Assessing the knowledge norm of assertion

ABSTRACT:
This paper aims to consider some relevant objections to Timothy Williamson’s knowledge-first account of assertion. More specifically, this paper focuses on the question of whether or not there exists only one rule or norm that is constitutive of assertions. The paper examines three recent contributions which put pressure on the knowledge rule for assertion. Firstly, the paper discusses an alternative normative approach regarding the normative implications that a given subject must fulfil while asserting (MacFarlane, 2009). Assuming this approach and focusing on alleged retraction data, John MacFarlane argues that the knowledge norm cannot explain such retraction data. Secondly, the paper considers an approach that denies the very existence of any kind of rule governing assertion (Schechter, 2017). Thirdly, the paper presents an objection which points to the possibility of disengaging from the knowledge rule (or of quitting the game, if Williamson’s metaphor is used) (Kelp and Simion, 2018). In light of this critical review, the paper explores the prospect of a pluralist approach which acknowledges the force of the first objection, while at the same time retaining the possibility of there being rules governing assertions which can provide some solutions to the challenge posed by the third contribution.

Timothy Williamson’s knowledge-first (k-FIRST) program\(^1\) establishes a fundamental distinction between knowledge and ignorance. According to Williamson, assertion is governed by knowledge being the one and only constitutive rule. He claims that a given subject S ought to assert p only if S knows p. Nevertheless, being aware that most of the time things are asserted in such a way that this knowledge rule is violated, Williamson introduced the excusability notion to point to the fact that, in some scenarios, S might be excused even though the content of the assertion does not qualify as knowledge. From this notion, an argument is proposed in this article that a new rule can be brought into the discussion to account for the challenge arising from retraction data while the knowledge rule is retained. John MacFarlane’s (2009) proposal to make visible the normative effects resulting from combining constitutivist approaches with commitment approaches for assertion allows for the introduction of an excusability rule, which is

\(^1\) Even though knowledge-first epistemology is endorsed by other authors like Hawthorne and Stanley (2008) and Littlejohn (2013) I will focus only on Williamson’s take on the program.
at a certain degree equivalent to a reasonable-to-believe rule, in a pluralist account on the rules governing assertion. However, as some of the issues in MacFarlane’s contribution may be used against the idea of rules existing at all, as Joshua Schechter does, the need for constitutive rules to individuate assertions is argued against in this paper. In the pluralist proposal put forward by this paper, assertion is the speech act that is jointly type-individuated by Williamson’s knowledge rule for making assertions and an excusability rule for retracting them. The scope for further work to be done will also be made evident, regarding the possibility of this supplementary rule providing an answer to Christoph Kelp and Mona Simion’s concerns with respect to their engagement condition.

In this paper, section 1 will sketch those of Williamson views which will be of use in understanding what is suggested in this article; section 2 will introduce MacFarlane’s account on retraction; section 3 will explain Schechter’s views against rules for assertion existing at all and which challenges must be fulfilled by him for his suggestions to hold; section 4 will introduce this paper’s positive proposal; section 5 will suggest some further developments for the contributions made in this paper on Kelp and Simion’s amendments to the knowledge rule as the one and only constitutive rule for assertion; and section 6 will be the conclusion.

1. Knowledge a là Williamson

Since one of the aims of this paper is to show how the pluralist account is compatible with k-FIRST, in this section the main tenets of this programme will be sketched out. Williamson (2000) defends a disjunctivist approach to knowledge: either we know, or we ignore by trespassing a well-defined point. From his research programme, it is evident that it is on this distinction that the whole epistemological enterprise relies: knowledge is the most general factive mental state and the result of a reliable method sustained on our limited discriminatory power to check in which of these cases of the disjunction we are. From the k-FIRST prism, knowledge is unanalyzable. It is not the sum of three separate ingredients (like an internalist on epistemic justification would argue): truth, belief and other conditions but a dependent variable between mind and external world instead. If knowledge comes first, then belief is just "botched" knowledge and a function aspiring to qualify as knowledge: to believe the proposition p is to treat p as being known. Therefore, it is knowledge that sets the standard. This is Williamson's response to Edmund Gettier’s (1963) challenge displaying that a given subject S can have a justified true belief, and that this type of belief can still fail to be knowledge.
Williamson is a reliabilist: according to him, knowledge is the product of a reliable belief-forming process, something that circularly entails epistemic SAFETY, which can be defined as,

