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**Knowledge is Not Our Norm of Assertion**

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What do I mean by *our* norm of assertion? I mean our *social norm*. I mean the rule(s) we embrace and enforce, however mildly or strongly, requiring us to meet an epistemic threshold when asserting. My thesis is that we do not require knowledge when asserting, for we do not even require truth.

In the first section I discuss social norms and various proposals for our norm of assertion. Some require only true assertions. These proposals are *factive*. Some allow false assertions. Those are *nonfactive*. In the second I present and criticize Benton’s case for the knowledge norm. In the remaining sections I examine experimental evidence for and against factive norms of assertion. In the third I critically examine John Turri’s (2013, 2017) experiments in support of factive norms. In the fourth I provide experimental evidence from “unlucky assertions” against factive norms (Kneer 2018, 2021; Reuter and Brössel 2019; Marsili and Wiegmann 2021). In the fifth I scuttle the factivist’s standard response, the excuse maneuver. I conclude by distinguishing optimal assertions from permissible assertions.

1. **Social Norms**

Social norms are a ubiquitous feature of human life. They are community shared expectations for appropriate behavior. They tell us what is permissible or impermissible in various situations. We learn our community’s norms as we grow up. We know them explicitly or implicitly. We apply them consciously or unconsciously. Social norms guide our behavior, our assessment of the behavior of others, as well as the assessment of our own. We use norms to hold others and ourselves to account. We praise (and reward) those who conform. We blame (and negatively sanction) those who do not. We enforce our norms. Social norms are socially approved prescriptive norms enforced through normative attitudes and third-party sanctions.

Many social norms vary across cultures and communities. When I was on campus during the pandemic, I felt enormous social pressure to wear a mask. When I was in the shopping mall, I did not. Some social norms are universal: keep promises, return favors, and don’t harm others just for fun. Social norms stating an epistemic threshold for permissible may be universal. We’d have to look and see (Turri and Park 2018; Kneer 2021).

Social norms differ from other kinds of norms or standards. Social norms are not necessarily objectively correct; many are not. Social norms are not evaluative standards for optimal behavior; such standards exist independently of social norms. Social norms differ from individual or collective goals. Even when a norm involves a gold, it may advance the goal poorly or not at all. Though following a social norm is typically in your interest, social norms are not simply prudential norms. Maybe you should exercise for your health, and so you ought to go to the gym. But there needn’t be a social norm to go to the gym. We don’t live in Ancient Sparta, after all.

What is our norm of assertion? There are many proposals in the literature. Here are four:[[1]](#footnote-1)

* One may assert that P only if one *knows* that P
* One may assert that P only if P is *true*.
* One may assert that P only if you possess *justification* to believe P.
* One may assert that P only if you *believe* that P.

The first two are *factive*. They require that you assert only true propositions; the proposition you assert must be a “fact.” The second two are *non-factive*, for you can believe that P when P is false, and you can have good evidence or adequate justification to believe that P even when P is false. Are non-factive norms “insensitive” to truth? No. For justification is a reliable route to truth, and most beliefs are justified.

These principles can be combined. The norm might also vary with context (Goldberg 2015; Gerken 2017).[[2]](#footnote-2) We might also embrace more than one, where one is more strongly embraced and enforced than the other. For example, we may strongly embrace and enforce an honesty norm—viz. the belief norm—but also embrace a justification norm, just less strongly. These are all proposals for what a significant number of us normatively expect of one another when we affirm, claim, declare, indicate, inform, state, tell or testify, or otherwise assert that something is so.

“But wait,” an afficionado to the literature might ask, “isn’t the norm of assertion supposed to a constitutive rule?” (Williamson 1996). First, it could be both a constitutive rule and a social norm (Fricker 2017). They are not mutually exclusive. Second, constitutive norms as such are not enforced (Pagin 2006). To explain enforcement, the norm would also have to be at least a social norm (Garcia-Carpintero 2020). Third, there could be constitutive norms for an activity that are not enforced, but lenient or stricter norms are enforced instead. Think of no contact rules in professional basketball that are rarely enforced. Knowing the constitutive norm (if there is one) does not suffice for knowing the social norm. Lastly, maybe there is no constitutive norm but only a social norm. The norm of assertion is *at least* a social norm.

