

The Importance of Knowledge Ascriptions

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Abstract

Knowledge ascriptions of the form “S knows that p ” are a central area of research in philosophy. But why do humans think and talk about knowledge? What are knowledge ascriptions *for*? This article surveys a variety of proposals about the role (or roles) of knowledge ascriptions and attempts to provide a unified account of these seemingly distinct views.

Introduction

Knowledge ascriptions play a central role in human life and thought. ‘Know’ is one of the 10 most commonly used verbs in English (Davies and Gardner 2010), the first cognitive verb that children learn (Shatz et al. 1983), and the most prominently used term in epistemic assessment (Gerken 2015a). It has also been argued that ‘know’ is unlike almost every other word because it finds a precise meaning equivalent in every human language (Goddard 2010).¹ These facts suggest that knowledge-talk plays an important and perhaps indispensable role in our communicative practices.

Knowledge ascriptions of the form “S knows that p ” are also a central area of research in philosophy. The philosophical interest in knowledge ascriptions can be traced at least to J. L. Austin (1946) and arguably back to Plato (Nagel 2007). Whenever this history began, it is undeniable that recent epistemology is characterized by a renewed interest in knowledge ascriptions (see Brown and Gerken 2012 for an overview). For example, some philosophers use knowledge ascriptions as evidence for particular theories about the semantics of ‘know’ (e.g., DeRose 1992), while others think that knowledge ascriptions can help shed light on the nature of knowledge itself (e.g., Unger 1975). Whatever we think about these issues, it is safe to say that knowledge ascriptions are now a staple of epistemological theorizing.

But what are knowledge ascriptions for? Why do humans think and talk about knowledge? Until recently, little effort was spent trying to clarify the role (or roles) of knowledge ascriptions. Within the past two decades or so, however, there have been a variety of proposals about what role or functions knowledge ascriptions play in our practice of epistemic evaluation; for instance, it has been suggested that knowledge ascriptions identify reliable informants (Craig 1990), or signal the appropriate end of inquiry (Kvanvig 2009), or track the epistemic norm governing assertion (Williamson 2000) and practical reasoning (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008), or that ascriptions of

¹ Jonathan Weinberg, Shaun Nichols, and Stephen Stich (2001) challenge this idea. See Michael Hannon’s (2015) article “The Universal Core of Knowledge” for a reply.

knowledge enable us to make important distinctions between blameworthy and blameless behaviors (Beebe 2012).²

This article will investigate several proposals about what knowledge ascriptions are for. Its dual goals are to guide the reader through some cutting-edge research on this topic, as well as to provide a unified account of these seemingly disconnected proposals. It will emerge that life without knowledge-talk, whether brutish and nasty or not, would be more solitary and almost certainly shorter.

2. Knowledge Ascriptions Certify Reliable Informants

Much of the contemporary debate about the roles of knowledge ascriptions derives from Edward Craig's 1990 book *Knowledge and the State of Nature*. According to Craig, knowledge ascriptions are valuable because they play an important role in human survival and flourishing. But how do we ascertain what role knowledge ascriptions play? Craig describes his methodology as follows:

We take some prima facie plausible hypothesis about what the concept of knowledge does for us, what its role in our life might be, and then ask what a concept having that role would be like, what conditions would govern its application...then see to what extent it matches our everyday practice with the concept of knowledge as actually found. (1990: 2-3)

Having sketched his method, Craig then states his hypothesis: knowledge ascriptions are used to *certify sufficiently reliable informants* (to put his central thesis briefly and roughly).³

This hypothesis is based on several plausible assumptions. In order to successfully guide our actions, we require true beliefs about our environment. Each of us needs reliable information for our own purposes, but we also have a shared need to pool and transfer information to make it easily accessible. Thus, it is for our collective benefit that we assess the reliability of informants not just for ourselves but for others, too, since this allows us to store reliable information while it is available, without knowing when, why, or under what circumstances it may be needed. To achieve this goal, we

² A handful of philosophers have attempted to shed light on the semantics of 'knows that' by reflecting on the function of knowledge ascriptions (Greco 2008, Henderson 2009, Hannon 2013, McKenna 2013). Others have raised doubts about the viability of this strategy (Rysiew 2012, Gerken 2015b). In this paper I will remain neutral on that issue.