SAFETY: One knows a proposition p via method M, only if one could not easily have falsely believed p (or a closely related proposition) via M (or a closely related method)

Some further clarification: SAFETY requires that one does not believe p at close worlds where p is false. It emphatically states that one is not required to believe p at all close worlds, for if p were false in a close world, that would mean that one believes p falsely at some close world. This approach commits Williamson with a modally-structured conception of knowledge (Williamson, 2009). This conception, makes clear the structural consequences of a chosen method aimed to knowledge: the belief-forming method —individuated in a very fine-grained way— changes from the good (knowledge) and the bad case (ignorance) along with the modal structure of the method itself. That is how the disjunctivist approach between knowledge and ignorance mentioned above should be understood.

As a consequence of this disjunctivist approach, Williamson maintains that the evidence in the good and bad case is different. In the good case the evidence is constituted by the fact that one sees (as a way of knowing) that p, whereas in the bad case it is constituted merely by the appearance as of p. Since seeing that p is a way of knowing that p, this —Williamson maintains— provides us with a solution to the skeptical problem that is in line with the idea that one’s evidence is the total sum of what one knows.

The issue of skeptical scenarios will be addressed further ahead in this paper, as they represent a challenge to Williamson’s approach that requires supplementing his knowledge-first approach with other fine-grained distinctions that are also relevant to the topic of this essay. Having flagged this point, Williamson’s knowledge-first approach to assertion will now be presented in this paper.
1.1. k-RULE for assertion

If we agree with Williamson that knowledge is the most general factive mental state, then we get the k-RULE, which can be defined as,

k-RULE: one ought to (assert p only if one knows p)

As indicated by the brackets, here the ‘ought’ factor governs the entire conditional (it has wide scope). Thus, one will not have violated the knowledge-norm for asserting p if one simply refuses to assert p.

Since Williamson considers assertion the natural counterpart of judgement and judgement the occurrent part of belief, as mentioned in his k-FIRST program, this then follows the rule that one should judge (or believe) p only if one knows p (Williamson, 2000:10). Therefore, with belief being aimed at knowledge and with knowledge entailing circularly epistemic SAFETY, and for S to not fall into the field of ignorance, SAFETY is a necessary condition to avoid getting to the truth accidentally and this is so for assertoric content as well. In the next sections, the argument that this sometimes implausible-to-fulfil condition gives room for considering the other rules that make assertions hold within the scope of ignorance is made in this paper.

As supplementary reasons to endorse k-RULE as the one and only constitutive rule over truth rule alone, Williamson claims that assertion is not the only speech act aimed at truth and that this type of utterance is not more privileged than others. Conjecturing and swearing are both aimed at the truth as well, even if to assert is not always to swear and to swear is not always to assert (Williamson, 2000:244). It is undeniable that conjecturing has lower warranting standards than assertion, so additional constraint is required to individuate the speech act we are dealing with —this issue will be elaborated upon in section 4.

Williamson (2000:248) provides another reason to prefer k-RULE over other kinds of constitutive rules like the truth rule (now referred to as the t-RULE) by performing a reductio ad absurdum of the latter norm. t-RULE can be stated along the lines of "if one must (φ only if p is true), then one should (φ only if one has evidence that p is true)." This norm is one according to which ‘must’ forbids and ‘should’ provides reasons for an action. So, by reductio ad absurdum,
“one ought to have evidence for one’s assertion because it ought to be true.” In some cases, this goal may fall short.

Consider, for example, a lottery case in which $S_1$ asserts to $S_2$ that the ticket she bought in a fair lottery was not the winning ticket, basing her assertion just on probabilistic reasons: $S_1$ is clearly exceeding her evidential authority. The truth account does not apply to $S_1$ as “the resources rule out the possibility that there is adequate evidence for each of the assertions ‘t did not win’ but not for their conjunction.” From SAFETY, if $S_1$ is basing her assertion just on a method derived from entertaining probabilities for each ticket, then $S_1$ could easily have falsely believed that each ticket from the whole conjunction had not won. Therefore, $S_1$ is cheating in the assertion game. So, in cases like this, the proper assertion circularly entails SAFETY and then forces $S_1$ to assert that she does not know if the chosen method is just probability. Even after asserting that ‘$S_2$ ticket did not win’, the content of the assertion can still be taken to be true. This is, therefore, another reason to endorse k-RULE.