Social norms have a strong influence on human behavior. A social norm requiring an epistemic threshold on permissible assertion thereby helps stabilize the reliability of assertion (Graham 2015, 2019, 2020; Turri 2016). From the epistemic point of view, the norm of assertion is a good thing. So what is our norm of assertion?

1. **Representing as Knowing and the Norm of Assertion**

I now turn to Benton’s case for thinking our norm requires knowledge.

*2.1 K-representation vs. K-norm*

Distinguish two hypotheses:

K-representation: whenever we assert that P, we represent ourselves as knowing that P.

K-norm: one may assert that P only if one knows that P.

K-norm is a *normative* thesis. Direct evidence for or against comes from normative intuitions about the permissibility or impermissibility of assertions. K-representation is a *linguistic* thesis. Direct evidence for or against comes from linguistic intuitions about felicitous or infelicitous assertions and other linguistic data. K-representation has either a pragmatic or semantic explanation; speech act theory (pragmatics) or semantics will explain why assertions represent their speakers as knowing (van Elswyk and Benton 2023).

Benton argues for K-representation directly from linguistic data: faulty conjunctions, conversational patterns involving prompts, abstentions, challenges, hedges, parentheticals, and mutual reasoning.

Several philosophers have challenged Benton’s conclusions. Maybe we only represent ourselves as having good reasons to believe that P when asserting. When we ask someone “how do you know” we’re asking for their justification—for their reasons—and not for knowledge *per se*. After all, once they gave their reasons, we don’t follow up by saying “yes, I see that you have excellent reasons to believe that P. But how do you *know* that P?”[[3]](#footnote-3) Although I find this reply telling, I shall not pursue it. K-representation may indeed provide the best explanation for the linguistic data.

Another piece of evidence Benton mentions involves asserting that someone’s lottery ticket did not win, solely on the evidence of the long odds. Many philosophers think you cannot know that a lottery ticket has lost just on the odds. Some think so asserting is impermissible (Williamson 1996; cf. Unger 1975). This would be a piece of direct evidence for K-norm (van Elswyk and Benton 2023: 30). But though Benton mentions lottery assertions, he does not give them much weight, for “some people do not have such strong judgments about the impermissibility of lottery propositions.” “Such data,” he says, “seems less probative.” I agree.[[4]](#footnote-4)

*2.2 K-norm Explains K-representation*

After arguing that K-representation best explains the linguistic data, Benton argues that K-norm best explains K-representation: “[The claim that] asserting represents oneself as knowing…would be explained by [the knowledge norm], for if there is a norm of permission on assertion requiring knowledge, in asserting one thereby represents oneself” as knowing (section 2.1). Benton thereby largely argues for K-norm indirectly.

Here Benton follows Timothy Williamson (1996: 505). Williamson argued as follows. In general, for any action that requires authority to perform the action, to perform the action is then to represent oneself as having the requisite authority. For example, when giving orders, one represents oneself as having the authority to give the order. According to K-norm, one has the authority (one is allowed) to assert that P only if one knows that P. Hence, if knowledge is the norm of assertion, it follows that when we assert that P, we represent ourselves as knowing that P.

This explanation is a *pragmatic* explanation of K-representation, and so of assertion as a speech act type. There are two main families of pragmatic explanations for speech act types. The first family focuses on the intentions in the mind of speakers. Since speech acts are acts, and all acts involve intentions, speech acts are typed by speaker’s intentions (Bach and Harnish 1979). The second focuses on commitments to rules. Speech acts are a special type of act, like making promises where one is thereby committed to normative rules. Utterances become assertions, on the second view, when the speaker, by making the utterance, is committed to the norm of assertion (Alston 2000; Rescorla 2009). Benton’s explanation is a pragmatic, normative explanation, that opts for a particular rule.

*2.3 A Non-Normative Semantic Explanation*

Has Benton shown that K-norm provides the best explanation for K-representation? No. To do so, he would have to eliminate other pragmatic explanations (normative and non-normative) as well as semantic explanations. A tall order, indeed.