³ Three clarifications are in order. First, Craig speaks of the *concept* of knowledge rather than knowledge ascriptions. My concern is with our knowledge-ascribing behavior, but I will treat these interchangeably because I assume that words express concepts and that concepts are the meanings of words. Second, Craig describes these informants as 'good' rather than 'reliable', but it is clear that reliability is at the heart of what Craig has in mind (see Craig 1990: 91). Third, the term 'reliable informant' is slightly misleading because reliable informants may sometimes be mistaken, and yet knowledge entails truth. I think there is a sense of 'reliable' that captures the truth condition (e.g., "Tim is usually reliable, but he wasn't today. He was wrong."); but in any case I am using 'reliable informant' as a term of art here. In Craig's sense a reliable informant must also be right (see Craig 1990: 85).

must identify individuals who are reliable *in general* (and not just for our own purposes); such people must be reliable enough for a variety of individuals with a wide range of interests, projects, and purposes. In order to ensure that informants are reliable enough for many people with diverse interests, a practice develops of setting the standard high enough so that

whatever turns, for others, on getting the truth about *p*, we need not fear reproach if they follow our recommendation. [...] In recommending an informant to you I am indeed implying that the likelihood of his being right is as great as your concerns require. (Craig 1990: 94)

In other words, the point of knowledge ascriptions is to certify an informant's belief or information to other members of one's community. We are certifying an agent as epistemically positioned such that others can freely draw on his or her information.

This deeply social picture of knowledge ascriptions explains how we store, retrieve, and transmit useful information across contexts. Although we each want information for our own purposes, we all benefit from pooling and sharing information because we occupy different epistemic positions and our own epistemic position is often not as good as we would like. Knowledge ascriptions are thus used to identify the adequacy of informants for persons and purposes beyond our immediate individual interests.⁴

Craig thus provides us with two important proposals. The first is a new method of philosophical investigation according to which we should start by considering what sort of role is served by the relevant philosophical concept. The second is the hypothesis that the main purpose of the concept of knowledge is to identify sufficiently reliable informants. These two ideas are distinct. You might endorse the pragmatic strategy to investigate the concept of knowledge by determining its function and yet think that Craig has misidentified the central function of this concept (an idea I'll return to shortly). Alternatively, you might reject Craig's methodology and still think there is an important conceptual connection between identifying reliable informants and knowledge.

This account of the function of knowledge ascriptions has been endorsed by a number of scholars.⁵ But many have also been critical of Craig's view.⁶ I do not have

⁴ Hawthorne (2004), Williamson (2005), and Rysiew (2012) argue that contextualism about 'knows' is incompatible with the role knowledge ascriptions play in storing and transmitting information across contexts. Hannon (2015b) defends contextualism from this challenge by appealing to Craig.

⁵ For example, see Fricker (2008), Greco (2008), Grimm (forthcoming), Hannon (2015a), Henderson (2009), McKenna (2013), and Pritchard (2012).

⁶ For example, see Feldman (1997), Weinberg (2006), Kappel (2010), Gelfert (2011), Kelp (2011), and Kusch (2011). Many criticisms of Craig have focused on his genealogical approach, which looks at the development of our current concept of knowledge out of a hypothetical state of nature. However, the genealogical approach is in principle separable from the functional-based method I have described, and Craig himself acknowledges this point in his retrospective assessment of *Knowledge and the State of Nature* (2007).

space to discuss many of the objections to Craig's proposal, but I do want to examine one worry that several philosophers have mentioned. According to Klemens Kappel (2010), Christoph Kelp (2011), and Patrick Rysiew (2012), a central error in Craig's proposal is that he misidentifies the main function of knowledge ascriptions; in particular, they claim that Craig mistakenly links knowledge ascriptions with identifying reliable informants rather than *signaling the appropriate end of inquiry*. To this hypothesis, I now turn.