Williamson (2000:253) also considers another argument to endorse k-RULE that is based on a particular version of George E. Moore’s paradox, $p$ and I do not believe that $p$, in which he uses ‘know’ in the place of ‘believe’. Sometimes, it may be that this is the case even if $S$ does not know it. However, to intuitively assert ‘$p$ and I do not know that $p$’ seems wrong. k-RULE can account for this phenomena. To know a conjunction requires that each conjunct be known: to assert $p$ commits to $S$ the existence of $p$, that is, to know $p$, and so with the assertion mentioned above a contradiction of the form $kp \land \neg kp$ can be found. Therefore, in accordance with the game metaphor mentioned previously, $S$ is cheating.

Further support for k-RULE is derived from a family of conversational data, which includes the fact that assertions can be challenged by asking how $S$ knows what she has asserted. To remain in good standing, the speaker is required to adequately respond to this challenge (Williamson, 2000 and Turri, 2014). So, as Williamson would argue, the aforementioned is evidence for understanding that k-RULE governs assertions: evidence that is reason enough to not entertain t-RULE in the pluralist account presented in this paper on the rules for assertion. This is elaborated upon in section 4.

At his point, a natural objection arises: most of the time we assert things violating k-RULE a à Williamson, even if we ought to assert just what fits within a reliable method. It is highly implausible to require $S$ to assert if she knows the proposition $p$ contained within her assertion. This objection allows Williamson to clarify what the expression ‘constitutive rule’
stands for by using the metaphor of a game. In chess\(^2\), for example, the movement of every piece has its own rule of movement assigned to it. A constitutive rule for, for instance, castle pieces in chess being pieces which you cannot move if the king is in check (let us call this rule castling). Authors like John R. Searle (1969) would say that if you do not comply with this rule, you are not castling. Still, Williamson disagrees. For him, when S violates this rule, we should agree that she is just cheating: the same applies for a football player who is not a goal-keeper when she touches the ball with her hands. That does not mean, however, that rules are not in force. According to Williamson, if S asserts something that she does not know, then she is cheating. Nevertheless, just like when one cheats in football or in chess by violating its rules but is still able to continue playing the game if one asserts ‘p’ while not knowing p, one cheats but does not stop asserting. This is the point where the excuse notion comes into play.

1.2. Excuses

In 1.1. it was made clear how Williamson states that one should judge (or believe) p only if one knows p, while assertion stands as the natural counterpart of judgement and judgement as that of the occurrent part of belief. Excusability applies to both assertion and belief and should be understood in light of the discussion between the internalist and the externalist approach to epistemic justification.

This discussion can be helpfully organized around the so-called new evil daemon scenarios. In such scenarios a given S might have some memories or perceptual experiences indiscriminable from the ones that another S, standing as an epistemic counterpart to her, is also having. Nevertheless, S’s experiences were intuitively induced for some evil daemon and so S’s beliefs do not constitute knowledge (they remain “botched” beliefs, to use Williamson’s terms). In this scenario, it is possible for internalists capture this intuitive verdict by claiming that, since epistemic justification supervenes upon internal mental states, the subject in the new evil daemon scenarios is justified. They tend to favor the idea that S is justified even though her belief is not formed reliably (as an externalist would do) on the basis of the aforementioned separation of belief, truth and justification (understanding the last one to be a specific kind of further condition, C) acting as independent variables. For externalists, this kind of belief is merely excused, not justified. In particular, for an externalist like Williamson, it is an unsuccessful case of knowledge within the dependent variable between the mind and the

\(^2\) This example is taken from MacFarlane (2009).
external world. He proposes to capture the intuitive verdict resulting from the scenario mentioned here by distinguishing between justification and excusability. According to him (Williamson, forthcoming), S’s belief that p is justified if she knows that p, and so justification is knowledge. If, as Williamson argues, knowledge is the result of SAFETY, then all beliefs not based on SAFETY do not qualify as knowledge and therefore remain belief alone, understood as “botched” knowledge. The same happens with assertions: if the content of a given speech act fails to be knowledge, then S fails to comply with k-RULE, and so the assertion dealt with is a kind of “botched” assertion, but an assertion after all. In these two cases, Williamson argues, S is excusable.

