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DISCUSSION NOTE

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How to understand the knowledge norm of assertion: Reply to Schlöder

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Abstract
Julian Schlöder (2018) examines Timothy Williamson's proposal that knowledge is the norm of assertion within the context of deontic logic. He argues for two claims, one concerning the formalisation of the thesis that knowledge is *a* norm of assertion and another concerning the formalisation of the thesis that knowledge is the *only* norm of assertion. On the basis of these claims, Schlöder goes on to raise a series of problems for Williamson's proposal. In response, I argue that both of Schlöder's claims can—and should—be rejected.

KEYWORDS
assertion, deontic logic, knowledge norm, Schlöder, Williamson

1 | INTRODUCTION

Timothy Williamson famously proposed that knowledge is the norm of assertion (1996, 2000). Julian Schlöder (2018) examines the proposal within the context of deontic logic. He argues for two claims, one concerning the formalisation of the thesis that knowledge is *a* norm of assertion and another concerning the formalisation of the thesis that knowledge is the *only* norm of assertion. On the basis of these claims, he goes on to raise a series of problems for the proposal. While I hold no brief for Williamson's proposal, I will argue, in its defence, that each of Schlöder's claims concerning its formalisation can—and should—be rejected.

2 | FORMALISING THE THESIS THAT KNOWLEDGE IS *A* NORM OF ASSERTION

Schlöder's first claim concerns the formalisation of the thesis that knowledge is *a* norm of assertion. Williamson formulates this thesis as the claim that one must: (assert that φ) only if one knows that φ (2000, p. 243). Formulated this way, the obvious formalisation of the thesis that knowledge is a norm of assertion is:

$$(\mathbf{KNA-W})\ \Box(A\varphi \rightarrow K\varphi)$$

Schlöder, however, rejects **(KNA-W)** in favour of the following, a formalisation of the claim that, if it is permissible that one asserts that φ, then one knows that φ:

$$(\mathbf{KNA-Nec})\quad \Diamond A\varphi \rightarrow K\varphi$$

The case Schlöder makes against **(KNA-W)** revolves around certain arguments Williamson deploys in support of the claim that knowledge is a norm of assertion, the *How do you know that?* and *You don't know that!* arguments. According to the first of these, the claim that knowledge is a norm of assertion explains why, if a speaker asserts something, one may always ask her *how* she knows it; according to the second, it explains why, if she *doesn't* know it, she can be criticised for not knowing it. Schlöder rightly insists that a formalisation of the thesis that knowledge is a norm of assertion is acceptable only if it "sanctions" these arguments (p. 50), that is, only if it is possible to explain the relevant facts in terms of that formalisation. And the problem, as Schlöder would seem to have it, is that **(KNA-W)** does *not* sanction Williamson's arguments: while the relevant facts can be explained in terms of **(KNA-Nec)**, Schlöder appears to think they cannot be explained in terms of **(KNA-W)**. He therefore concludes that **(KNA-W)** should be rejected in favour of **(KNA-Nec)**.

(KNA-W) does sanction Williamson's arguments, however. To see this, suppose that a speaker asserts that P, that is, that Ap holds. And suppose further both that knowledge is a norm of assertion and that the thesis that knowledge is a norm of assertion is formalised by **(KNA-W)**. Given that either the speaker knows that P or she doesn't, that is, that $Kp \vee {\sim}Kp$ holds, it follows that $(Ap \,\&\, Kp) \vee (Ap \,\&\, {\sim}Kp)$ holds, that is, that we are in either of two cases: either the speaker asserts that P and knows that P or she asserts that P and does not know that P. And since $\Box(Ap \rightarrow Kp)$ is equivalent to ${\sim}\Diamond(Ap \,\&\, {\sim}Kp)$, it follows that, if the speaker does *not* know that P, so that we are in the second case, she has done something impermissible; put contrapositively, if the speaker has not done something impermissible, we must be in the first case, in which she *does* know that P. In short, if knowledge is a norm of assertion, and the thesis that knowledge is a norm of assertion is formalised by **(KNA-W)**, then knowing something is a necessary condition on doing something permissible in asserting it.