3. Knowledge Ascriptions Are Inquiry Stoppers

As inquirers we seek reliable information on which to base our actions. Plausibly, the basic aim of belief is to store correct information, for the rational person wants her actions to be guided by true beliefs. However, the process of inquiry is potentially open-ended. For example, what does it take to know that my cat is not currently in the kitchen? Must I check under the table? Must I look behind the door? Must I open every closed drawer? Must I prove that I am not dreaming? Must I know that I am not a brain in a vat? Inquiry can be thought of as a process of ruling out various possibilities; however, it is almost always possible to continue one's inquiry (logical possibilities are endless). Thus, we need a point at which people can reasonably terminate inquiry.⁷ According to Kvanvig (2009: 344), this stopping point is cognitively valuable because it satisfies one of the platitudes about the functional roles of knowledge ascription: it signals the point of legitimate inquiry closure. The same cannot be said for belief, justification, reliability, or the like.⁸

Similarly, Kappel (2010), Kelp (2011), and Rysiew (2012) argue that Craig does not consider the special role that knowledge ascriptions have for inquiry independently of whatever need we might have for identifying reliable sources of information. They claim that a distinct role for knowledge ascriptions in inquiry is to certify information as being such that it may, or even should, be taken as settled for the purposes of one's practical and theoretical deliberations. Our need for an 'inquiry-stopper' arises out of the following trivial observations about our interest in truth and certain limitations in our cognitive capacities: (1) the truth matters; (2) inquiry is needed to acquire truth; (3) inquiry is always costly in the sense that continuing to inquire requires time and resources; and (4) inquiry has no natural stopping point because there are always further conceivable but as yet uneliminated error possibilities. We therefore need a way to command a switch of attention away from

⁷ I say "reasonably" terminate inquiry because I want to rule out cases in which we no longer feel like investigating or because we want to be alleviated from doubt. Also, false belief would not be a successful end to inquiry, which is why knowledge is factive.

⁸ There may be exceptional cases in which speakers are willing to ascribe knowledge to somebody and yet it is reasonable to inquire further (Brown 2008a: 1444–1445; Reed 2010: 228–229). I will discuss these cases in sections 4 and 5. For now I will simply say it is uncontroversial that "S knows that p" typically conveys that there is no need for further investigation. This idea can be traced back to Gilbert Harman's *Change in View* (1986: 47). Thanks to a referee for pointing this out.

these further uneliminated possibilities. We need to signal when inquiry has gone on long enough.

Kvanvig, Kappel, Kelp, and Rysiew are surely right about our need for an inquiry-stopper. However, this idea is not obviously incompatible with Craig's hypothesis about our need to identify reliable informants. These two functions might not even be all that distinct, but rather just opposite sides of the same coin. Why think this? One common way to reasonably terminate inquiry is by identifying a sufficiently reliable informant who has the information one needs. A reliable informant as to whether p is someone from whom we can take it that p , which is to say that we treat her word on whether p as settling the question of whether p . I take it from the bank teller that the bank will be open on Sunday; I do not take it from a street psychic that I should invest my savings in a certain stock. In saying "S knows that p " we are saying that S is sufficiently reliable for one to take it that p .

This connection explains why the functional role of flagging reliable informants also serves to mark the point at which further inquiry is unnecessary. Spending more time and resources to continue one's inquiry would be impractical: continuing to inquire beyond this point would commit us to paying higher 'informational costs' that are not worth the lessened risk of being wrong. Everyday life does not demand that our chances of being wrong are absolutely zero. If our informant knows, then there is no need to investigate further. Attributing knowledge to someone is a way of expressing the attitude that someone's epistemic position (with respect to a given proposition) is good enough to stop further inquiry. That's precisely what makes such an informant reliable *enough*.⁹

The dual roles of identifying reliable informants and terminating inquiry can thus be given a unified treatment. Instead of replacing Craig's hypothesis with the view that knowledge ascriptions are used to terminate inquiry, both hypotheses appear to be mutually supporting.