Still, Williamson (forthcoming) understands that each excused belief is merely excused in its own way and that significant differences do exist between them. Even though he states that it is not possible to establish a taxonomy of excuses, he also makes clear the distinction between a given norm for assertion N, understood here as a norm for S in the assertion situation, and the secondary norm of having a general disposition to comply with N or DN. And these two are in between the tertiary norm of doing what an S who complies with DN would do in the assertion situation at issue here, or ODN, being ‘o’ for ‘occurrent’. It is improbable but possible to comply with N, DN and ODN, and so S will in any situation always assert only that which she knows. It is possible to comply with N and ODN while violating DN, so though S would not generally assert only what she knows, in a very ordinary situation she would do it because it happens to suit her to do so and so on to show that all these three norms do not have equal status.

The notion of excusability helps Williamson to vindicate his k-FIRST approach to assertion in cases where it is known by intuition that one is blamelessly asserting a given proposition. Such cases are Gettier cases and the new evil daemon scenarios, from which it is understood through intuition that one has a justified true belief that does not qualify as knowledge, or a justified false belief. Since Williamson maintains that justification requires knowledge, he explains away these intuitions by claiming that subjects in these scenarios blamelessly violate the knowledge rule. Williamson is able to distinguish between excusable and non-excusable violations of the k-RULE. This explains why someone might cheat and be excused at the assertion game by not complying with its constitutive rule while still playing the game. To understand the pluralist proposal that will be explained in section 4, it should be noted

---

3 Jonathan Sutton (2007) formulates it as follows: "My view is that a subject's belief that p is justified if he knows that p: justification is knowledge."
that the notion of excusability circularly entails the notion of reasonably believing. S is excused for believing p only if S reasonably believes that p, if p is either not the case or the causal relation between S’s “botched” belief and p does not constitute knowledge à la Williamson. In section 4, the role that excusability might play on type-individuating assertions will be discussed.

Williamson’s approach to assertion has thus been presented in this paper. In the next sections some potential concerns that can be raised against such an approach will be addressed. In section 2, how retraction data poses a challenge for k-RULE being the one and only rule for assertion is discussed; in section 3, the possibility that from the problem of retraction it should be argued that there are no rules governing assertions will be taken into consideration. However, the argument concerning the reasons why the constitutive rules approach is the right one will be raised; in section 4, the positive pluralist proposal put forward in this paper shall be introduced; in section 5 further work to be done in the same direction defined in section 4 will be suggested and section 6 will be the conclusion.

2. Retraction

In this section, the focus will be on the phenomenon of retraction since, it puts some pressure on Williamson’s approach to assertion. That can be taken to mean that another normative approach dealing with the normative implications that S must fulfil when she makes an assertion will be used. In an article published a decade ago, John MacFarlane (2009) entertains different broad categories of answers to the question: what is assertion? For many, to assert is “to express an attitude,” while for others, to assert is “to propose to add information to the conversational common ground.” Nevertheless, the two accounts that MacFarlane considers in his paper that can be beneficial in shedding some light on the current debate are those committed to the idea that to assert is “to make a move defined by its constitutive rules” (as Williamson does with k-RULE) and the ones who endorse that to assert is “to undertake a commitment.” Even though they both describe assertions in normative terms, these two accounts differ as follows: constitutive rules look at norms for making assertions while commitment accounts look at the normative effect of making assertions or at the fact that if S asserts p S is committed to retracting that assertion if they cannot take up the challenge to defend it. It must be noted that, for the sake of the arguments presented in this paper, these two approaches can be combined even if some k-RULE advocates may reject the latter view. Now,
MacFarlane’s account focusing on the normative commitments that a given S undertakes while asserting will be addressed.

In his works on assertion, Williamson does not consider the normative effects of this kind for assertion as MacFarlane does. By entertaining these effects, MacFarlane argues that k-RULE cannot explain retraction data. MacFarlane offers an example of retraction in his paper using epistemic modals: a given S utters the assertion ‘Joe is in Boston’. Then, the content of her assertion is challenged by some data rejecting it. Thus her previous assertion could be retracted by saying, ‘Joe might not be in Boston after all’. Other examples of retraction would be expressions of the kind ‘I take that back’ or ‘I recant’.