To illustrate the challenge, I will review a semantic explanation from Peter van Elswyk’s recent paper “Representing Knowledge” (2021). (Benton cites the paper himself in this context.) According to van Elswyk, an utterance of an unqualified declarative sentences like ‘whales are mammals’ includes ‘I know’ in parenthetical position, zero voiced. On this proposal, when we utter ‘whales are mammals’ it is *as if* we uttered ‘whales are mammals, I know’. The parenthetical ‘I know’ is there in the syntax. We just don’t utter it. But since it is already there, that’s why voicing it sounds redundant. Parentheticals that we voice include ‘I think’ and ‘I believe’, as in ‘inflation is likely to flatten off, I believe’.

Utterances of unqualified declarative sentences then express two types of meanings: truth-conditions and felicity-conditions. The truth-condition of ‘whales are mammals’ is the proposition whales are mammals. This is the asserted, at-issue proposition. The felicity-condition is the proposition I know that whales are mammals. Why do parentheticals contribute to felicity-conditions instead of truth-conditions? That’s because parentheticals “function as signals guiding the hearer to a proper appreciation of the statement” (Urmson 1952: 495, quoted by van Elswyk). It’s trivial on this view that assertions made by uttering declaratives represent speakers as knowing what they have asserted, for that is a part of the total meaning of the utterance.

Part of the evidence for his thesis comes from other languages with *evidentials*. Evidentials are grammatically obligatory morphemes that convey how the assertor knows what they are asserting. Evidentials are semantic features of the language whereby the subject represents themselves as knowing the proposition asserted. Like parentheticals, they do not contribute to truth conditions. English does not include evidentials. Instead, van Elswyk believes, it includes an unvoiced parenthetical. If other languages have a semantic explanation ready-to-hand for K-representation, why not English (and other languages too)?

The rest of van Elswyk’s evidence comes directly from intuitions about felicitous and infelicitous discourses involving assertions. Consider faulty conjunctions like ‘whales are mammals, but I don’t know they are’. At the level of truth-conditions, there is no contradiction (whales could be mammals and I could fail to know that). But even so it sounds contradictory. Why is that on van Elswyk’s proposal? Because the felicity-condition of the first conjunct (the proposition I know that whales are mammals) contradicts the truth-condition and the felicity condition of the second conjunct. Faulty conjunctions sound contradictory because the total meaning is contradictory, even if the at-issue truth-conditional meaning is not. It should now be obvious how van Elswyk’s proposal handles the other linguistic data.

I did not bring up van Elswyk’s proposal to defend it. Rather my point is to show that K-representation might not be *best* explained by K-norm, for there might be a non-normative explanation that explains just as well or better. Van Elswyk’s semantic proposal seems to do the trick. To win the debate, Benton would have to show that this proposal (and all the others) fares worse overall when compared to K-norm. My point, then, was to neutralize Benton’s data, so to speak. We can grant K-representation without granting K-norm, for it hasn’t been shown that K-norm provides the best explanation of K-representation.

What will decide the issue? Evidence that goes directly to the norm of assertion: intuitions about the permissibility or impermissibility of assertions without knowledge. I turn to that next.

1. **Experimental Evidence for Factive Norms**

*3.1 Turri on Unlucky Assertions*

We are after *our* norm of assertion—the norm of the majority, so to speak—not just yours or mine. One methodology to collect direct evidence for our norm is experimental philosophy. Experimental philosophy asks representative groups of native speakers for their intuitive judgments about hypothetical cases in controlled experiments.

John Turri is by far and away the leading experimental philosopher advocating factive norms for assertion. In a series of experiments spanning a decade, Turri and collaborators have probed the intuitions of thousands of participants across a variety of hypothetical scenarios and a range of experimental conditions.

Turri’s experiments began as a reply to the armchair intuitions of philosophers who insisted there was nothing impermissible about asserting something that is not true, provided the assertor had good reasons—strong justification—to believe what they were asserting (Douven 2006; Lackey 2007; Hill and Schechter 2009; Kvanvig 2009). Call cases of reasonable but false assertions “unlucky assertions.” Unlucky assertions, these philosophers insisted, are permissible. Turri thought to test this hypothesis on laypeople in controlled experiments. Maybe philosopher’s intuitions are idiosyncratic (and so only cover the norm of a small community), mistaken, or confused (it happens).

