

Knowledge Guaranteed

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Abstract: What is the relationship between saying ‘I know that Q’ and guaranteeing that Q? John Austin, Roderick Chisholm and Wilfrid Sellars all agreed that there was some important connection, but disagreed over what exactly it was. In this paper I discuss each of their accounts, and present a new one of my own. I suggest that the relation is this: by saying ‘I know that Q’, you represent yourself as having the authority to guarantee that Q.

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1. Introduction

What is the relationship between saying ‘I know that Sarah won’ and guaranteeing that Sarah won, or more generally between saying ‘I know that Q’ and guaranteeing that Q? John Austin, Roderick Chisholm and Wilfrid Sellars all agreed that there was some important connection, but disagreed over what exactly it was. In this paper I discuss each of their accounts, and present a new one of my own.

Austin said the relationship between ‘I know’ and guaranteeing amounts to this: when you say ‘I know that Q’, you thereby guarantee that Q. Chisholm said the relationship is this: sometimes, but

not always, when you say ‘I know that Q’, you thereby guarantee that Q. Sellars said the relationship is this: ‘I know that Q’ means the same thing as ‘Q, and I have reasons good enough to guarantee Q’. I say the relationship is this: by saying ‘I know that Q’, you represent yourself as having the authority to guarantee that Q.

Here is the paper’s plan. Section 2 covers Austin’s view. Section 3 covers Chisholm’s view. Section 4 covers Sellars’s view. Section 5 presents my view. Section 6 concludes the discussion.

2. Austin

Austin thought that the relationship between ‘I know’ and guaranteeing amounts to this: when you say ‘I know that Q’, you thereby guarantee that Q.

Austin likens ‘I know’ to ‘I promise’. ‘I promise’ is a performative utterance. Let ‘A’ name an action type. In a normal situation, if you say ‘I promise to A’, then you thereby promise to A. Your aim in saying ‘I promise’ is not to describe or report anything, but to make a promise. Its purpose is not descriptive, but performative. Says Austin,

[W]hen I say “I promise” . . . I have not merely announced my intention, but, by using that formula (performing this ritual), I have bound myself to others, and staked my reputation, in a new way. Similarly, saying “I know” is taking a new plunge. But it is *not* saying “I have performed a specially striking feat

of cognition, superior, in the same scale as believing and being sure, even to being merely quite sure”: for there is nothing in that scale superior to being quite sure. Just as promising is not something superior, in the same scale as hoping and intending, even to merely fully intending: for there is nothing in that scale superior to fully intending. When I say “I know [that Q]”, I *give others my word*: I *give others my authority for saying* that [“Q”]. (Austin 1946: 171)

‘I know’ is not “a descriptive phrase” either, says Austin (1946: 174). To say ‘I know that Q’ is not to “*describe*” some special cognitive achievement of ours regarding Q.¹ Instead, it is *to do something*, namely, to “give others my word” that Q is the case, thereby authorizing them to repeat ‘Q’. And since Austin considers ‘give my word’ and ‘guarantee’ to be interchangeable in these matters (see the dagger (†) footnote on p. 173), we can put his position quite simply: to say ‘I know’ is to guarantee.

Austin’s evidence for this hypothesis is phenomenological. He points to *the way we feel* about uttering ‘I know’.

We all *feel* the very great difference between saying even “I’m *absolutely* sure” and saying “I know”: it is like the difference between saying even “I firmly and

¹ Here one is reminded of what is perhaps Sellars's most famous line: “The essential point is that in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says” (Sellars 1963: 169).

irrevocably intend” and “I promise”. If someone has promised to do A, then I am entitled to rely on it, and can myself make promises on the strength of it: and so, where someone has said to me “I know”, I am entitled to say *I know too*, at second hand. (Austin 1946: 172)

Here Austin goes beyond what he said in the previous quote. Previously he spoke of guaranteeing others the right to say ‘Q’. Here he speaks of guaranteeing others the right to say ‘I know that Q’. But that subtle difference is beside the main point. His main point is to extend the analogy between ‘I know’ and ‘I promise’. Saying ‘I promise to A’ feels a certain way, and guarantees that A will be done. Saying ‘I know that Q’ feels that same way, and so by analogy likewise guarantees that Q is true.