MacFarlane considers retraction a move constituted by its own rules which govern when it should be made. After considering many possible candidates for a retraction rule (MacFarlane, 2009:12-13), he poses the following one,

RETRACTION-RULE: One must (retract a previous assertion A when one performed A and A was untrue)

This rule, combined with the normative implications defined by MacFarlane’s proposal, has a considerable impact on k-RULE a là Williamson. If RETRACTION-RULE was set as “One must retract a previous assertion A when one performed A and A was not known” then it would be very hard for S to show that her assertion was safe from error, for she would need to have the concept of SAFETY and closeness of possible worlds to properly take up the challenge to defend her assertion. What is in dispute when considering a very plausible norm like MacFarlane’s RETRACTION-RULE is SAFETY as a necessary condition for assertion to count as such when one is required to defend their claim: if knowledge circularly entails SAFETY then every belief that fails to be safe falls into ignorance, according to Williamson. As explained in 1.2., Williamson retains k-RULE by stating that whenever S’s assertoric content falls into ignorance she can be excused if she finds herself in a Gettier case or a new evil daemon skeptical scenario, but it is still not clear why, under RETRACTION-RULE, S should retract her assertion if its content is true, and, as many would argue, t-RULE should be enough for an assertion to hold. It might follow that t-RULE alone does not require retraction, and if so, it is not clear why an assertion governed by this rule, even though it had gotten to the truth accidentally, needs excuses as is posed in 1.2. at all. Still, this paper will defend the point that retraction is
required only when the excused assertion coming from S fails to be excused while ruling out t-RULE as a constitutive rule. More about this discussion will follow in section 4.

MacFarlane points out that under this view, assertions express belief—understanding in this article belief as being a function aimed towards knowledge to comply with k-FIRST program—only when there is a general presupposition that the asserter S is disposed to play under constitutive rules.

3. No need for rules?

Since Williamson’s arguments in favor of k-RULE being the best rule of assertion are compelling and in light of the objection concerning retraction presented above, one might conclude that assertion is not governed by any rule at all. This is the position advanced by Joshua Schechter (2017) and Casey Johnson (2017).

Joshua Schechter rejects the very same idea of constitutive norms for speech acts. His proposal is to rule out constitutive norms by considering “general pragmatic principles governing communication, such as a principle that tells us to do what is communicatively most helpful in context.” According to him, this requires us to find other ways, which do not involve norms, to distinguish assertions from other speech acts (Schechter, 2017:37). To do so, he relies on papers from Igor Douven (2006) and Jennifer Lackey (2007): both authors sustain that whenever S finds herself asserting p in a Gettier-style case of justified false belief, she does not need any kind of excuse for her asserting p to be appropriate, as a possibility that has been mentioned at the end of section 2. This, Schechter understands, might be proof of rules not existing at all. The discussion between excuse and justification will not be explored in detail here, but it is still argued in this paper that under RETRACTION-RULE, in these cases when p fails to be true and S does not find herself in a new evil daemon scenario and assuming the very same conjunction for the assertion containing p, S actually ought to retract.

To reinforce his position, Schechter draws into the picture an even more controversial example, in which an assertion about p can be proper if the asserter believes that p, even if the belief is unjustified. He concedes that this is a claim that have not found much endorsement in the literature, which is understandable. An example of this is that an S named Robinson strongly believes that there is life on Jupiter’s satellite Europa based on wishful thinking. Schechter requires us to suppose that Robinson does not believe that this belief is defective at all. To the question “Is there life somewhere other than on Earth?” Robinson answers, “Yes, there is life on
Europa.” He maintains that Robinson’s assertion is proper if we ought to do what is communicatively most helpful in context, which in this case would be to provide an answer to a question. Yet Joshua Schechter concedes that Robinson does not reasonably believe the proposition uttered, and he even accepts that Robinson does not reasonably believe that he knows the proposition. So, in this case, he fails to comply with the excusability notion circularly entailing rationality, as explained at the end of section 1.2. If he is asserting, he is not excused, and he ought to retract when asked to answer how he knows what is being asserted. Still, Robinson’s response seems very much like a conjecture (as explained in 1.1.) when taking into account how this belief is formed. In the next section, an argument will be raised about why the reasonable-to-believe notion implicit in the excusability notion is important in the pluralist account presented in this paper and why a speech act like the one entertained in Robinson’s case should be considered conjecture and not proper assertion.