In a 2013 study, he tested laypeople’s intuitions about the following vignette:

WATCH. Maria is a watch collector. She owns so many watches that she cannot keep track of them all by memory alone. So she maintains a detailed inventory of them. She keeps the inventory up to date. Maria knows that the inventory is not perfect, but it is extremely accurate. Today Maria is having guests over for dinner. Soon after dinner is served, one of her guests asks, ‘‘Maria, do you have a 1990 Rolex Submariner in your watch collection?’’ Maria consults her inventory. It says that she does have a 1990 Rolex Submariner in her collection. [But this is one of those rare cases where the inventory is wrong: she does not have one/And this is just another case where the inventory is exactly right: she does have one]. (Turri 2013: 282)

In the false condition, half the participants read the first part (“But this is one of those rare...”). In the true condition, the other half read the second part (“And this is just another case…”).

After asking control questions for understanding, the experiment then asked the participants the key question:

Should Maria tell her guest that she has a 1990 Rolex Submariner in her collection? [Yes/No]

If participants share the non-factive intuition, they should answer at around the same rate in both conditions. But if they share the factive intuition, participants should answer “yes” at high rates in the true condition, and participants should answer “no” at high rates in the false condition. Turri found over 80% of the participants in the false condition responded that Maria should not make the assertion, compared to only 3% in the true condition. In both conditions these rates are far greater than chance (Turri 2013: 283). On its face, this is compelling evidence indeed that laypeople share a factive norm of assertion. Turri concludes philosophers have “mischaracterized how reasonable false assertions are actually evaluated by competent lay practitioners of our practice of assertion” (Turri 2013: 39-50; 2016b: 760).

Turri claims this and subsequent experiments show beyond a reasonable doubt that our norm is factive (Turri 2013, 2017b, 2018, 2020). In particular, he concludes our norm is the knowledge norm (2014a,b, 2015a, 2016b, 2018, 2021; Turri and Buckwalter 2017; Turri, Friedman, Keefner 2017; Turri and Park 2018). Should we agree?

*3.2 A Methodological Flaw: The Ambiguity of ‘Should’*

No. There’s a crucial flaw in Turri’s experiments.

Turri thinks his use of ‘should’ in his key question probes participants for their judgments as to whether the protagonist’s assertions are *permissible*, and so probes their intuitions about the *norm* of assertion:

[R]esearchers working on the norm of assertion … assume that the rule [of assertion] is deontological because … ‘should’ expresses the concept of permission; you have permission or authority to assert only under certain conditions [such as justified belief or knowledge], and to do so otherwise is impermissible. (Turri 2016: 61)

But Turri knew one might have used other words to probe laypeople’s permissibility intuitions instead. In is 2013 article he wrote:

What is the right way to express assertion’s … norm? Some say, ‘You should make an assertion only if . . .’; others say ‘You ought to make an assertion only if . . .’; others say, ‘You may make an assertion only if . . .’; and others say, ‘You must: make an assertion only if . . .’. … I’m not going to resolve this inconsistency here. Instead, I will simply opt for the ‘should’ formulation…It is legitimate to question whether different terminology would lead to different results…I welcome and encourage further work that makes different choices. (Turri 2013: 281)

Across his studies from 2013 to 2021, Turri uses ‘should’ instead of ‘may’ ‘permitted’ ‘allowed’ or even ‘must’ or ‘ought’. Did he make the right choice?

No. That’s because ‘should’ has (at least) two meanings. The first meaning—the meaning Turri requires—is *deontological*. It has to do with permissions and obligations. The second meaning—the meaning Turri does not intend to test for—is *teleological*. It has to do with goals or intentions, with instrumental expediency. We all know there are some things that are allowed that we should not do, and some things we should do that are not allowed.