4. Knowledge Ascriptions Track Epistemic Norms

Knowledge ascriptions have also been associated with the role of tracking the epistemic norms of assertion and practical reasoning. This is because knowledge ascriptions (and denials) align with natural assessments of assertion and practical reasoning in ordinary language. Here's an example: it seems appropriate to challenge assertions by asking the asserter, "How do you know that?" (Williamson 2000: 252; Unger 1975: 250-65). Similarly, we can rightfully criticize a person's actions or reasoning when that person acted without knowledge; for instance, "You shouldn't have gone down this street, since you didn't know that the restaurant was there" (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008: 571). In addition to questions and challenges, there is data from lottery assertions: one is not warranted in asserting "Your ticket is a loser" (or using this as a premise in practical reasoning) on the grounds that one does not know that the ticket is a loser (Williamson 2000: 246; Hawthorne 2004: 21).¹⁰

⁹ I argue for this view in...

¹⁰ Theorists who investigate the epistemic norms governing assertion and practical reasoning typically do not make any claims about functional role, for they are not working within the

These considerations illustrate that knowledge-talk is tightly connected to warranted assertion and practical reasoning. In contrast, competing accounts in terms of evidence, justified belief, warrant, or reliability do not straightforwardly align with ordinary language usage (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008: 573; Gerken 2015a).

For the sake of convenience, we can formulate the relevant epistemic norms as follows:

K-Assertion: One is in a good enough epistemic position to assert that p if (and only if) one knows that p .

K-Practical Reasoning: One is in a good enough epistemic position to rely on p in practical reasoning if (and only if) one knows that p .¹¹

I will refer to these norms collectively as ‘the knowledge norms’. Occasionally I will consider these norms together because in many cases our intuitions about assertion, practical reasoning, and knowledge go together.¹² For example, DeRose’s (1992) bank scenarios have been used to show that the epistemic propriety of both assertion and practical reasoning depend on whether one is thought to have knowledge. For this reason, many arguments for (and against) the knowledge norm of assertion apply *mutatis mutandis* to the knowledge norm of practical reasoning, and *vice versa*.

The knowledge norms have attracted several defenders, but they have also been contested for a variety of reasons. First, there are many circumstances in which asserting that p and relying on p in one’s reasoning seems proper or warranted even though we would not say that the agent knows p . In particular, cases of warranted false belief and warranted yet lucky true beliefs (i.e. Gettier cases) go against the idea that knowledge is necessary either for warranted assertion or for practical reasoning (Brown 2008a; Gerken 2011; Smithies 2012). Although we are unwilling to ascribe knowledge in these cases, this does not change our view about the epistemic

Craigian framework. However, these theorists often support their preferred view about epistemic norms by appealing to knowledge ascriptions and denials, which assumes that knowledge-talk is tracking the relevant epistemic norms.

¹¹ Three points of clarification are needed. First, I put the necessity claim in parentheses in both cases to indicate that each norm can be understood as a sufficiency claim, a necessity claim, or a bi-conditional. Second, a contextualist would need to rephrase these norms to accommodate the context-sensitivity of ‘knows’ (see DeRose 2002). Third, I have followed Hawthorne’s (2004) formulation of the practical reasoning norm, but my discussion applies to other formulations as well, such as Fantl and McGrath’s (2009) “acting on p ” and Hawthorne and Stanley’s (2008) “treating p as a reason for action”. For present purposes, I treat the epistemic norms of action and practical reasoning as relevantly similar, although this is a simplification (see Gerken 2011 fn.2).

¹² Montminy (2012) argues that assertion and practical reasoning must be governed by the same epistemic norm. Brown (2012) and Gerken (2014) raise doubts about the plausibility of this view. I do not claim that the norms of assertion and practical reasoning coincide. Rather, I merely assume that some of the arguments used to support (and criticize) both *K-Assertion* and *K-Practical Reasoning* are sufficiently similar to allow us to discuss these norms together.

appropriateness of one's reasoning or assertion. This indicates that knowledge ascriptions might not track the necessity direction of the knowledge norms.

Second, our tendency to cite knowledge when defending or criticizing actions does not necessarily indicate that knowledge ascriptions track the relevant epistemic norm. As Brown (2008a) and Reed (2010) point out, we also cite epistemic states both stronger and weaker than knowledge when defending and criticizing actions; for example, I might say, "You shouldn't have left so late because you weren't *certain* that the trains were operating after midnight." I might also say, "When I arranged your blind date, I had every *reason to believe* that her divorce was final." That we cite factors both stronger and weaker than knowledge when defending and criticizing action counts against the idea that knowledge ascriptions are tracking the governing epistemic norm.