In the next section we’ll consider Chisholm’s critique of Austin, in light of which Chisholm’s own view takes shape.

3. Chisholm

Chisholm thought that the relationship between ‘I know’ and guaranteeing amounts to this: sometimes, but not always, when you say ‘I know that Q’, you thereby guarantee that Q.

Chisholm’s main criticism of Austin’s view is that it overlooks an important difference between performative utterances “in the strict sense” and “in the extended sense.”² We can perform certain

² Compare Searle’s (1979) distinction between “direct” and “indirect”

speech acts by simply saying that we are performing them. For example in normal circumstances, by saying ‘I promise’, you thereby promise; by saying ‘I apologize’, you thereby apologize; by saying ‘I request’, you thereby request; and so on. When you perform a speech act in this way, your utterance is *a performative utterance in the strict sense*. Compare ‘I request you to pass the salt’ to ‘I want the salt’. By saying ‘I want the salt’, you do not thereby want the salt – any suggestion to the contrary is ridiculous. And yet, as Chisholm (1966: 16 – 17) notes, ‘I want’ “is often used to accomplish what one might accomplish by means of the strict performative ‘I request’.” That is, often you can request me to pass the salt by saying ‘I want the salt’. In virtue of this, we can consider ‘I want’ to be *a performative utterance in the extended sense*. Other phrases similarly qualify. For instance, whereas ‘I apologize’ is a strict performative, ‘I’m sorry’ can often be used to apologize.

Chisholm then remarks,

Clearly, “I know” is not performative in what I have called the strict sense of the term, for knowing is not an “act” that can be performed by saying “I know.” To say “I *promise* that *p*,” at least under certain circumstances, *is* to promise that *p*; but to say “I know that *p*” is not itself to know that *p*. (One may say “I hereby promise,” but not “I hereby know.”) “I know” is related to “I guarantee” and “I give you my word” in the way in which “I want” is related to “I request.” For “I

speech acts, or “primary” and “secondary” illocutionary acts.

know” is often used to accomplish what one may accomplish by the strict performative “I guarantee” or “I give you my word.” Hence, “I know” may be performative in an extended sense of the term. (Chisholm 1966: 17)

‘I want’ can still describe a state of mine even though it’s also being used performatively, to make a request. ‘I’m sorry’ can still say something about me even though it’s also being used performatively, to make an apology. Likewise ‘I know’ “may serve both to say something about me and to provide you with guarantees” (Chisholm 1966: 17). Chisholm also notes that there are perfectly ordinary situations in which to say ‘I know’ is not to guarantee. I might, for instance “confess or boast to you” that I know something you thought only you knew, even though “you neither need nor want my guarantee.”³

³ In fairness to Austin, he could handle this latter criticism by pointing out that, generally speaking, performatives “come off” only against certain background conditions. ‘I promote you’ can be used to promote you, but only if you’re eligible for the promotion. Likewise, Austin might say, ‘I know’ can be used to provide you with a guarantee only if you’re eligible for the provision. But this response, while plausible as far as it goes, does not address Chisholm’s more fundamental point, which is that ‘I know’ is a performative only in the extended sense, and so cannot *just* be a way of guaranteeing, and also plausibly has a “descriptive” function as well. Wittgenstein (1975: §12) suggests a view similar to Austin’s, but which could accommodate Chisholm’s insistence that ‘I know’ serves a descriptive function. Says Wittgenstein, “For ‘I know’ seems to describe a state of affairs which guarantees what is known, guarantees it as a fact.” In short, Wittgenstein suggests that by saying ‘I know’, you guarantee *by describing*. See also §§433, 575; but compare §243.

4. Sellars

Sellars thought that the relationship between ‘I know’ and guaranteeing amounts to this: ‘I know that Q’ *means the same thing as* ‘Q, and I have reasons good enough to guarantee Q’.