Kneer (2018: 166), Reuter and Brössel (2019: 308), and Marsili and Wiegmann (2021: 3) have all made this point against Turri. Here is Marsili and Wiegmann:

[T[here are two natural readings of the verb ‘should’ …. On the one hand, we may say that an agent ‘should do something’ in order to follow a norm—this is what we call a deontological reading. On the other hand, we may say that an agent ‘should’ do something in order to meet their aims, or some other standard for success—this is what we call a teleological reading. Only … if should-questions are interpreted deontologically … can they be evidence of laypeople’s intuitions about the norm of assertion, as opposed to evidence of their intuitions about what makes an assertion successful. (Marsili and Wiegmann 2021: 3)

Maybe Turri’s participants across all his experiments think our norm is factive, maybe they do not. Since ‘should’ is ambiguous, Turri’s participants might have systematically interpreted his test question in the wrong way. As a result, we cannot rely on his experiments to learn about the norm of assertion.[[5]](#footnote-5)

*3.3 Testing for the Deontological Interpretation*

Is there a way of figuring out how laypeople interpret Turri’s “should” question? Marili and Wiegmann simply asked them.

First, they reran Turri’s experiment almost verbatim.[[6]](#footnote-6) When asked “Should Maria tell her guest that her that she has a 1990 Rolex Submariner in her collection?” 89% (180 out of 202) of the participants said no. That’s the same result as Turri’s. So far, so good.

Second, they asked the 180 participants who said “no” a follow-up question. There were two conditions for the follow-up, with 90 participants in each condition. In the “inclusive” condition participants could pick between zero and all three of the following answers when asked why they said that Maria should not tell her guest she has a 1990 Rolex:

-- otherwise she will fail in her intention to tell the truth.

-- otherwise she will violate the norms of conversation.

-- otherwise her guest will face bad consequences.

91% picked the first, 10% the second, and only 2% the third. In the “exclusive” condition participants had to choose one answer:

-- otherwise she would fail in her intention to tell the truth – even if she would not violate a rule.

-- otherwise she would fail in her intention to tell the truth, and she would also violate a rule.

64% picked the first and 35% picked the second. The clear majority who said Maria should *not* tell her guest that she has a 1990 Rolex Submariner picked the *teleological* answer. The clear majority interpreted Turri’s question teleologically, not deontologically. We know Turri’s experiments failed to probe participants for their judgments about the norm of assertion, for when asked how they interpreted the key question the majority say they interpreted it the wrong way. To probe for the norm of assertion, Turri should not have chosen ‘should’. Turri’s experiments do not speak to our norm of assertion.

1. **Experimental Evidence Against Factive Norms**

Marsili and Wiegmann (like Kneer and like Reuter and Brössel) went on the offensive. They wanted to see if they could modify the WATCH vignette in such a way that they could confidently elicit participants intuitions about what Maria should say in the deontological sense and then see what they said about Maria’s assertion. Interpreted the right way, would they give factive or nonfactive answers?

So instead of asking participants what Maria *should say*—a present tense question about an action she has yet to take—they thought we should ask participants what Maria *should have said*—a past tense question about something Maria already said. For given that she’s made the assertion already, there’s no point in giving her advice about how to achieve her ends, “but it is not too late to point out that her behavior was improper” (Marsili and Wiegmann 2021: 6). So when we ask a past-tense question, we are more likely to elicit deontological interpretations of the test question. They revised the vignette accordingly:

PAST-TENSE. Maria is a watch collector. She owns so many watches that she cannot keep track of them all by memory alone. So she maintains a detailed inventory of them. She keeps the inventory up to date. Today Maria is having guests over for dinner. Soon after dinner is served, one of her guests asks, “Maria, do you have a 1990 Rolex Submariner in your watch collection?” Maria consults her inventory. It says that she does have a 1990 Rolex Submariner in her collection. Accordingly, Maria replies: “Yes, I do have a 1990 Rolex Submariner.” But this is one of those rare cases where the inventory is wrong: she does not have one.

Marsili and Wiegmann then divided their participants into two groups—two conditions, Past-Positive and Past-Negative—and asked the following questions:

Past-Positive: Maria should have told her guest that she has a 1990 Rolex Submariner. [Agree/Disagree]

Past-Negative: Maria should not have told her guest that she has a 1990 Rolex Submariner. [Agree/Disagree].