Third, there are plausible cases in which more than knowledge is required to rely on p in practical reasoning. Brown (2008b: 176) discusses the case of a surgeon who is about to operate on a diseased kidney. Before operating, the surgeon double-checks the patient's notes, despite knowing which kidney is diseased. The nurse explains what's happening to a nearby student as follows: "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".¹³ This illustrates that knowledge ascriptions might not track the sufficiency direction of the knowledge norm of practical reasoning.¹⁴

Defenders of the knowledge norms have responded to these criticisms in a variety of ways. For example, it has been argued that apparent counterexamples to the necessity direction of both *K-Assertion* and *K-Practical Reasoning* are merely *excusable* violations of the relevant norms (Williamson 2000: 256; Hawthorne and Stanley 2008: 586; DeRose 2009: 93-5). However, this strategy is beset with problems (Douven 2006; Lackey 2007; Brown 2008a; Gerken 2011). And against the idea that sometimes more than knowledge is required for practical reasoning (as in Brown's surgeon case), Jonathan Ichikawa (2012) has argued that cases in which knowledge is intuitively present, but action is intuitively epistemically unwarranted, provide no traction against the knowledge norm.

It is unlikely that this debate will be settled anytime soon, but for the present purpose let us assume there are genuine counterexamples to the knowledge norms. Thus, knowledge ascriptions are not used to track the epistemic norms governing assertion and practical reasoning.¹⁵

¹³ Rysiew (2007), Gerken (2011), and Sosa (2015) also think the epistemic requirements on action can be higher than those on knowledge.

¹⁴ See Lackey (2011) for an argument against the sufficiency direction of the knowledge norm of assertion. For a challenge to Lackey's cases, see Benton (forthcoming); for her reply, see Lackey (forthcoming).

¹⁵ Many people claim that assertion and/or practical reasoning are governed by an epistemic norm other than knowledge (see Douven 2006, Neta 2006, Weiner 2007, Lackey 2007, Rysiew 2007, Kvanvig 2009, and Smithies 2012). However, we should not assume that there is exactly one constitutive epistemic norm of assertion and/or practical reasoning. While it might be more theoretically satisfying to postulate just one norm, this fact should not prejudice our

Anyone who denies the knowledge norms faces an explanatory challenge: why is the word ‘knowledge’ often appropriately used in the assessment of assertion and practical reasoning? It is undeniable that we use ‘knowledge’ far more frequently than alternative epistemic vocabulary, such as ‘justified’ or ‘reliable’ or ‘warranted’, which gives knowledge a presumption of importance that these other terms lack. This places a burden on anyone who denies the knowledge norms to explain why knowledge-talk is so prominent in the epistemic assessment of assertion and practical reasoning. The next section will consider an answer this challenge. I will then provide a unified account of the hypotheses we have considered.

5. Knowledge Ascriptions Are a Threshold-Marker

What could explain the prominence of knowledge-talk if not the knowledge norms? Here’s a hypothesis: perhaps ‘knowledge’ *normally* picks out the epistemic standard for warranted assertion and practical reasoning, but not always. This would explain why competent and rational speakers frequently use ‘knowledge’ when evaluating assertions and practical reasoning (because knowledge is normally required) even though knowledge is not the relevant epistemic norm (because sometimes more, or less, than knowledge is needed).

Mikkel Gerken (2015a) suggests this view. He proposes a thesis called ‘normal coincidence’ according to which the degree of warrant required for knowledge normally coincides with the degree of warrant necessary and sufficient for assertion and practical reasoning (2015a: 146; see also Douven 2006: 469).¹⁶ On this view, we typically know what we assert and we typically rely on known propositions for practical reasoning, yet knowledge is not the norm governing these actions. As we’ve seen in the previous section, there are some circumstances in which more (or less) than knowledge is required; for instance, more is required when the stakes are very high, as in Brown’s surgeon case, and less is required in Gettier cases. Assuming these are genuine counterexamples, the knowledge norms are incorrect. Nevertheless, we often cite ‘knowledge’ in epistemic assessment because it is normally a reliably accurate way of indicating that the standard required for epistemically warranted assertion and practical reasoning is met.