Besides the evidence we have from language, that Schechter considers to be expressions of the form ‘how do you know it?’, which is the kind of conversational evidence referred to in 1.1. when the hearer of an assertion casts doubt on the content of the speech act, as mentioned previously, if the existence of normative effects is conceded to, then the existence of norms should be accepted. RETRACTION-RULE is quite challenging to reject. This paper supports the idea that there exist sound indications of k-RULE being constitutive for making assertion: also regarding excusability circularly entailing the notion of reasonably believing, as will be explained in section 4. The retraction requirement as a normative effect taken from the examples offered by Schechter and referred to in the previous paragraphs can be an example of why the existence of constitutive rules for assertions must be entertained.

Moreover, Schechter unintentionally offers in his conclusions an excellent counterexample to his claims. As a reason to also reject belief rule (b-RULE) for assertion, Joshua Schechter brings into the discussion a case taken from Rachel McKinnon (2013:124) and Williamson (2000:256) of a tutor of a student in physics. In this case, the tutor fears that while putting in all the required effort, her student may be concerned only with the small details which prevent her from seeing the big picture. In a situation in which this student requires an urgent response, her tutor answers something in which she does not believe and that she knows to be false. Schechter argues that in this example, it is appropriate to assert claims that one knows to be false. However, what the tutor is doing here is transferring the need for retraction to the student in a clearer way if possible. If the tutor’s contribution is to be introduced in a PhD thesis, the examining board will discount points from the student's final marks if she
does not retract the false assertion. So Schechter must provide some answer for RETRACTION-RULE.

4. A pluralist proposal

So far this paper has brought to light the following areas of tension. Firstly, Williamson’s arguments in favor of there being a k-RULE governing the making of assertions are compelling. Secondly, MacFarlane’s idea that asserting a given proposition also has some normative effects and seems to be plausible as well. Focusing more specifically on the normative effect of retracting one’s assertion, in this paper it has been maintained that combining the idea of norms of retraction with Williamson’s k-FIRST approach gives rise to the idea that S must retract S’s assertion concerning p if p is unknown. This means that S must be able to show that S does in fact know that p in order to not be required to retract her assertion. However, this requirement is too demanding as it asks of subjects to be able to discern whether their beliefs are safe from error, thereby requiring them to have the concept of SAFETY which is a philosophical concept.

This said, however, the idea that assertions are governed by rules should not be dismissed. Instead, a form of normative pluralism about assertion is proposed in this section. The main tenet of this pluralist view is that the making and the retracting of an assertion are governed by different norms: the making of an assertion is governed by k-RULE, but the retracting is governed by an excusability-RULE (e-RULE), and not the t-RULE mentioned previously.

To support this suggestion, let us firstly reconsider one of Williamson’s objections presented in 1.1. on t-RULE being the constitutive rule for assertion. Assertions are not the only speech act aimed at truth. Conjecturing is aimed at the truth too. In this paper, the suggestion has been made to use the excusability notion entailing a reasonable-to-believe rule —if we understand “reasonability” in an internalist fashion— as a constraint to mark out the area of assertions. Let us remember section 1.2.: S is excused for believing p only if S reasonably believes that p, either if p is not the case or the causal relation between S’s “botched” belief and p does not constitute knowledge a là Williamson. Conjecture does not necessarily entail any commitment from S with the world, so this speech act allows for entertaining contradictory claims, while assertion does not if we assume that S is rational. To use excusability in this way might be a solution to answer Joshua Schechter’s requirement to find something besides
k-RULE to distinguish assertions from other speech acts, even though, in this suggestion itself as argued in section 3., rules are involved.

Secondly, against t-RULE too, the idea is committed to that it is very hard for a given S to take up the commitment to show that she knows that p, entailing that circularly SAFETY is known, the same may hold —to a certain extent— with the commitment to show that p is true. Not all truths are accessible, so it is much easier to take up the commitment to show that believing or asserting p is excusable, following Williamson, regarding S’s epistemic position. Consider the new evil daemon scenarios explained in 1.2. In these environments, S does not know that she does not know that p. Still, against Williamson’s account on luminosity, namely, the rejection of the idea that we have special access to our mental states or that we are in a position to know what one’s evidence is, authors like Sven Rosenkranz (2018) argued that not knowing that one does not know that p is luminous.