Once it has been established that knowing something is necessary for doing something permissible in asserting it, both the fact that a speaker who asserts that P may always be asked how she knows it, and the fact that she may be criticised if she does not know it, can be explained on the basis of two further assumptions. The first assumption, which I shall label (α), is that, where having property π is necessary for doing something permissible in ψ-ing, an agent who ψs may always be asked how she came to have property π. Given that knowing something is necessary for doing something permissible in asserting it, it follows that a speaker who asserts something may always be asked how she knows it: *How do you know that?* The second assumption, which I label (β), is that, where having property π is necessary for doing something permissible in ψ-ing, an agent who ψs and yet lacks property π may always be criticised for that lack. Given that knowing something is necessary for doing something permissible in asserting it, it follows that a speaker who asserts something but does not know it can be criticised for not knowing it: *You don't know that!*

It is difficult to see how Schlöder might deny that the foregoing shows that **(KNA-W)** sanctions Williamson's arguments except by denying one or the other of assumptions (α) and (β). As I have formulated them, these are both strong claims, concerning all actions whatsoever, and it may be possible to rely instead on weaker assumptions—concerning only speech acts, for example. But while I have no knock-down argument to offer in support of either assumption, both are prima facie plausible. Moreover, they can be supported by reflecting on cases in which it is uncontroversial that having a certain property is necessary for doing something permissible in performing a certain sort of action. Suppose, for example, that, in order to do something permissible in entering a certain building—a university library, for example—one must have authorisation for doing so. If one enters the building then it is the case both (a) that one may be asked how one obtained authorisation for doing so, and (b) that one may be criticised for not having authorisation if one does not. Similarly, suppose that, in order to do something permissible in ψ-ing when one has promised not to ψ, one must have been released from one's obligation not to ψ. If one ψs, despite having promised not to ψ, then it is the case both (a′) that one may be asked how one came to be released from one's obligation not to ψ and (b′) that one may be criticised for not having been released from one's obligation not to ψ if one has not. Assumptions (α) and (β) provide natural explanations of these commonplace sorts of facts, with (a) and (a′) being instances of (α), and (b) and (b′) instances of (β).

I shall assume, then, that both (α) and (β) are at least approximately correct, and conclude that **(KNA-W)** *does* sanction Williamson's arguments. It follows that, for all that he has shown, Schlöder's first claim, that Williamson's proposal that knowledge is a norm of assertion is to be formalised by **(KNA-Nec)**, can be rejected. I want to argue for a stronger conclusion, however. Schlöder's claim that Williamson's proposal is to be formalised by **(KNA-Nec)** not only *can* be rejected; it *should* be.

An initial point is that **(KNA-Nec)** is too weak to fully capture the thesis that knowledge is a norm of assertion. An adequate formalisation of the thesis ought to have the consequence that it is not permissible to assert something that one does not know, that is, $\sim\Diamond(A\varphi \;\&\; \sim K\varphi)$. Since $\sim\Diamond(A\varphi \;\&\; \sim K\varphi)$ is equivalent to $\Box(A\varphi \rightarrow K\varphi)$, **(KNA-W)** easily delivers this result. **(KNA-Nec)**, however, does not. In KD4,[1] Schlöder's favoured deontic logic, **(KNA-Nec)** is consistent with $\Diamond(Ap \;\&\; \sim Kp)$,[2] which formalises the claim it is permissible to assert that P and not know that P.

This is not a decisive objection to **(KNA-Nec)**. It may be possible to patch things up, either by strengthening the underlying logic or by making further stipulations, so that **(KNA-Nec)** *does* have $\sim\Diamond(A\varphi \;\&\; \sim K\varphi)$ as a consequence.[3] Nevertheless, I think it is significant. One would expect an adequate formalisation of the thesis that knowledge is a norm of assertion to entail $\sim\Diamond(A\varphi \;\&\; \sim K\varphi)$ in standard systems of deontic logic, such as KD4. Regardless, even if this objection is set to one side, I think there is another, more decisive objection, namely that **(KNA-Nec)** is too *strong*. For **(KNA-Nec)** is equivalent to, and so entails, $\sim K\varphi \rightarrow \sim\Diamond A\varphi$, which formalises the claim that, if one does not know something, it is not permissible for one to assert it.