Why would the level of warrant required for knowledge normally coincide with the level of warrant that is both necessary and sufficient for assertion and practical reasoning? According to Gerken, one of the communicative functions of knowledge ascriptions is to serve as a *threshold-marker*. In normal cases of epistemic assessment, ascriptions of knowledge mark the threshold of warrant that a person must possess with regard to p in order to properly assert p and to be epistemically rational in acting

willingness to dismiss data that seems to falsify an exceptionless norm. In the next section, I will discuss a more nuanced approach.

¹⁶ Actually, Gerken focuses specifically on action, not assertion. He does say that assertion is a speech act and, hence, an act, but he nevertheless sets aside the special case of assertion because he considers it a distinctive kind of act with distinctive features. For simplicity, however, I will ignore this complication and continue to focus on both assertion and practical reasoning.

on (the belief that) p . With respect to practical reasoning, we need such a threshold because there must be some point at which one's epistemic position provides a strong enough basis for action. 'Knowledge' usually indicates that this threshold has been met, and so the agent is warranted in acting. With respect to assertion, we have such a threshold because there must be some point at which one's epistemic position is strong enough with respect to p to serve as a reliable source of information from which others can take it from one that p . Information transmitted via assertions is commonly used as reasons for action, so we generally expect people to assert only what they know.

On this view, knowledge ascriptions mark the threshold of warrant for proper assertion and practical reasoning in *normal* cases of epistemic assessment. But what makes a case of epistemic assessment 'normal'? I will not pursue a full characterization of this notion here (see Gerken 2011, 2015a for a discussion), but Gerken assumes that environmental factors, such as objective frequencies, partly determine whether a context is normal. 'Epistemic normality' is perhaps best illuminated by reflection on paradigm cases, so I'll provide two examples. A person in an area where, unbeknownst to them, all of the barn-looking objects are merely barn facades would be in *abnormal* circumstances because such areas are rare (or only imaginary). In such an environment 'knowledge' would not mark the threshold for epistemically warranted assertion or practical reasoning. Similarly, cases in which a subject's practical stakes are very high are *abnormal* because usually much less is at stake (most practical reasoning circumstances are not of life-or-death importance). These facts about epistemic normality help explain why assertions and actions can sometimes be reasonable even in the absence of knowledge, as well as why possessing knowledge isn't always enough. ¹⁷

6. Knowledge Ascriptions: Towards a Unified Account

Notice that the threshold-marking function of knowledge ascriptions is similar to the view discussed in section 2: knowledge ascriptions (usually) certify reliable informants to members of our community. As inquirers we want information on which to base our beliefs and actions. Thus, to say that an agent knows that p is to say that she is epistemically positioned with respect to p so as to be a good source of actionable information, which means that we may take it from her that p (see Greco 2008 and Henderson 2009 for a similar view). Our practical concerns generate a standard that is fitting to certify information that is good enough for the practical reasoning situations

¹⁷ I am simplifying Gerken's view a fair bit here. More precisely, he says that person S meets the epistemic conditions required for her to properly assert p or rationally use (her belief that) p as a premise in practical reasoning if and only if S is warranted in believing that p to a degree that is adequate relative to her deliberative context (see Brown 2008b for a similar view). The notion of a deliberative context can be thought of as the agent's reasonably believed or presupposed practical context, which is determined by parameters such as alternative courses of action, urgency, availability of further evidence, and the stakes (Gerken 2015a: 144). This warrant-demand frequently coincides with the degree required for knowledge, which helps explain why knowledge-talk is so central to our practice of epistemic evaluation. However, some deliberative contexts are abnormal and thus require more (or less) warrant than knowledge.

of many people with diverse interests. Think of this as a general (or communal) threshold. The level of warrant needed for knowledge is that which puts the agent in a strong enough epistemic position for her to serve as a reliable source of actionable information for members of her epistemic community. Nevertheless, there will sometimes be cases in which more, or less, warrant is needed than is required for knowledge. In the case of Brown's surgeon, the cost of error is so high, and the cost that one must pay to check further is so low, that the standard normally required for action (i.e. knowledge) doesn't suffice. And this is precisely what we should expect, since someone with a particularly important reason for wanting to get the right belief on a question is unlikely to rely on the general public standard that an individual knows.