To forestall misunderstanding: Rosenkranz maintains that the very notion of epistemic justification is equivalent to the fact that one is not in a position to know that one is not in a position to know that p. So, in this paper it is proposed that Rosenkranz’s claim that “not being in a position to know that one is not in a position to know” is luminous be accepted, since it is consistent with Williamson’s framework that maintains that a subject is excused from asserting p if she is not in a position to know that she is not in a position to know p —for that’s the condition of the new evil demon scenario. This tells us that if S’s assertion is excusable, then S is in a position to know that she is excusable in cases like the new evil daemon scenarios. Under this light, being able to take up the commitment to defend S’s assertion would mean to be able to show that S’s assertion is excusable: and S is always in a position to know whether her assertion is or is not excusable, for excusability is luminous. This outcome is possible since, by Rosenkranz’s reasoning, it is possible to guarantee that whether or not S is excusable is always within S’s epistemic reach. Following MacFarlane, S must be able to take up the commitment to defend her assertion, and if not then she ought to retract it.

Therefore, in Gettier cases, by RETRACTION-RULE, S’s assertion is excusable and there is no need for retraction because her assertion is accidentally true, and in the new evil daemon scenarios S’s assertion continues to be excusable as far as her epistemic reach makes her excusable, following Rosenkranz. However, Schechter’s Robinson example in section 3 would be a case of non-excusability: the readers are not in a position to know if Robinson got to the truth accidentally as far as there is no way to check if there is life in Europa, neither for the readers nor him. So the argument is put forward in this paper that Robinson’s utterance might
be type-individuated as conjecture. However, the case of the student in the physics tutor’s assertion is not excusable, and it cannot be saved by type-individuating it as a conjecture since the tutor knows her utterance to be false. To the question ‘how do you know?’ they both ought to answer that they do not know it and to retract by following the conjunction of k-RULE for making the assertion and e-RULE for retraction, since they are not excusable, understanding the latter also as a way to individuate assertion from other speech-acts.

By considering retraction governed by excusability, the pluralist proposal presented in this paper on constitutive rules for assertion allows for a certain harmony between knowledge governing the making of assertion and excusability for those cases in which S is in a bad environment. Or, to put it in other words, this form of normative pluralism says that assertion is the speech act that is jointly type-individuated by k-RULE and e-RULE.

5. Further research

In this section further work to be done will be addressed. This form of pluralism might, if appropriately developed, solve other problems having to do with k-RULE’s factivity, namely the problem outlined by a recent paper from Cristoph Kelp and Mona Simion (2018) having to do with the engagement of a given S to a constitutive rule for assertion. Kelp and Simion use this concept of engagement to argue against the existence of just one and only one constitutive rule for assertion: something that applies for k-RULE, t-RULE, b-RULE, e-RULE and so on. It should be noted, however, that they do not claim that assertions are not governed at all for constitutive rules. They both agree that they exist, and with Williamson, accept that one of the constitutive rules governing this speech act is knowledge, which is a position that they have defended in Kelp (2013, forthcoming), Kelp and Simion (2017) and Simion (2016a, b). So their contribution is against considering k-RULE alone as the one and only constitutive rule for assertion, as I do. To do this, their engagement condition comes into play,

ENGAGEMENT CONDITION: if activity A is constituted by only a single constitutive rule R and if one violates R with near-maximum systematicity, then one does not engage in A

4 Before them, Ishani Maitra (2011) and Casey Johnson (2017) developed similar accounts.
5 In their paper, Kelp and Simion initially consider an engagement condition of the form “if some activity A is constituted by a set of constitutive rules, R, then one cannot violate too many members of R too systematically without ceasing to engage in A” and, they later refer the one used in this paper as a derivation labeled engagement condition’ (or engagement condition prime). However, as far as my article
After, they consider ENGAGEMENT CONDITION along with two hypotheses, or,

SYSTEMATIC FALSITY: $S_1$ makes assertions that, with near-maximum systematicity, are false and

SYSTEMATIC COUNTER-KNOWLEDGE: $S_1$ makes assertions that, with near-maximum systematicity, are false and run counter to what $S_2$ knows.

Then, they show the inconsistency of considering any kind of constitutive rule alone by using a generic rule of the kind,

c-RULE: one must assert $p$ only if $p$ has property $C$

in which $C$ stands as any kind of property considered for a constitutive rule, and

FACTIVITY: $p$ has $C$ only if $p$ is true.