Sellars considered Chisholm’s critique of Austin compelling, as far as it went. But Sellars also suspected that Chisholm’s own answer didn’t capture the full extent of the relationship between ‘I know’ and guaranteeing. Says Sellars,

I think that Chisholm is quite right about [the weakness of Austin’s account]. On the other hand, it seems to me that [Chisholm] overlooks the possibility of a connection between “I know” and “I guarantee” other than the one he considers. “I know that-*p*” might be related to “I guarantee that-*p*” not just as an autobiographical description which on occasion performs the same role as the latter[,] but as one which contains a reference to guaranteeing in its very meaning. Is it not possible to construe “I know that-*p*” as essentially equivalent to “*p*, and I have reasons good enough to support a guarantee” (i.e., to say “I guarantee” or “You can rely on my statement”)? (Sellars 1975: 100)

Sellars mentions four points in favor of his semantic hypothesis (1975: 100). First, it allows us to “recognize a performative element in the very meaning of the verb ‘to know,’” while allowing for Chisholm’s point that ‘to know’ is not a strict performative. Second,

it preserves the “pre-analytic datum” that there is a “symmetry” among first, second, and third-person uses of ‘to know’. Third, it allows us to “appreciate the *context dependence* of the adequacy involved” in saying ‘I know’. Finally, the account explains why our ‘knowledge’-thoughts are essentially interpersonal.

I’ll now discuss each of Sellars’s four points in turn, and then present a more direct criticism of his semantic hypothesis.

Beginning with Sellars’s first point, it’s not clear that we ought to recognize a performative element *in the meaning* of ‘know’, even if we acknowledge that ‘know’ is a performative in the extended sense. We don’t think there’s a performative element in the meaning of ‘want’, even though ‘want’ is a performative in the extended sense. We don’t think that ‘I want X’ means ‘X is desirable, and I desire it enough to support a request’, or any such thing. So there is nothing in the profile of an extended performative to make us suspect that the meaning of ‘know’ should reflect its performative potential. Setting that aside, even if there is some pretheoretical pressure to recognize a distinctive illocutionary force in ‘know’, there are competing accounts of its illocutionary force. On one such account, to say ‘Smith knows that Q’ is to *credit Smith for having a true belief that Q*, as opposed to forming a true belief by luck (Greco 2003). On another account, to say ‘Smith knows that Q’ is to *approve of Smith as an informant about Q* (Craig 1990). We would need to adjudicate among all these theories before settling on Sellars’s proposal.

Moving on to Sellars’s second point, which is somewhat ob-

sure, I do not detect the “symmetry” Sellars says he finds among first, second and third-person knowledge attributions. To help us understand the symmetry he has in mind, he says,

“He knows that-*p*” would entail “He has reasons good enough to support a guarantee that-*p*”. (Sellars 1975: 100).

But it does not seem correct that the truth of ‘he knows’ entails the truth of ‘he has reasons good enough to support a guarantee’, especially if we keep in mind that Sellars here refers to good enough *ethical* reasons to support a guarantee. This connects with my main positive criticism of Sellars’s semantic proposal, on which more shortly.

As for Sellars’s third point, while it is certainly true that the propriety of saying ‘I know’ often depends on context, it’s not clear how this tends to support Sellars’s semantic proposal about the meaning of ‘know’. Sellars says,

R1: “Reasons which might be adequately good to justify a guarantee on one occasion might not be adequate to justify a guarantee on another” (1975: 100).

This seems correct – the practical and ethical implications of guaranteeing are context-dependent. But compare:

R2: Reasons which might be adequately good to justify a request on one occasion might not be adequate to justify a request on another.

This also seems correct – the practical and ethical implications of

requesting are context-dependent. But this should not lead us to believe that ‘I want X’ means ‘X is desirable, and I have reasons adequate to support a request’. And if the truth of R2 doesn’t support the semantic hypothesis about ‘I want’, then the truth of R1 doesn’t support Sellars’s semantic hypothesis about ‘I know’ either.

Moving on to Sellars’s fourth and final point, it again does not seem true. That is, it does not seem true that “we rarely” think to ourselves ‘I know this’, or wonder ‘do I know this?’, unless “the question of a possible guarantee to someone other than ourselves has arisen” (Sellars 1975: 100). On the one hand, when making plans, whether in concert with others or in isolation, we often wonder whether we know things, or affirm that we do indeed know them. Suppose I live alone in a small house in the country. I wonder to myself, “should I leave the furnace on while I’m gone for the week?” Then I think, “Well, I know the forecast said to expect sub-zero temperatures here this week, so I should leave it on to prevent the pipes from cracking.” This seems perfectly natural and a common enough phenomenon, though no question has arisen about a possible guarantee to another person. On the other hand, many of us often wonder whether we know this or that out of sheer curiosity, not because we’ve been prompted to consider offering someone a guarantee.

So I’m not persuaded by any of the four points Sellars offers in support of his semantic hypothesis. Aside from that, the hypothesis seems doubtful in its own right. First, competent speakers do not recognize it as true, which would be surprising if it were true. Sec-

ond, it rules out *by definition* non-reason-based knowledge. But many serious philosophical proposals about knowledge contemplate non-reason-based knowledge (e.g. Wittgenstein 1975: §§166, 253; Williams 1992; Sosa forthcoming: ch. 6). If these accounts are wrong, it does not seem to be due to a semantic error.

5. A Different Approach

I propose that the relationship between ‘I know’ and guaranteeing amounts to this: by saying ‘I know that Q’ you represent yourself as having the authority to guarantee that Q.

I have two primary motivations for making this proposal. First, like Sellars, I suspect that Chisholm’s suggestion, although correct as far as it goes, does not fully capture the relationship between saying ‘I know’ and guaranteeing. I suspect that the relationship goes deeper than its sometimes being the case that saying ‘I know’ is a way of guaranteeing. But unlike Sellars I do not aim to redeem this suspicion by *defining* ‘know’ in terms of guaranteeing. Instead I aim to redeem it by positing a normative connection between *asserting that you know* and *having the authority to guarantee*. Second, the proposal coheres seamlessly with an independently attractive view about the epistemic norm of assertion, and the relationship between asserting and guaranteeing.

My account proceeds from four assumptions. I’ll begin by explaining the assumptions, and then show how they support my proposal.

My first assumption is the well supported *knowledge account of assertion* ('KA' for short): you may assert Q only if you know Q. The 'may' here designates epistemic permission – knowledge is essentially the requisite *epistemic* relation for assertion. It does not follow that you morally or prudentially may assert Q only if you know Q. The case for KA consists in a cumulative explanatory argument from conversational patterns (see Unger 1975: esp. 260 ff; Slote 1979; Williamson 2000: chapter 11; Reynolds 2002, DeRose 2002, and [[citation omitted]]). I emphasize that my purpose here is *not* to recount this argument, canvass objections, respond to objections, or evaluate competing proposals. That cannot responsibly be done here. For present purposes, I simply assume that KA is true, resting content with the considerable body of scholarship supporting it. (For critical discussion of KA see, e.g., Weiner 2005, Douven 2006, Lackey 2007, Hill and Schechter 2007, Levin 2008, Kvanvig 2009, Brown forthcoming, and [[citation omitted]].)

My second assumption derives from the relationship between asserting and guaranteeing.⁴ Other things equal, insofar as an assertion is true, it is good *qua* assertion; insofar as it is false, it is bad *qua* assertion. In virtue of this, let's say that assertion *aims at truth*. Other speech acts also aim at truth, such as guessing, conjecturing and guaranteeing. Call speech acts aimed at truth *alethic speech acts*.⁵ Alethic speech acts differ in two important, closely related

⁴ I defend the view sketched in this paragraph more fully in [[citation omitted]].

⁵ What I call "alethic speech acts" correspond largely with what Searle (1975: section 4) calls "assertives."

ways. First, some place more credibility on the line than others. Guessing extracts little if any of your credibility. Conjecturing extracts more credibility than guessing, asserting more than conjecturing, and guaranteeing more than asserting. Second, the more credibility an alethic speech act extracts, the stricter the epistemic norms governing it. Guessing requires virtually nothing by way of evidence or epistemic standing: you may guess Q whenever you'd like, arguably no matter what the evidence indicates. Conjecturing requires that you have at least some evidence favoring Q, and perhaps that Q be the most probable alternative given your evidence.⁶ Asserting Q requires that you know Q. Guaranteeing extracts more credibility than asserting, so guaranteeing has a correspondingly stricter requirement – it requires more than knowledge. A natural candidate for the epistemic norm of guaranteeing is knowledge of knowledge: you may guarantee Q only if you know that you know Q. Call this *the KK account of guaranteeing* ('the KK account' for short).⁷

My third assumption concerns the relationship between *uttering a declarative sentence* and *making an assertion*. The primary way we make an assertion is *by* uttering a declarative sentence. I assert that Sarah will win by uttering 'Sarah will win'. Of course, there are other ways of asserting, such as writing or typing the sentence.⁸

⁶ Henry Jekyll suggests as much when he writes to Utterson: "I must here speak by theory alone, saying not that which I know, but that which I suppose to be most probable." See the final section of Stevenson 1886: "Henry Jekyll's Full Statement of the Case."