Thus, there are two ways in which contextual factors like human interests, purposes, and the like get into the picture: first, they determine the general (or typical) threshold for epistemically warranted assertion and practical reasoning; second, they shape one's deliberative context (see fn 17 for further discussion of a deliberative context). An interesting feature of this view is that, to use the term loosely, 'knowledge' is doubly relative. It is relative to the deliberative context and more broad features of the human situation (e.g. our psychology, societal makeup, circumstances, and so on).¹⁸

The threshold-marking function also coheres with the hypothesis discussed in section 3: knowledge ascriptions are inquiry-stoppers. If one is in a good enough epistemic position to assert p , then further inquiry into whether p is typically unnecessary. Further, if one is in a good enough epistemic position to rely on p in practical reasoning, then further inquiry is no longer required. Thus, we can provide a unified account of seemingly distinct goals of identifying reliable informants, signaling the appropriate end of inquiry, and the threshold-marking function of knowledge, while also preserving the basic insight that there are strong associations between knowledge, assertion, and practical reasoning, without succumbing to the existing criticisms against the knowledge norms.¹⁹

On this account, knowledge ascriptions can be thought of as a communicative heuristic that offer a quick and somewhat messy way of conveying a diverse range of information (Gerken 2015a: 157). We rely on this rough, ready, and imprecise notion of knowledge and allow as a rule of thumb that when you know p , you can properly assert p and appeal to p in practical reasoning.²⁰ This works fine most of the time, except in cases where one's context is abnormal. However, the circumstances in which knowledge and the standard for assertion/practical reasoning do not coincide are rare enough to make it cognitively cost-efficient to continue citing 'knowledge' in most

¹⁸ Thanks to Robin McKenna for articulating this point.

¹⁹ I will stay neutral on whether these connections are constitutive of the nature of knowledge or the semantics of knowledge ascriptions.

²⁰ Cohen (2004) defends a similar idea.

cases of epistemic evaluation, even those in which the degree of warrant necessary or sufficient for assertion or practical reasoning doesn't coincide with knowledge.²¹

7. Concluding Remarks

Recent epistemology has witnessed a surge of interest in knowledge ascriptions, including an interest in what knowledge ascriptions are for. A variety of answers have been suggested, but this plurality should make us wonder if knowledge ascriptions have just one function. I have explored several proposals and offered a unified treatment of them. Put roughly, I have argued that knowledge ascriptions are valuable because they help us to collaborate with others in order to achieve certain goals. More specifically, knowledge ascriptions serve the interrelated functions of identifying reliable informants, pooling and sharing information, signaling the appropriate end of inquiry, and providing a threshold-marker which indicates that the epistemic standard that is usually necessary and sufficient for assertion and practical reasoning has been met.

For the sake of brevity, I have limited my discussion in three ways. First, I have focused specifically on knowledge ascriptions to adult humans, not children or non-human animals. Second, I have not tried to account for ascriptions of knowledge to groups, institutions, or information technology. Third, it is plausible that the plurality of roles played by knowledge ascriptions is far greater than those considered here. For example, you might think that knowledge ascriptions are used to provide assurance to others (Austin 1946, Lawlor 2013), to give credit for true belief (Greco 2003), to counter doubts (Rysiew 2001), to make important distinctions between blameworthy and blameless behaviors (Beebe 2012), or to indicate that one is certain (BonJour 2010). A fully general account of knowledge ascriptions would have to confront this vast range of complex phenomena.

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Biography

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²¹ Gerken (2015a: 154–155) provides a psychological explanation for why people sometimes continue to cite knowledge in abnormal cases, where it ceases to mark the contextually-relevant threshold. Roughly, the idea is that if 'knowledge' is established as the central epistemic term early in life, it may acquire an overly general role in epistemic assessments. There are a variety of psychological approaches to knowledge ascriptions that I do not have space to discuss here, including Nagel (2010), Schaffer and Knobe (2012), and Gerken and Beebe (*forthcoming*).

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