It will be conceded by most that if a given subject $S$ violates a constitutive rule $R$ for an activity $A$ with near-maximum systematicity, then one does not engage in $A$. The problem arising from these considerations is that they rely on the fact that if it is possible to think of cases in which $S$ asserts by saying something that is systematically false or unknown, then this fact—together with the engagement condition—should lead proponents of a given kind of $C$ account of assertion to say that the person in question is no longer asserting the relevant propositions. And yet, since these cases are best described by saying that the person in question is indeed asserting the relevant propositions, then the proponents of the $C$ account have a problem.

The SYSTEMATIC COUNTER-KNOWLEDGE hypothesis also prevents the belief rule (b-RULE) from being the one and only constitutive norm. If it is supposed that there is one and only one constitutive rule for assertion and that this rule is b-RULE, then by SYSTEMATIC COUNTER-KNOWLEDGE, $S$ utters assertions that with near-maximum systematicity run

is aimed to put pressure on the idea of being assertions governed by one and only one constitutive rule, the latter is directly being used here.
counter to what she knows, or that when she asserts \( p \) she knows \( \neg p \). If S’s beliefs qualify as knowledge, then when S knows that \( \neg p \) she almost never believes that \( p \). Therefore she is violating b-RULE with maximum systematicity. The combination of MacFarlane’s RETRACTION-RULE and Kelp and Simion’s systematic falsity/counter-knowledge point speaks against Williamson’s k-RULE qua unique rule. If it is possible to assert while violating k-RULE and there is no need for retraction, then we should consider constitutive rules other than knowledge.

Someone may argue that both SYSTEMATIC FALSITY and SYSTEMATIC COUNTER-KNOWLEDGE are incredible hypotheses: one of those possible situations that make the discussion inescapable. For any reasoning endorsing one and only one constitutive rule, it is possible to define an unlikely situation in which a given S incurs into an irrational systematic practice. Yet, if Williamson’s definition of knowledge as circularly entailing SAFETY is taken as the standard for assertion in light of Kelp and Simion’s ENGAGEMENT CONDITION and MacFarlane’s RETRACTION-RULE, it is not very unlikely that some S, e.g. a conspiracy theorist, be found failing systematically to comply with SAFETY by falling into several argumentative fallacies. In the so-called post-truth era, there have been studies conducted on the kind of cognitive biases that conspiracy theorists have while retaining thousands of followers (Gorman and Gorman, 2017), even those defending very strange ideas like that of the earth being flat.

Obviously, none of these conspiracy theorists comply with SAFETY: they instead engage in cherry-picking, confirmation bias and the confusion between correlation and causality, filling the ignorance gap or all the types of fallacies that one can imagine. Still, as the high number of followers they have in some cases show, they are able to retain some credibility since they mostly comply with the requirement of truth making their assertion to supervene on some cherry-picked truths while systematically violating k-RULE. Thus many may argue that their very existence is proof of truth being a sufficient condition for assertion or, as Schechter does, for rules not existing at all. Still, e-RULE may provide a tool for considering each conspiracy theorist case individually to state in which cases retraction is required if excusability does not apply. Those would be Gettier cases, in which factivity requirement in Kelp and Simion conditional of conjunctions may hold at some degree, or new evil daemon environments in which S is excusable following Rosenkrantz’s reasoning.
6. Conclusion

It has been taken into consideration in this paper that Williamson’s disjunctivist approach arising from the distinction between knowledge and ignorance might be quite hard to fulfill, under the light of retraction data, when knowledge à la Williamson is considered as the one and only rule governing assertion. MacFarlane’s contribution combining constitutivist approaches for assertion and commitment approaches, with the latter type being those that make clear the normative effects for assertion, pose some points which can contest Williamson’s views. If a retraction rule of the kind “S must retract a previous assertion A when S performed A and A was not known” is entertained, then it would be very hard for S to show that her assertion was safe from error, for she would need to have the concept of SAFETY and closeness of possible worlds to properly take up the challenge to defend her assertion. Still, far from considering this challenge proof of constitutive rules not existing at all as some authors like Schechter do, a pluralist view is argued for in this paper in which k-RULE remains the rule governing the making of assertions and an excusability-RULE, e-RULE, be raised as the one governing retraction. This paper concludes with the sketching of possibilities for further research on the subject of e-RULE possibly proving useful for addressing the challenges coming from factivity in the engagement condition posed by Kelp and Simion.
BIBLIOGRAPHY:


