Can the Knowledge Norm Co-Opt the Opt Out?

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Abstract: The Knowledge Norm of Assertion (KNA) claims that it is proper to assert that *p* only if one knows that *p*. Though supported by a wide range of evidence, it appears to generate incorrect verdicts when applied to utterances of "I don't know." Instead of being an objection to KNA, I argue that this linguistic data shows that "I don't know" does not standardly function as a literal assertion about one's epistemic status; rather, it is an indirect speech act that has the primary illocutionary force of *opting out* of the speaker's conversational responsibilities. This explanation both reveals that the opt-out is an under-appreciated type of illocutionary act with a wide range of applications, and shows that the initial data in fact *supports* KNA over its rivals.

Keywords: Opt-outs; Knowledge Norm of Assertion; indirect speech acts; "I don't know"; Pyrrhonian skepticism.

I. A puzzle

The much-discussed Knowledge Norm of Assertion (KNA) holds that one may properly assert that *p* only if one knows that *p*. Arguments in its favor have primarily appealed to three pieces of linguistic data: (i) the oddity of Moorean sentences of the form "*p* and I do not know that *p*"; (ii) lottery cases in which statements such as "Your ticket lost" are infelicitous, despite being highly justified by the evidence; and (iii) the propriety of challenging assertions with questions like "How do you know?"[1] This is an impressive lineup, but there's a hitch in the third argument:

(1) Tim: "Is your brother at work?"

Jen: "I don't know."

#Tim: "How do you know?"

In contrast to standard cases, here Tim's follow-up sounds bizarre. It is as if Tim has *missed the point* of Jen's response, or as if he is *badgering* her – pressing her for information that she has made clear she does not possess. Intuitively, we might say that "I don't know" is intended to *opt out* of her conversational responsibility to respond to Tim's question, rather than to be a literal assertion about her epistemic status.

Other cases support this interpretation. In particular, consider the fact that uttering "I don't know" can be felicitous even if the speaker does, in fact, know the answer to the question:

(2) Keith: "Who did you vote for?"

Liz: "I don't know."

#Keith: "Oh come on – you know! Who was it?"

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[1] See e.g. Williamson (2000: Ch 11) and DeRose (2011: Ch 3) for developments of these lines of thought. Brown (2008) and McKinnon (2012) offer criticism of arguments based on this evidence, while Adler (2009) and Benton (2011) both put forward different evidence in favor of KNA.

Here Liz's response – though false – sounds perfectly fine, despite the fact that a blunt application of KNA would render it infelicitous. Further, it is clear that Keith has missed the point of the utterance: Liz has, in effect, indicated that her voting decision is not a topic that is open for discussion, and yet Keith continues to inquire about it. This exchange feels a bit as if the speakers have been playing a game and Liz says "I quit", to which Keith responds "Okay, so what's your next move?"

Further troublesome cases for KNA arise when "I don't know" is used to avoid engaging with pointless questions:

(3) Liz: "Can you hand me that screwdriver?"

Keith: "Why's it called a 'screwdriver', anyways?"

Liz: "I don't know – would you just give it to me?"

Even if Liz *does* know why it's called a 'screwdriver' (namely, because it is used to drive screws), her response sounds fine. Of course, a literal application of KNA would render it infelicitous: if she knows the answer, she can't know that she *doesn't* know it. But this feels like an overly literal reading of Liz's utterance – the point of her response is to *get out of* dealing with Keith's idle question. The problem is that it is unclear how KNA can allow for this.

These cases appear to be problematic for KNA; but they also suggest, more generally, that "I don't know" does not function simply as an assertion about one's epistemic status. To drive this point home, the following pair of cases is instructive:

(4a) Tim: "Is your brother at work?"

Jen: "I know whether he is."

Tim: "I didn't ask whether you *knew*!"

Here Tim's response is natural, for Jen has simply given him an irrelevant response: he asked about her brother, and she responded with a claim about her epistemic status. Compare:

(4b) Tim: "Is your brother at work?"

Jen: "I don't know whether he is."

Tim: "I didn't ask whether you *knew*!"

In this case it seems that Jen *has* given a relevant response, and it is *Tim's* follow-up that sounds uncooperative. Though we can make sense of Tim's utterance, it is unnatural and has a "smart-aleck" feel to it – he seems to be reading Jen's response too literally. This asymmetry between (4a) and (4b) is notable, for in the latter Jen gives the simple contradictory of her response in the former ("I don't know" = "It's not the case that I know"), yet in (4b) she intuitively gives a relevant response while in (4a) she does not. This should be surprising. Intuitively, one would think that if P is an irrelevant answer to a question, then $\neg P$ should be as well. The fact that Jen's response in (4b) is natural suggests that the literal semantic content of "I don't know" is not what is doing the work in the conversation; instead we must look to its illocutionary force for an explanation. My suggestion is that "I don't know" serves a special function in response to questions, namely to *opt out* of one's responsibility for providing an answer.

I take it that these cases combine to illustrate that it would be quite *natural* to understand "I don't know" as performing some sort of opt-out maneuver. In the remainder of the paper I will defend this hypothesis and argue that it is consistent with (and in fact *supports*) KNA. My explanation proceeds in two steps: (i) we must recognize the more general role that the illocutionary act of *opting out* plays in conversation, and (ii) we must understand "I don't know" as an *indirect speech act* whose primary illocutionary force is to opt out of one's responsibility for answering a question.

II. Opting out

Begin with (i). Speaking generally, an opt-out occurs when an agent makes clear that he cannot or will not discharge some salient responsibility that has been assigned to him. Theorists (e.g. Grice 1975 and Coppock 2012) have already noted that there is a class of opt-outs that selectively target the responsibility to fulfill specific Gricean maxims, such as

(5) "This might not answer your question, but…" [Relation]

(6) "I'm not sure, but I think…" [Quality]

I agree with this, but we can see that more must be said about the opt-out once we focus in on the conversational responsibilities generated by *questions*. Asking a question generally gives the addressee a responsibility to provide a response that satisfies the Gricean maxims. If the speaker cannot do so, one option is for her to selectively opt out of a maxim, as with (5) and (6); but these selective opt-outs have limited power:

(7) Tim: "Is your brother at work?"

#Jen: "I don't think this answers your question, but he's a linguist."

Here Jen's attempt to make her answer felicitous by opting out of Relation fails – her answer is simply too far off topic. But if this is right, how is Jen to respond *at all* if she has no relevant information? This indicates that sometimes a speaker needs to make a *complete opt-out* – one that entirely disavows her responsibility to give a response.

Further evidence for this kind of opt-out comes from the fact that there are straightforward ways to completely opt out of *practical* responsibilities, as in:

(8) Tim: "Go to the meeting next week."

Jen: "I can't – I'm out of town."

(9) Keith: "It's your move." [While playing chess.]

Liz: "I quit."

So it looks as though there ought to be a complete *conversational* opt-out as well. What could such a speech act look like? Consider:

(10) Keith's Lawyer: "What took place on the night of September 7th?"

Liz: "I take the Fifth."

(10) provides an institutionalized example of a complete, conversational opt-out. Slightly more flexible and natural examples can also be found, e.g.

(11) Tim: "Is your brother at work?"

Jen: "I can't say."

My suggestion is that this notion of a complete opt-out actually plays a substantial role in everyday, cooperative conversation. In particular, the Gricean maxims of Quality and Relation tend to put speakers in a dilemma – Relation requires that the addressee give a pertinent answer, but Quality requires her to give an answer of which she has knowledge (or, at least, justification). Since she may have *no* relevant knowledge, she will be forced to opt out of giving any answer whatsoever. And because this will be a common dilemma, one would expect there to be a *standard* way of performing a complete opt-out. This is where "I don't know" enters the picture.

III. "I don't know" as an indirect opt-out

I believe we can understand "I don't know" as an *indirect speech act* that has the primary illocutionary force of performing a complete opt-out. An indirect speech act (Searle 1979: Ch. 2) occurs when a speaker performs one type of illocutionary act with the primary intention of performing another, as with:

(12) "Can you pass the salt?"