At first sight, this might not seem problematic. Suppose that knowledge is a norm of assertion. If one does not know that P, does it not then follow that asserting that P is impermissible—if not that it is impermissible *full stop*, then at least that asserting it is impermissible *for one*? If so, then entailing ~Kφ → ~◇Aφ, far from constituting the basis of an objection to **(KNA-Nec)**, will in fact be something that an adequate formalisation of the thesis that knowledge is a norm of assertion *ought* to be doing.

It may be that something like this thought lies at the heart of Schlöder's objection to **(KNA-W)**. While I have shown that **(KNA-W)** enables us to demonstrate that a speaker who asserts something but does not know it does *something* impermissible, I have not shown that, if one does not know something, asserting it is impermissible.[4] That is to say, I have not shown that **(KNA-W)** enables us to demonstrate that ~Kφ → ~◇Aφ holds. Indeed, I *cannot* show this, since unlike **(KNA-Nec)**, **(KNA-W)** does not entail ~Kφ → ~◇Aφ.[5] Anyone who is tempted to think that, if knowledge is a norm of assertion then, if one does not know something, asserting it is impermissible, and so to think that an adequate formalisation of the thesis that knowledge is a norm of assertion ought to entail ~Kφ → ~◇Aφ, will thus be tempted to think **(KNA-W)** is too weak in much the same way as I argued **(KNA-Nec)** is too weak, and in particular that it is too weak to sanction Williamson's *You don't know that!* argument.

The temptation to think that an adequate formalisation of the thesis that knowledge is a norm of assertion ought to entail ~Kφ → ~◇Aφ should be resisted, however. If knowledge is a norm of assertion, it follows that asserting that P when one does not know that P is impermissible (for one). I think it also follows that, if one does not know that P, the particular assertion that one makes if one nevertheless asserts it is impermissible. However, it does not follow, and may even be false, that if one does not know that P, asserting that P is impermissible (for one): even if knowledge is a norm of assertion, it may be the case, both that one does not know that P, and that asserting that P is permissible (for one). An adequate formalisation of the thesis that knowledge is a norm of assertion therefore ought *not* to entail ~Kφ → ~◇Aφ.

What obscures this point is a tendency to conflate the particular assertion that one makes if one asserts that P with asserting that P itself. The assertion that one makes if one asserts that P is an *action*, a dated particular that is the *doing* of something. Asserting that P, on the other hand, is an *act*, a thing that is thereby done. While acts and actions are closely related—acts are types or kinds of things that are done; actions are the doings of them—they are importantly distinct. This is shown by the fact that acts are *repeatable*: one may perform the same act—do the same thing—on different occasions. Actions, by contrast, are unrepeatable: even if one does the same thing on different occasions, one's doings of it are, perforce, distinct from each other.[6]

With this distinction in place, the key point is easily appreciated. Suppose again that knowledge is a norm of assertion. It follows that the act of asserting that P when one does not know that P is impermissible; indeed, this is what it is for knowledge to be a norm of assertion. Given that doings of impermissible acts are themselves impermissible, it also follows that, in asserting that P when one does not know that P, one's doing of that act, the particular assertion that one makes, is an impermissible action. Though I will take no position on the issue here, it may be the case that acts that cannot be performed without performing some impermissible act are also impermissible. If so, from the assumption that knowledge is a norm of assertion, it also follows that various other acts, besides asserting that P when one does not know it, are impermissible—asserting that P when one does not know it and in a certain tone of voice, perhaps. But it does not follow that *other* acts are impermissible—those acts that *can* be performed without asserting that P when one does not know it. They may of course be impermissible for other reasons, but for all that the assumption that knowledge is a norm of assertion shows, these other acts are permissible. In particular, since asserting that P is something that can be done without asserting that P when one does not know it, it may be that the act of asserting that P is permissible.

Crucially, this last point—that, for all the assumption that knowledge is a norm of assertion shows, the act of asserting that P may be permissible—holds regardless of whether or not one knows that P. To see this, suppose that one currently does not know that P, but asserts it anyway. Then this particular assertion is impermissible. But suppose further that one is able to go on to find out, and so come to know, that P, and assert it again. For all that the assumption that knowledge is a norm of assertion shows, this later assertion is *not* impermissible. Yet one performs the same act—asserting that P—in making this later assertion as one does in making the earlier assertion. Given that an *action* is permissible only if it is not the performance of any impermissible *act*, it follows from the fact that, for all that the assumption that knowledge is the norm of assertion shows, the later assertion is not impermissible that, for all the assumption shows, the act of asserting that P is not impermissible either. In short, for all the assumption that knowledge is a norm of assertion shows, asserting that P is permissible, and regardless of whether or not one knows that P. An adequate formalisation of the thesis that knowledge is a norm of assertion therefore ought *not* to entail $\sim K\varphi \rightarrow \sim\Diamond A\varphi$. And since **(KNA-Nec)** does, it is too strong.

This concludes my case against Schlöder's first claim, the claim that the thesis that knowledge is a norm of assertion is to be formalised as **(KNA-Nec)**. Since, contrary to what Schlöder suggests, **(KNA-W)** does sanction Williamson's *How do you know that?* and *You don't know that!* arguments, this first claim *can* be rejected. I have also argued that it *should* be rejected, as, unlike **(KNA-W)**, it both fails to entail something that an adequate formalisation plausibly should, namely $\sim\Diamond(A\varphi \,\&\, \sim K\varphi)$, and entails something that an adequate formalisation should not: $\sim K\varphi \rightarrow \sim\Diamond A\varphi$.

This connects with debates, not just about the norms, if any, of assertion, but about whether normative requirements more generally are properly formulated as wide- or narrow-scope.[7] **(KNA-W)** formalises the thesis that knowledge is a norm of assertion in such a way that the deontic operator $\Box$ takes wide scope with respect to the material conditional, $\rightarrow$. **(KNA-Nec)**, which is equivalent to $\sim K\varphi \rightarrow \Box\sim A\varphi$, formalises it, by contrast, in such a way that $\Box$ takes narrow scope with respect to $\rightarrow$. I am thus defending a wide-scope formulation of the thesis that knowledge is a norm of assertion in arguing that Schlöder's first claim can be rejected, and attacking a narrow-scope formulation in arguing that it should be.

However, **(KNA-Nec)** is not the only narrow-scope formulation of the thesis that knowledge is a norm of assertion. **(KNA-Nec)** is the narrow-scope formulation that corresponds, not to **(KNA-W)**, but to the equivalent schema $\Box(\sim K\varphi \rightarrow \sim A\varphi)$. The narrow-scope schema corresponding to **(KNA-W)** is rather $A\varphi \rightarrow \Box K\varphi$, raising the obvious question: is there any reason to think that this alternative formalisation of the thesis should also be rejected? Or does it perhaps succeed where **(KNA-Nec)** fails?

It does not. Very briefly, $A\varphi \rightarrow \Box K\varphi$ fails to entail $\sim\Diamond(A\varphi \,\&\, \sim K\varphi)$.[8] It is thus too weak. Like **(KNA-Nec)**, albeit for different reasons, it is also too strong. For it is equivalent to, and so trivially entails, $A\varphi \rightarrow \sim\Diamond\sim K\varphi$, which formalises the claim that, if you assert something, it is not permissible to not know it. This is problematic for two reasons. On the one hand, it implies that, if you ever assert that P, it is impermissible to forget, and so not know, that P. This is very implausible. On the other hand, it implies that, even if one asserts something that one *cannot* know—because it is false, say—one nevertheless *ought* to know it. It thus conflicts with the widely held principle that ought implies can, that one can do what one ought to do.[9]

3 | FORMALISING THE THESIS THAT KNOWLEDGE IS THE *UNIQUE* NORM OF ASSERTION

The problems that Schlöder raises for the proposal that knowledge is the norm of assertion depend not only on his claim that the thesis that knowledge is a norm of assertion should be formalised as **(KNA-Nec)**, but also on an additional claim. This is the claim that, in order to fully capture the thesis that knowledge is the *unique* norm of assertion, the formalisation of the thesis that it is *a* norm of assertion will need to be supplemented with **(KNA-Suff)**, a formalisation of the claim that, if one knows something, it is permissible for one to assert it:

$$(\textbf{KNA}-\textbf{Suff})\ \mathrm{K}\varphi \rightarrow \Diamond \mathrm{A}\varphi$$

