Lackey 2011 and McKinnon 2015. See also McGlynn 2014; Gerken 2017). Proponents of knowledge norms have responded in a variety of ways. For example, Turri argues that since the stakes are very high in such cases, the speech act is no longer an assertion (Turri 2010a). Furthermore, the responses to the counterexamples to the sufficiency of knowledge for action are also applicable to the linguistic case (see, e.g., Ichikawa 2012; 2017).

**3.2. d. Moorean paradoxes.** Moorean paradoxes are sentences of the form ‘*p*, but I don’t know that *p*.’ For example, ‘Dogs bark, but I don’t know that dogs bark.’ Moorean paradoxes figure prominently in discussions about the norm of assertion. While such constructions are perfectly consistent, they are infelicitous to assert. Proponents of knowledge norms have argued that this is support their approach (Unger 1975; Williamson 2000; Adler 2002; DeRose 2002; Turri 2011, 2013). The knowledge norm, KNAS, implies that the first conjunct of a Moorean paradox is only assertible, when the second conjunct is inappropriate for the speaker to assert. Thus, it straightforwardly explains why Moorean paradoxes seem paradoxical although they are logically consistent.

Meanwhile, advocates of other accounts argue that they can explain the infelicity by other means. These include advocates of warrant accounts (Lackey 2007; Kvanvig 2009; McKinnon 2015) as well as proponents of the truth norm (Weiner 2005; Whiting 2013). Weiner, for example, proposes to account for the infelicity with a truth account by appealing to conversational maxims.

Furthermore, proponents of certainty accounts have argued that these have an advantage over knowledge accounts regarding Moorean paradoxes involving certainty rather than knowledge (Stanley 2008; Vollet 2017; Petersen forthcoming). According to Williamson, however, Moorean paradoxes with ‘certain’ can be dealt with by the knowledge norm by assuming that ordinary speakers tend to align standards for certainty with standards for knowledge (Williamson 2000: 254). Nonetheless, it remains controversial whether the combined evidence from Moorean paradoxes favors the knowledge norm over competing views.

**3.2.e. Lotteries.**

Lottery propositions are another recurring topic of debate regarding norms of assertion, and are commonly cited as support for the necessity of knowledge for assertion (DeRose 1996; Hawthorne 2004; Unger 1975; Williamson 2000). The underlying assumption is that when the only winning ticket out of a million has been drawn, and your ticket is a loser, but the numbers are not announced yet, it is inappropriate for me to assert that you didn’t win, although my belief is true and highly justified. A knowledge norm explains why, since intuitively I do not know that your ticket is a loser, whereas less demanding norms have been argued to have difficulty explaining why Lottery assertions are invariably inappropriate (see, e.g., Williamson 2000).

Some resistance to this line of argument comes from authors rejecting the assumption that Lottery propositions are always inappropriate to assert (see McGlynn 2014 for a list including, among others, Cappelen 2011; Hill and Schecter 2007). Others have responded with accounts of the data, which replace the knowledge norm with their favored less demanding alternative. For example, Weiner (2005) argues that the truth norm together with Gricean maxims explain why Lottery assertions are improper, while Kvanvig (2009) and McKinnon (2015) propose explanations involving different warrant norms. To the extent that these explanations succeed, they show that there is no direct route from Lottery propositions to the conclusion that assertion requires knowledge.

**3.2.f. Grice.** Let us conclude the presentation of the epistemic norms of assertion with briefly considering Grice’s second sub-maxim of quality – the *Maxim of Evidence*:‘Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.’ Proponents of sliding threshold warrant norms (Gerken 2012, 2017; Goldberg 2015 and McKinnon 2013; 2015) regard this as a precursor to their norms emphasizing the gradable modifier ‘adequate’ in Grice’s formulation. In contrast, Benton argues, on the basis of careful exegetical work, that Grice’s *Maxim of Evidence* is best interpreted as a knowledge norm in disguise (Benton 2016). However, one might wonder why Grice would risk violating his own coorporative principle by articulating a knowledge norm in terms of ‘adequate evidence’ rather than in terms of knowledge.

**4: Arguments for and against commonality.** What is the relationship between the epistemic norms of action and practical deliberation on the one hand and epistemic norms of assertion on the other? Some authors take the differences to be significant whereas others think that there are no significant differences.

**4.1. Kinds of commonality.** To determine whether there is commonality between various epistemic norms we must determine the nature of the commonality thesis. The debates have primarily concerned whether one must be in an equivalent epistemic position vis-à-vis *p* to act on it, rely on it in practical deliberation and assert it, respectively (cf. Brown 2012; Montminy 2013). Consequently, Gerken (2014: 729) labels this commonality thesis *equivalence* commonality:

***Equivalence Commonality***

S is an epistemic position to act on *p* iff S is in an epistemic position to assert that *p*.

This thesis is distinguished from a commonality thesis that pertains to *structural* commonality

***Structural Commonality***

The epistemic norm of action/practical reasoning and the epistemic norm of assertion have relevantly similar structures.

It is worth keeping the distinction in mind since some arguments against one type of commonality may not compromise the other type.

**4.2. Arguments for *Equivalence Commonality***. As noted initially, the relationship between epistemic norms of action and assertion is naturally thought to be a genus-species relationship insofar as assertions are speech *acts*. However, this alone does not entail *Equivalence Commonality* or *Structural Commonality*. The *differentia* of the genus might be so substantive that differences are more significant than the similarities. So, argument is required and this is widely acknowledged.

For example, Montminy argues that assertion and practical reasoning must be governed by the same norm (Montminy 2013). He initially suggests a version of Bach’s belief rule according to which assertion that *p* must manifest one’s belief that *p*. Subsequently, Montminy argued for a knowledge account of action according to which one must act on the belief that *p* only if that belief counts as knowledge. *Given* these norms both *Equivalence* and *Structural Commonality* may be derived.

McKenna also invokes the idea that beliefs influence what we act on and assert in arguing that belief, action, and assertion should be held to a common epistemic norm (McKenna 2016). Specifically, he defends the theses ‘One should believe *p* iff one should act on *p*’ and ‘One should believe *p* iff one should assert *p*.’ McKenna calls the conjunction of these theses ‘strong equivalence commonality’ and supports it by arguing that given the interrelations between belief, assertion and action, they must be held to the same norm.

McKinnon pursues another line of reasoning for a unified epistemic norm of assertion and practical reasoning by arguing from reflection on cases of isolated second-hand knowledge (ISHK, cf. Lackey 2011): ‘‘…insofar as assertions and decisions epistemically grounded in ISHK both seem inappropriate, this is evidence for a unified norm of assertion and practical reasoning.’’ (McKinnon 2012: 569. See Gerken 2014 for criticism)

Fassio, in turn, defends *Structural Commonality* by arguing that beliefs, assertions and premises in practical reasoning share a common representational nature (Fassio 2016). Fassio then argues that given that the relevant representational feature is what epistemic norms are concerned with, beliefs, assertions and practical deliberation are of a nature such that they share a *structurally* common epistemic norm. However, Fassio does not purport that this motivation also amounts to a motivation of *Equivalence Commonality*.

**4.3. Arguments against commonality**. Brown argues against commonality by suggesting that the basic motivations for it are flawed (Brown 2012). For example, she argues that the Instance Argument (noted in our introduction) according to which assertion is a speech act and therefore a species of action does not motivate commonality. However, although Brown does not explicitly distinguish between *Equivalence Commonality* and *Structural Commonality*, her argument appears to target the former. Likewise, Brown offers cases in which the epistemic requirements for belief, practical reasoning and assertion diverge and as such they are best understood as targeting equivalence commonality (Brown 2012).

Gerken’s positive epistemic norms of action and assertion exemplify *Structural Commonality*. But hesuggests counterexamples to *Equivalence Commonality* and argues that they arise due to differences between deliberative context and conversational context (Gerken 2014. McGlynn 2014 criticizes and Gerken 2017 responds. Goldberg 2015 also criticizes *Equivalence Commonality*). As mentioned, the debate about commonality has substantive consequences. One example is the argument that the failure of *Equivalence Commonality* compromises the conjunction of knowledge norms of action and assertion (Gerken 2017: 183):

***The Commonality Argument***

C1: The conjunction of KNAC and KNAS entails *Equivalence Commonality*.

C2: *Equivalence Commonality* is false.

C3: The conjunction of KNAC and KNAS is false. C1, C2 *modus tollens*.

Finally, Simion’s rejection of the idea that there are epistemic norms of action would, given that there *are* epistemic norms of assertion, have the result that both *Equivalence Commonality* and *Structural Commonality* fail. This Simionian argument against commonality hinges on the case against the existence of epistemic norms of action

**4.4. Commonality concluded.** The debates about commonality are important in their own right insofar as they illuminate important substantive and structural features of epistemic norms of action, belief, practical deliberation and assertion and of their interrelations. However, they are especially important for the epistemic norms of assertion because of related debates about responsibility for aspects of one’s assertive speech acts. As a manner of conclusion, we will briefly illustrate by considering some aspects of these debates.

**5: Epistemic norms for conversational implicatures?** When we are asserting something we often do a lot more with our words than merely conveying the content of what we say (Austin 1962). In Grice’s development, our assertions often carry conversational implicatures (Grice 1989). This raises the question whether there are epistemic norms for such conversational implicatures and other pragmatic phenomena.

**5.1. Criticism of epistemic norms for conversational implicatures.** On the basis of principled differences between what is asserted and what is implicated, Fricker argue that there is little similarity between assertion and implicature when it comes to epistemic norms (Fricker 2012).

Her discussion is based on the assumption that appropriate assertion requires knowledge of the asserted content. In contrast, she argues, a speaker who implicates that *q* by asserting that *p* never has to know that *q* is the casefor the implicature to be epistemically appropriate. The reason for this, according to Fricker, is that asserted content can be ascertained straightforwardly by virtue of being explicit, while it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to determine clearly what a speaker intends to implicate. This, in turn, is due to the complexity of recovering implicatures based on contextual clues about a speaker’s intentions. In consequence, Fricker argues that there is a significant and principled asymmetry between what the speaker asserts and what she implicates. The content of the assertion is something for which the speaker has full epistemic responsibility. In contrast, Fricker argues that a significant part of the epistemic responsibility in forming a belief that an implicature that *q* is true on the basis of the speaker’s assertion that *p* lies with the recipient rather than with the asserter.

Fricker’s arguments may not commit her to outright denialism of epistemic norms of conversational implicature insofar as they may be compatible with some minimal epistemic constraints on conversational implicatures. However, her negative view is usefully juxtaposed with positive views.

**5.2. Arguments for epistemic norm for conversational implicatures.** Fricker’s negative approach against the idea of epistemic norms for implicature has been criticized from various angles. According to one line of criticism, asserted content need not be made explicit by the speaker in the way Fricker presupposes since it may be partly determined by unarticulated constituents that are contextually determined (Hawthorne 2012). If this is so, Fricker’s arguments might overgeneralize. Another line of response appeals to the idea that speakers may be at least partly epistemically responsible for implicatures. For example, Green considers a case in which Sally is asked to share her impression of a candidate and asserts ‘Well, he is very tall’ (Green 2017 drawn from Grice 1989: 33). Here the implicature is that the candidate is not well qualified. But if Sally asserted this without any epistemic warrant for assuming so, she would – at least in many cases – appear to be epistemically criticizable. Green goes on to argue that a knowledge norm cannot be extended to conversational implicature (Green 2017). Instead Green considers assertion and implicature to be on a continuum of varying degrees of epistemic responsibility for the speaker.

Gerken provides further arguments in favor of epistemic norms governing declarative conversational implicatures and proposes the following (Gerken 2017: 173).

**WASA-Dec**

In the conversational context, CC, in which S’s assertion that *p* conveys that *q*, S meets the epistemic conditions on appropriate assertion that *p* (if and) only if S’s assertion is appropriately based on a degree of warrant for believing that *q* that is adequate relative to CC.

According to this proposal the speaker has epistemic obligations pertaining to the implicated content. Thus, WASA-Dec appears to be able to account for cases such as the one involving Sally’s assessment of the candidate (citing Grice’s original case).

In sum, the relationship between pragmatic phenomena, such as, but not restricted to, conversational implicature, and epistemic norms raise many questions that researchers have only begun to explore and which are related to broader issues in the pragmatics-semantics interface (cf. Stainton 2016). We conclude by briskly considering some of the wider interest of these debates.

**5.3. Wider ramifications.** One reason why it is important to explore the nature of epistemic norms in relation to pragmatic phenomena is that doing so connects the debate about the norms of assertion to important debates about the ethics of speech. For example, the discussion may help shed light on the phenomenon of harmful speech such as slurs, hate speech and other derogatory linguistic phrases (Ishani and McGowan 2012). It is often thought that action and mere talk have radically different moral properties. Indeed, this assumption may be appealed to in arguments for free speech. However, theorists who emphasize that assertion is a speech act may argue that the difference between talk and action is less significant that it initially appears to be. Such a perspective may provide a novel rationale for thinking that certain speech acts are harmful *in themselves* rather than merely by giving rise harmful action. So, the debates over commonality and over whether pragmatic phenomena are governed by epistemic norms may have important consequences in debates that pertain to the ethics of speech. As mentioned, this is one reason why we have discussed the epistemic norms of assertion alongside epistemic norms of action and practical deliberation. We expect that further work on the epistemic norms of assertion and its relation to other speech acts will shed light on both substantive theoretical issues as well as on important practical issues.

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1. Many epistemologists use ’justification’ in the broader sense roughly as we use ’warrant.’ While irksome such terminological variances are nearly unavoidable. So, we address them by seeking to be explicit about our respective [↑](#footnote-ref-1)