Taken literally, (12) is a question. But it is very natural to suppose that its primary illocutionary force – the *point* of the utterance, as it were – is to make a request (1979: 31). My claim is that, at least in paradigmatic cases, the *point* of uttering "I don't know" in response to a question is to flag that one cannot or will not answer. It is a signal that the conversational arc should proceed without waiting for such a reply.[2]

For our purposes it will be useful to note six characteristics of indirect speech acts. (i) *Calculability.* First, indirect speech acts are calculable – the hearer must be able to alight upon the targeted illocutionary act by reasoning from the literal one, and such reasoning usually appeals to the fact that a *prerequisite* of the targeted act is made salient by the literal utterance (Searle 1969: Ch. 3; 1979: 31). In the case of (12), the addressee will note that the question flouts Relation (by changing the topic to her ability to manipulate objects) and so look for an alternative intention. Since her being *able* to pass the salt is a prerequisite of properly requesting that she do so, she can infer that the speaker intends to make this request.[3] (ii) *Standardization*. Second, indirect speech acts often (though not always) become *standardized* or *idiomatic* ways of performing the targeted speech act, especially if they help navigate common situations (1979: 41). This is the case with (12): it is very common to desire something from others and yet not want to directly request or command that they do it, so utterances of the form "Can you…?" have become standard ways of making requests. (iii) *Automatic Processing*. Third, and relatedly, indirect speech acts tend to be *heard* simply as instances of the targeted speech act, rather than

[2] I intend to focus on cases where "I don't know" is the leading phrase in a response to a question, e.g. with "I don't know" or "I don't know what to say." There are other uses of this phrase that are not plausibly seen as an opt-out, such as "I don't know where to go to college – what do you think?", but I suspect that such cases occur primarily when one is *not* responding to a question. I cannot provide necessary and sufficient criteria for determining when "I don't know" will function as a complete opt-out; my claim is simply that the *standard* use of this phrase in response to a question is as such.

[3] See Searle (1979: 46-7) for a much more detailed treatment of this inference.

the literal one. Thus "Would you hand me that book?" is automatically heard as a *request*, not a question (1979: 31). (iv) *Politeness*. Fourth: indirect speech acts are usually used for the sake of *politeness* (1979: 36). Direct requests or commands (e.g. "Pass the salt") are often felt to be imperatival and therefore bossy, whereas putting the request in the form of a question, like (12), is much less presumptuous. (v) *Not an idiom*. Fifth, though indirect speech acts are idiomatically used to perform the targeted speech act, they are not *idioms*, per se. This is because idioms cannot be taken literally without confusion:

(13) Keith: "Joe kicked the bucket."

#Liz: "Did he hurt his toe?"

On the other hand, indirect speech acts *can* be taken literally, though usually such responses have a "smart-aleck" feel to them:

(14) Student: "Can I go to the bathroom?"

Teacher: "I don't know, can you?"[4]

(vi) *Literal usages*. Sixth and finally, in highly specialized circumstances questions like (12) *can* be used literally, as when a doctor is testing a patient's ability to use his hands and asks, "Could you lift the notebook?"

Having laid out the main characteristic of indirect speech acts, I now want to show that (i)-(vi) similarly apply to utterances of "I don't know" in response to questions. I will contend that the best way to explain this (and other) data is to understand "I don't know" as indirect opt-out. Begin by taking a standard case:

(15) Tim: "Is your brother at work?"

Jen: "I don't know."

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[4] Note that (14) serves two purposes in this context: it gives an example of a literal interpretation of the student's indirect request, and it also gives yet another case in which "I don't know" is a warranted assertion despite the fact that the speaker *does* know the answer.

Now, *if we assume KNA*, we get a straightforward explanation of the function of Jen's assertion: namely, as an indirect speech act with the primary illocutionary force of a (complete) opt-out. (i) *Calculability*. Tim can see that Jen has violated Relation, for he asked about her brother and she responded with a claim about her epistemic status; thus he infers that she probably has another intention. His question conferred a responsibility of providing a warranted and relevant assertion, i.e. (by KNA) a relevant answer *of which she has knowledge*. In saying "I don't know" Jen has made salient the fact that she *lacks* knowledge, i.e. lacks a prerequisite for discharging the responsibility that Tim's question conferred onto her. So Tim can infer that she intends to opt out; and since Jen provides no supplementary answer, this is a *complete* opt-out. (ii) *Standardization*. Of course, these inferences are probably unnecessary: assuming KNA, it is standard for questions to confer the responsibility of providing relevant knowledge; and since it is also common to lack such knowledge, "I don't *know*" has become an idiomatic way of opting out. (iii) *Automatic Processing*. Such standardization helps to explain why "I don't know" is *heard* as an opt-out, not an assertion. Beyond the mere intuition that this is how standard cases like (15) sound, further evidence for this claim can be found by looking to contexts in which it would make sense to interpret the utterance as a literal assertion, and yet we still hear it as an opt-out. For instance, consider a professor explaining skepticism:

(16) Professor: "So what would a skeptic say if asked whether he has hands?"
Student: "I don't know."