Schlöder's argument for this second claim revolves around the observation that Kp, Ap, and ~◇Ap are jointly consistent with **(KNA-Nec)** under KD4. Yet if this observation shows that, in order to fully capture the thesis that knowledge is the *unique* norm of assertion, **(KNA-Nec)** will need to be supplemented with **(KNA-Suff)**, it shows that **(KNA-W)** needs to be supplemented with **(KNA-Suff)** as well, since Kp, Ap, and ~◇Ap are also jointly consistent with **(KNA-W)** under KD4.[10]

But what exactly is the problem supposed to be with the fact that Kp, Ap, and ~◇Ap are jointly consistent under KD4 with **(KNA-W)**?[11] Why should we think this shows that, to capture the thesis that knowledge is the unique norm of assertion, **(KNA-W)** needs to be supplemented with **(KNA-Suff)**? Why is it not enough to formalise the thesis that knowledge is *a* norm of assertion, and to *not* supplement that formalisation with the formalisation of any further theses about norms of assertion?

Schlöder's central thought is that, if an assertion conforms to the knowledge norm and yet is impermissible, the assertion must violate some *other* norm of assertion: "knowledge would at most be a *partial* norm of assertion," Schlöder writes, "but not *the* norm" (p. 51). Given this, a formalisation of the thesis that knowledge is the *unique* norm of assertion will be adequate only if it implies that it is *not* possible for an assertion to conform to the knowledge norm and nevertheless be impermissible. But taken on its own, **(KNA-W)** does not imply this. The fact that Kp, Ap, and ~◇Ap are jointly consistent with **(KNA-W)** under KD4 shows that it allows for assertions that conform to the knowledge norm (Kp and Ap) but are impermissible (~◇Ap). To block this, Schlöder concludes, we need to assume that, if one knows that P, it is permissible for one to assert it, and so need to supplement **(KNA-W)** with **(KNA-Suff)**.[12]

The problem with this reasoning is that what I am calling its central thought—the claim that if an assertion conforms to the knowledge norm and is impermissible, the assertion must violate some other norm of assertion—is simply false. An assertion may conform to the knowledge norm and nevertheless be impermissible, not because it violates some other *norm of assertion*, but because it violates some *nonassertoric* norm, that is, a norm, such as a norm of politeness, that is not a norm of assertion.

Schlöder attempts to abstract away from nonassertoric norms such as norms of politeness by reading the permissibility operator, ◇, in a particular way, so that it may be permissible in the intended sense for one to assert that P, even though it is not permissible in a broader sense. More specifically, Schlöder's suggestion is that we read "the ◇ of the knowledge norm as expressing *to be in a position to*" (p. 51).

This does not address the issue, however. For one thing, although reading the permissibility operator in this way enables Schlöder to abstract away from some nonassertoric norms, it does not enable him to abstract away from them all. Someone who knows that P, but who is obliged not to reveal that P, having been told that P in confidence, for example, is not in a position to assert that P, even though to do so would not violate the knowledge norm or, *ex hypothesi*, any other norm of assertion. More importantly, the question of whether or not it is possible to abstract away from nonassertoric norms by reading the permissibility operator in a different way is simply not relevant. The issue at hand is whether or not, if knowledge is the norm of assertion, an assertion can conform to the norm and nevertheless be impermissible, on the ordinary understanding of the word "permissible"; and the answer to this question is simply "yes," as the example of assertions that conform to the knowledge norm but violate other nonassertoric norms shows. The fact (if it is a fact) that, on some *other* understanding of the "permissible," an assertion *cannot* conform to the norm and be impermissible, if knowledge is a norm of assertion, does nothing to change this.

Contra Schlöder, then, an adequate formalisation of the thesis that knowledge is the unique norm of assertion therefore need *not* imply that it is not possible for an assertion to conform to the knowledge norm and yet be impermissible, and the fact that Kp, Ap, and $\sim\Diamond Ap$ are jointly consistent under KD4 with **(KNA-W)** does nothing to show that it stands in need of supplementation with **(KNA-Suff)**. In fact, it follows from what has been said that it should *not* be supplemented with **(KNA-Suff)**. For if an assertion can conform to the knowledge norm and yet be impermissible because it violates some nonassertoric norm, instances of **(KNA-Suff)** may in fact be *false*.