What did the participants who passed the control questions say?

For those participants in Past-Positive, to agree that Maria should have told her guest she has a 1990 Rolex is to express a non-factive answer; they agreed that Maria should have told her guest something that is false. 82% of the participants agreed. 82% of the participants chose the non-factive answer.

For those in Past-Negative, to disagree that Maria should not have told her guest that she has a 1990 Rolex Submariner is also to express a non-factive answer; they disagreed that Maria should not have told her guest something false. 73% of the participants disagreed.

Combining the outcomes of the two conditions, 77.5% gave a non-factive answer (155 out of 200). Changing the key question from present tense to past tense reverses the results.

Did participants who gave non-factive answers also interpret the question deontologically? Did they interpret the “should have said” and “should not have said” questions in terms of Maria having been permitted to make her assertion? Certainly. For Maria did not intend to make a false statement; that was clearly not her goal.

Marsili and Wiegmann ran another study using three more vignettes involving unlucky false assertions. One involves the reasonable false belief that a bag of coffee is from Colombia (the labels got mixed up at the factory). Another involves the reasonable false belief that a friend drives an American car (they have for years, but their car was just stolen and replaced with a German car). And the third involves the reasonable false belief that a certain band is playing in town tonight, based on reading the newspaper (but because one of the members just got sick, another band is playing instead). In the condition where the protagonist makes a false assertion, when asked to agree/disagee that the protagonist should not have made their assertion, Marsili and Wiegmann found that around 90% disagreed. And when those who gave teleological answers on follow-up questions were eliminated, well over 95% disagreed. The nonfactive answer was the overwhelming response.

Reuter and Brössel took a more direct approach. Instead of asking past tense questions about what Maria should or should not have said to elicit a deontological interpretation, they simply changed the question from “Should Maria tell her guest…?” to “Is Maria permitted to tell her guest…?” (2019: 309-310). They used different terminology in their key question to see if it would lead to different results.

When they reran Turri’s experiment using ‘should’ the results were just like Turri’s. Almost 69% of their participants said Maria should not tell her guest she has a 1990 Rolex where only about 19% said she should tell her guest she has one (they allowed their participants to pick “don’t know”). But when they ran their version of the experiment using ‘permitted’ instead but also with past tense, the results flipped. Nearly 77% said Maria is permitted to tell her guest she has a 1990 Rolex and only 14% said she is not (2019: 313). The nonfactive answer dominated. When Kneer replaced ‘should’ with both ‘appropriate’ and ‘permitted’ in his studies, he received similar results (2018, 2021).[[7]](#footnote-7)

Our most recent direct evidence, using prompts that are more likely to elicit intuitive judgments about our norm of assertion, strongly suggests that our norm of assertion is not factive.

Is this evidence conclusive? No. Further replication would be required. New studies that ask different questions may give different answers. This is experimental social science, after all. Even so, our most recent direct evidence is telling. Given the flaw in Turri’s studies, for now we should give considerably more credence to the idea that a significant proportion of the folk do *not* embrace a factive norm governing assertion. Insofar as we are willing to bet on evidence from experimental philosophy, we should say that knowledge is not our norm of assertion.

1. **The Failure of the Excuse Maneuver**

*5.1 Excuse Validation*

“No, no, no!” says the defender of factive norms. “When people choose the nonfactive answer in these experiments, they don’t really mean it. What they really mean to say is that the assertor made a blameless but impermissible assertion. They think the assertor is blameless for the assertor, in having good reasons for believing what they have asserted, has an excuse for breaking the factive norm of assertion. Participants who chose nonfactive answers have confused permissible assertions with impermissible but blameless assertions. They *really* think unlucky assertions are impermissible. None of these studies undermine a factive norm for assertion. It’s all an illusion.” That’s the factivist’s standard reply to unlucky assertions. You’ll find it sections 2.3 and 3 of Benton’s chapter. Call this the *excuse maneuver*.