⁷ [[citation omitted]]

⁸ It isn't always the case that uttering the grammatically declarative

My fourth and final assumption is that when you (purport to) perform an act, you thereby represent yourself as having the authority to do it, that is, you represent yourself as satisfying the norms governing such an act. By inquiring on your behalf with the tax office, I represent myself as having the authority to inquire on your behalf. By pronouncing a couple married, the justice represents herself as having the authority to marry the couple. By declaring that I promote you, I represent myself as having the authority to promote you. And so on. Of course you needn't *explicitly claim* that you have the authority in order to represent yourself as having it. Such representation is most often implicit and automatic.

With these four pieces in place – that is, the knowledge account of assertion, the KK account of guaranteeing, the relationship between assertion and declarative utterance, and the relationship between acting and representing yourself as authorized – we are positioned to explain the relationship between saying 'I know' and guaranteeing. Here it goes:

When you say 'I know that Q', you thereby assert that you know that Q. When you assert that Q, you represent yourself as having the authority to assert that Q. And since knowledge is the norm of assertion, you represent yourself as *knowing that you know that Q*. And since *knowing that you know* is the norm of guaranteeing, you thus represent yourself as *having the authority to guarantee that*

sentence 'S' amounts to asserting that S. For example, if I recite 'Sarah will win' as one of my lines in a play, I do not thereby assert that Sarah will win. We can set aside this complication for present purposes.

Q. Putting that all together, we get the following: when you say ‘I know that Q’, you represent yourself as having the authority to guarantee that Q. That is the relationship between ‘I know’ and guaranteeing.

My proposal is not only perfectly consistent with Chisholm’s, but it helps to explain why Chisholm’s proposal is true. It helps us understand why saying ‘I know’ can be, and sometimes is, used as a way of guaranteeing. My proposal also entails that ‘I know that Q’ is descriptive and not merely performative, since by uttering it you say something that is either true or false.

My proposal improves on Sellars’s while retaining its spirit. Although ‘I know that Q’ doesn’t mean ‘Q, and I have reasons good enough to guarantee Q’, *by saying* ‘I know that Q’ you do *represent yourself* as having the authority to guarantee Q. Semantic equivalence or entailment seem to be too strong a connection between ‘I know’ and guaranteeing. Representation is a weaker, but nevertheless still intimate, connection. So my proposal ties ‘I know’ to guaranteeing more closely than Chisholm’s does, but not as closely as Sellars’s does. Moreover my proposal accomplishes this without essentially tying knowing to having reasons; it is perfectly consistent with (though it does not entail) the hypothesis that non-reason-based knowledge is possible.

6. Conclusion

In closing, let me say a word about my second assumption, namely,

the KK account of guaranteeing. My other three assumptions are fairly well established in the literature on either speech acts or epistemic norms – or at least well enough established to make it reasonable to assume them for present purposes. The KK account of guaranteeing is a comparative newcomer on the scene. I do find the KK account intuitively very plausible – especially when considered in light of the evidence favoring the knowledge account of assertion – but I’m not reduced to simply appealing to intuition here. We could instead view my discussion as *providing evidence for* the KK account, in the following way.

Suppose along with Austin, Chisholm and Sellars that there is some important connection between ‘I know’ and guaranteeing. And suppose that the other three, well established assumptions of my account in section 5 are correct (i.e. the knowledge account of assertion, the relation between declarative utterance and assertion, and the relation between acting and representing yourself as authorized). Now *if* the KK account of guaranteeing is correct, then it enables an improved explanation of the connection between ‘I know’ and guaranteeing. And that provides some support for the KK account.

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