4 | CONCLUSION

Schlöder nicely illustrates the point that formalisation can sharpen our appreciation of a philosophical issue by helping us to see new and interesting problems. I have argued that the claims on which the problems that Schlöder raises for Williamson's proposal are based—the claim that the thesis that knowledge is *a* norm of assertion is to be formalised in terms of **(KNA-Nec)** rather than **(KNA-W)**, and the claim that the thesis that knowledge is the *only* norm of assertion is to be formalised in terms of **(KNA-Suff)**—are false. In doing so, I hope to have illustrated another way in which formalisation can sharpen our appreciation of a philosophical issue, helping us to better see how a familiar proposal ought to be understood.[13]

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ENDNOTES

[1]KD4 is a standard deontic logic, in which the operators $\Box$ and $\Diamond$ are governed by axioms (K), (D), and (4), and the rule of inference (Nec):

(K) $\Box(\varphi \rightarrow \psi) \rightarrow (\Box\varphi \rightarrow \Box\psi)$
(D) $\Box\varphi \rightarrow \Diamond\varphi$
(4) $\Diamond\Diamond\varphi \rightarrow \Diamond\varphi$
(Nec) $\vdash \varphi$ entails $\vdash \Box\varphi$.

[2]To see that **(KNA-Nec)** is consistent with $\Diamond(Ap \& \sim Kp)$ in KD4, consider a KD4 model $\langle W, R, I\rangle$ where $W = \{a, b, c\}$, $R = \{\langle a, b\rangle, \langle a, c\rangle, \langle b, c\rangle, \langle c, c\rangle\}$, Kp holds in *a* but not *b*, Ap holds in *b* but not *c*, and, for all other wffs φ, Aφ does not hold in any world. **(KNA-Nec)** holds in all worlds, and $\Diamond(Ap \& \sim Kp)$ holds in *a*.

[3]I am grateful to Julian Schlöder for pressing this point.

[4]I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this journal for raising this.

[5]Consider a KD4 model <*W, R, I*> where *W* = {*a, b*}, *R* = {<*a, b*>, <*b, b*>}, Ap and Kp both hold in *b*, Kp does not hold in *a*, and, for all other wffs φ, Aφ does not hold in any world; **(KNA-W)** holds in all worlds, but ~Kp → ~◇Ap does not hold in *a*.

[6]I am grateful to Mike Martin for suggesting I put the issue in terms of the act-action distinction. For discussion of it, see, for example, the first chapter of Hornsby (1980).

[7]I am grateful to Manuel García-Carpintero and Javier Gonsález de Prado Salas for discussion of this point. Broome (1999) is a prominent defence of the view that normative requirements are to be construed as wide-scope. For discussion and criticism of Broome's views, see Kolodny (2005) and Raz (2005).

[8]To see that Aφ → □Kφ does not entail ~◇(Aφ & ~Kφ), consider a KD4 model <*W, R, I*> where *W* = {*a, b, c*}, *R* = {<*a, b*>, <*a, c*>, <*b, c*>, <*c, c*>}, Kp holds in *c* but not *b*, Ap holds in *b* but not *a*, and, for all other wffs φ, Aφ does not hold in any possible world. Then Aφ → □Kφ holds in all worlds, and ◇(Ap & ~Kp) holds in *a*.

[9]I am grateful to Guy Longworth for this point.

[10]To see this, consider a KD4 model <*W, R, I*> where *W* = {*a, b*}, R = {<*a, b*>, <*b, b*>}, and Kp and Ap hold in *a*, Ap does not hold in *b*, and, for all other wffs φ, Aφ does not hold in any world. **(KNA-W)** holds in all, and Kp, Ap, and ~◇Ap hold in *a*.

[11]I focus on the case of **(KNA-W)** in what follows, since it is my preferred formalisation of the thesis that knowledge is a norm of assertion, but what I say applies equally to the case of **(KNA-Nec)**.

[12]It is unclear to me why Schlöder opts here for **(KNA-Suff)**, which formalises the assumption that, if one knows something, it is permissible for one to assert it. To ensure that Kp, Ap, and ~◇Ap are not jointly consistent under KD4, all that is needed is the weaker assumption that, if one knows something *and asserts it*, it is permissible for one to assert it, which can be formalised as (Kφ ∧ Aφ) → ◇Aφ.

[13]In addition to more specific debts acknowledged in earlier footnotes, I would like to thank Julian Schlöder, Lee Walters, two anonymous referees for this journal, and audiences at talks in London and Paris for discussion and comments.

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