Is this plausible? Do people really tend to confuse blameless wrongdoing with permissible action? Turri discovered that as a matter of fact many of us do (Turri 2013, 2019; Turri and Blouw 2015). He calls the general phenomenon *excuse validation*. Turri asked participants for their reactions in a variety of vignettes where it was obvious that the protagonist broke a rule but with a good excuse and so was blameless. For example, Doreen might have just had all the systems in her car checked and serviced. Driving home, she thinks she is going 55mph (the posted speed limit), for that is what her speedometer says. But she is going 65mph, for the mechanic accidentally made a mistake. Here is it obvious that Doreen is breaking a rule; she’s speeding. But it is also obvious she has an excuse. So it is also obvious that we would not blame her. When Turri asks his participants whether Doreen should be criticized, almost everyone said no. But when asked whether “there is any sense in which Doreen is doing something incorrect” only about half said yes. That is, half said no. How can this be? It looks like half the participant’s used Doreen’s excuse to say she did not break a rule. Similar experiments had similar results. About half the time use excuses to say that a protagonist did not do anything wrong in cases where blameless wrongdoing obviously occurred.

Part of Turri’s proof that excuse validation occurs is that judgments of permissibility disappear when participants are asked a follow up question as to whether the protagonist broke a rule inadvertently. Turri found that participants changed their answers. In the Doreen case, when given the chance to say that Doreen broke a rule inadvertently, well over 90% said that she did, and so that she broke a rule when driving 65mph (Turri and Blouw 2015). It’s as if the participants knew all along that Doreen broke a rule, they just didn’t want to say so unless they could also say that she did so unintentionally and so blamelessly. In other words, to find out if excuse validation is going on, just ask. If excuse validation is a fact of human psychology, why not suppose that it happens when confronted with cases of unlucky assertions? Maybe the excuse maneuver is right, after all. Maybe all of the evidence against factive norms is confounded by excuse validation.

*5.2 Testing Unlucky Assertions for Excuse Validation*

Are the participants in Marsili and Wiegmann’s experiments who picked nonfactive answers to the test questions guilty of excuse validation? To find out, all you to do is ask. If the excuse maneuver is correct for unlucky assertions, 90% of participant who gave nonfactive answers should change their tune when allowed to say the protagonist broke a rule unintentionally. So Marsili and Wiegmann gave their participants who picked the nonfactive option the following choice:

I agree that Maria should have told her guest she has a 1990 Rolex (past-positive)/I disagree that should not have told her guest she has a 1990 Rolex (past-negative):

1…because she violated the rules of conversation, but did so inadvertently

2…because she did not violate the rules of conversation, given that she had the best reasons to believe what she said is true

If the participants who gave nonfactive answers are engaged in excuse validation, the overwhelming majority should pick the first answer instead of the second.

What did Marsili and Wiegmann find? Of the 155 participants that gave non-factive answers to the original question, 139 picked the second option, not the first. That’s 90% of the participants who picked the non-factive answer when testing for excuse validation. That’s the *exact opposite* of what the excuse maneuver would predict. The overwhelming majority who judge that unlucky assertions are permissible do not seem to be engaged in excuse validation. Minimally, they seem to be at least expressing their overall permissibility judgments. The results were the same when they asked these follow up questions to their participants in their coffee, car, and music experiments. Turri’s test torpedoes the excuse maneuver.

Now suppose you think, as a referee to their paper suggested, that “rules” or “norms” of conversation are “too philosophical” for the folk to properly interpret. Marsili and Weigmann were sympathetic to this point, so they ran the experiment again but with different questions. Participants first choose between the following key questions:

1. Maria should not have told her guest that she has a 1990 Rolex Submariner in her collection.
2. It was permissible for Maria to tell her guest that she has a 1990 Rolex Submariner in her collection.

24% picked (1), the factive answer (84% of these then gave teleological answers on a follow-up question). 76% picked (2), the nonfactive answer.

The participants that chose (2) were then asked a different question to test for excuse validation:

It was permissible for Maria to tell her guest that she has a 1990 Rolex

1…because it was her responsibility to answer based on the evidence available to her, so she did the right thing, given the circumstances (74% said this)

2…because it was her responsibility to say the truth, but she is excusable for getting things wrong, given the circumstances (26% said this — excuse validation)

Though a quarter responded the way factivists predict in this experiment, three quarters did not. The weight of the evidence across all their experiments contradicts the excuse maneuver. Excuse validation may be a real thing. But at least these experiments suggest it’s not what is happening when it comes to unlucky assertions. The excuse maneuver is no excuse for defending factive norms of assertion.

