REPLY TO SIMION

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ABSTRACT: Mona Simion questions whether there is a distinction between taking back an assertion and taking back only the content of an assertion, as I have claimed. After arguing against the distinction in question, Simion grants that there is a difference between the cases that I use to illustrate the distinction, and thus turns to the task of explaining the difference in a way that keeps it from undermining the knowledge norm. The explanation she offers is in terms of a distinction between doing something that is wrong and doing something that is blameworthy. I respond here by defending the distinction and questioning the explanation she gives of it.

KEYWORDS: knowledge norm of assertion, blameworthiness, normativity, assertion

Mona Simion[1] questions whether there is a distinction between taking back an assertion and taking back only the content of an assertion, as I claimed in arguing against the knowledge norm of assertion.[2] After arguing against the distinction in question, Simion grants that there is a difference between the cases that I use to illustrate the distinction, and thus turns to the task of explaining the difference in a way that keeps it from undermining the knowledge norm. The explanation she offers is in terms of a distinction between doing something that is wrong and doing something that is blameworthy.

I have elsewhere addressed the idea of salvaging the knowledge norm by appeal to a distinction between violating a norm and being blameworthy for doing so, both in "Norms of Assertion"[3] and more extensively in *Rationality and Reflection,*[4] especially chapters 2 and 3. The arguments there attack directly the idea that any distinction between blameworthiness and impropriety of some more fundamental sort, or more generally between any primary notion of propriety and some secondary notion, can explain away the purported counterexamples to the knowledge norm of assertion. I argue that such distinctions misunderstand the

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[1] In Mona Simion, "Assertion: Just One Way to Take It Back," *Logos & Episteme* VII, 3 (2016): 385-391.

[2] In Jonathan L. Kvanvig, "Knowledge, Assertion, and Lotteries," in *Williamson on Knowledge*, eds. Duncan Pritchard and Patrick Greenough (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 140-160.

[3] Jonathan L. Kvanvig, "Norms of Assertion," in *Assertion*, eds. Jessica Brown and Herman Cappellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[4] Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *Rationality and Reflection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

nature of fundamental normativity, treating it in the way that is best reserved for some derivative domains, such as the legal sphere, where the normativity in question is partially a function of some more fundamental normativity.

Since the second part of Simion's paper does not engage with these arguments, I will bypass responding to that part of her paper here, since the general approach she takes is addressed already in the material cited above. I'll focus, then, on the claim that the distinction between two kinds of taking back is mistaken.

One example I used to illustrate the distinction is as follows:

> For example, if we assert a claim and then are shown that the claim is false, we take back the content of our speech act, but we needn't apologize for or regret the very act itself. Randy says, "I've studied music all my life; there's no piece of group music even moderately well-known in the U.S. where part of the group is playing in 15/16 time and another part in 17/16 time," to which Michael responds, "That's certainly a reasonable judgment, except that you don't know enough about King Crimson. They are moderately well-known, and they have just such a piece." Michael then shows Randy the piece (so, I'm assuming that Michael is correct), to which Randy says, "I was wrong, I take it back." Now Randy may regret his assertion if he is the sort of person who strongly dislikes confronting his own fallibility. He may even vow to be much more careful not to say anything at all when he risks being wrong in order not to repeat this embarrassing moment, though such a response is surely overblown. Chagrin is normal, even mild embarrassment, but apologizing would be unctuous and overwrought. As I told the story, Randy responds appropriately. He doesn't apologize for making the assertion, but what he does instead is take back the content of the assertion. In fact, were he to apologize, the natural response would be dismissive: "Give it a rest, nobody's always right …"[5]

Simion grants that there is a difference between the cases where an apology is appropriate and cases where it is not, but claims that the explanation of the difference can't be given in terms of a distinction between taking back the speech act itself and taking back its content:

> But if the propositional content is inert in isolation, it is less clear how Kvanvig envisages one being able to take it back in isolation. To see this, notice that assertion, as opposed to other types of actions—say, having vacationed in Hawaii—can be 'taken back.' Not in the sense that one can change the past as to not have had asserted in the first place, of course. Rather, taking back an assertion that p refers to no longer standing behind the commitments implied by having asserted that p. Now, p itself, in isolation, does not imply any commitments whatsoever. That is, depending on which illocutionary force we

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[5] Kvanvig, "Knowledge, Assertion," 148.

will act upon it with, different commitments will follow. If I promise that *p*, for instance, I commit myself to a future course of action; if I assert that *p*, I commit myself to, at least, it being the case that *p*.

If that is the case, it becomes clear that in order to take an assertion back, that is, to be released from the commitments implied by it, it has to be the case that I take back everything, force and content. I cannot only take back the content *p*, because *p* in isolation does not commit me to anything, inasmuch as I do not present it as true, or command *p*, or promise *p*, etc. Also, I cannot only take the action back either, because presenting nothing as true, or promising nothing also fails to imply any commitments on my part.[6]

Simion notes that content is inert in isolation, taking on various types of force depending on the kind of speech act in which the content is embedded. As a result, taking back the content of an assertion can't involve retracting some speech act itself, unless one takes back both the content and the assertion simultaneously. Hence, if the taking back is supposed to draw a distinction between taking back one kind of speech act versus taking back another kind of speech act, the distinction cannot be drawn.

It should be noted, however, that in the example I used above, as well as elsewhere in the paper, the distinction is not drawn in terms of two different kinds of speech acts. One side of the distinction applies to a speech act, for when one apologizes for, or regrets, an assertion, the object of one's attitude is the assertion itself, which is a speech act. But when one takes back only the content of an assertion, one does not have a speech act as the object of one's attitude nor of the act of taking back. Instead, the object of the taking back is whatever intellectual commitment to the claim led to the assertion in the first place, and what one is doing is countermanding that commitment. Thus, to take back the content of an assertion, as opposed to taking back the speech act itself, has as its object a commitment which is a mental state or act. In the usual case, such a commitment would be either a belief (a mental state) or the adoption of it (a mental act).

This distinction alone does not undermine the knowledge norm of assertion, but is merely one cog in a machine aimed at undermining that account. It is a defensive maneuver aimed at showing that the acknowledgement of a lapse of some sort, when it is pointed out that we don't know what we are talking about, is not the right kind of acknowledgement to justify endorsing the knowledge norm. So long as there are differences in this regard concerning the cases I describe, these cases can fulfill this defensive task whether or not the

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[6] Simion, "Assertion," 287.

differences are properly characterized in terms of a distinction between taking back the assertion itself versus taking back its content. Simion objects to this way of explaining the differences, but, as I've argued, I don't think her concerns undermine this approach.