1. **Conclusion**

Turri’s experiments do show one thing: we standardly take the manifest point or purpose of assertion to convey knowledge. That’s why so many of us, when thinking teleologically, say that Maria should not assert she has a 1990 Rolex when she does not have one. She won’t fulfil her intention, or the point of assertive communication, if she does. Other conversational evidence from Turri bears this out. “Just so you know, the lecture starts and three.” “Just so I know, where does the parade begin?” Our point in making assertions is often to convey knowledge, and our point in asking questions is to receive knowledge (Turri 2016c). If the manifest point of so many assertions is to convey knowledge, of course we shouldn’t assert what we don’t know, for if we do, we will fail to achieve our goals (cf. Willard-Kyle 2020). As a norm of prudential rationality, or as an optimal standard from the epistemic point of view, the knowledge “norm” makes perfect sense. Indeed, perhaps the standard point of making assertions explains why we represent ourselves as knowing when we make assertions, just as walking into a store represents ourselves as interested in making a purchase.

But all this still fails to establish that, when it comes to our standard for *permissible* assertions, that we only allow knowledge backed assertions. What we should and should not do from the instrumental or optimal point of view, I have already said, is not always the same as what is socially permissible or impermissible. Perhaps we need a pluralist ontology of “norms” of assertion: optimal assertions are backed by knowledge; permissible assertions require less. So here at the end of the chapter I have arrived at a position once defended by Turri in a 2014 paper (cf. Marsili 2018). In that paper Turri argued that knowledge set the standard for “good” assertions, but that justification set the standard for “permissible” assertions. He thought this mixed position accounted for the linguistic data Benton and others brings forward for a knowledge norm, while at the same time accounting for the “main” and “most persistent” objection to the knowledge norm, viz. that the knowledge norm forbids reasonable false assertions (2014:561). This seems to me to be a perfectly sensible position. Even so Turri quickly abandoned it.

In his 2016 book he tells us why. When he wrote the 2014 paper, though he thought there was something right about the excuse maneuver, he wasn’t certain. He also thought there was something to the chorus of philosophers who insisted that reasonable false assertions are permissible. And so he argued that knowledge set the standard for “good” assertions and justification for “permissible” assertions. But then after further developing his understanding of excuse validation, he changed his mind (Turri and Blouw 2015). “When the relevant empirical work was done, the results—especially the results on excuse validation—undermined the initial motivation” for the 2014 account (2016b:67). He was then certain that the excuse maneuver worked.

But we’ve just seen that it doesn’t. Benton’s data can be accommodated in various ways. Turri’s data does not address our norm of assertion. The most recent empirical evidence speaks clearly against factive norms of assertion. The excuse maneuver fails experimentally. Given all this, circling back to the position Turri proposed in 2014 looks rather well motivated indeed. Though the experimental evidence I’ve referred to for a nonfacive norm of assertion might soon all be overturned, as things stand, knowledge is not our norm of assertion.[[8]](#footnote-8)

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1. For references and for additional proposals, see Pagin and Marsili 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For an extensive bibliography to the literature, see Pagin and Marsili 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Douven 2006: 468-476; Hill & Schechter 2007; Lackey 2007: 610; Levin 2008; Kvanvig 2009: 143, 149-50; Maitra & Weatherson 2010: 110; Cappelen 2011: 38-40; McKinnon 2015: chs. 5-6; Mandelkern & Dorst 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For recent discussion of lottery assertions, see Azzouni 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For another methodological challenge, see Gerken 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. There was a slight modification in the vignette—following Reuter and Brössel they dropped the line “Maria knows that the inventory is not perfect, but it is extremely accurate.” See Reuter and Brössel 2019 for their reasons and Turri 2021 for his reply. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For Turri’s criticisms of aspects of Kneer’s experiments and Reuter and Brössel’s, see Turri 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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