Here the student's response can be interpreted as saying either that (a) he, the student, cannot answer the professor's question, or (b) he, playing the role of the skeptic, does not know that he has hands. Most hear reading (a), i.e. understand the student's statement as an opt-out, rather

than a literal assertion like (b). This suggests that "I don't know" is automatically processed as an opt-out, much as "Can you pass the salt?" is automatically processed as a request.

(iv) *Politeness*. A fourth commonality with indirect speech acts stems from the observation that direct (complete) opt-outs – such as "I can't answer that" or "It's none of your business" – tend to sound uncooperative and dismissive of the inquirer, since they are often used when the speaker is obviously withholding information. "I don't know," on the other hand, gives the semblance that the speaker *wants* to cooperate but is simply unable to do so, and thus is more polite.[5] (v) *Not an idiom*. Though it is obvious to speakers that "I don't know" is intended to opt out, we have already seen that a smart-aleck, literal understanding is possible:

(17) Tim: "Is your brother at work?"

Jen: "I don't know."

Tim: "I didn't ask whether you *knew*!"

(vi) *Literal usages*. Finally, it seems that in specialized circumstances, "I don't know" *can* be used as a literal assertion about one's epistemic status. For instance, suppose a bomb has gone off in a warzone, and a soldier has just regained consciousness:

(18) Medic: "Can you feel your legs?"

Soldier: "I don't know!"

It is obvious that the soldier does not care about discharging his conversational responsibilities in this case, and instead has every reason to answer the medic directly; thus we are inclined to read his response as a literal assertion about his unfortunate epistemic status.

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[5] Of course, this semblance of cooperation is lost when it is obviously false that the speaker does not know the answer, as in (2) above. But in such cases the felt politeness is also diminished.

These remarks reveal a striking number of commonalities between "I don't know" and indirect speech acts. The most natural explanation, of course, is that "I don't know" *is*, at least in standard cases, an indirect opt-out. Further evidence in favor of this claim is found in the fact that it makes sense of our initial cases (1)-(4), and squares them with KNA. This is because the felicity conditions of an indirect speech act are derived from its targeted (indirect) illocutionary act, not its literal one. Thus "Can you pass the salt?" is felicitous even if the speaker already knows the answer, for the intended *request* is felicitous. Likewise for the utterances of "I don't know" in (1)-(4) above: although the literal assertion is sometimes unwarranted, the primary illocutionary act of *opting out* is warranted. For instance, in (3) the reason it is felicitous for Liz to make the (false) assertion that she doesn't know why it is called a 'screwdriver' is that it is proper for her to opt out of answering this pointless question. Further, recall that the asymmetry between "I know" and "I don't know" from cases (4a) and (4b) suggested that the primary function of "I don't know" cannot be explained in terms of its literal semantic content. The opt-out analysis offers such an explanation, and predicts this asymmetry. Thus my analysis explains our initial data, and does so consistently with KNA.

At this point it is worth addressing a two-stage objection. First, note that in standard cases like (15) it is literally *true* that the addressee does not know the answer, so why do I say that this is not a literal assertion about her epistemic status? My response to this worry is that many indirect speech acts can be literally true assertions while still functioning with some other primary illocutionary force. For instance, "Your shoes are muddy" may be a true assertion, but it is still an indirect request to take your shoes off – we are forced to posit this to make sense of the conversational upshot of making the statement. Likewise, I want to argue, even when "I don't

know" is literally true, we are still forced to claim that it is an indirect opt-out due to the evidence I've marshaled regarding the conversational upshot of the utterance.

However this leads to the second prong of the objection: do we really need to posit "I don't know" as an indirect opt-out at all? Why can't we understand it as a literal assertion, and simply explain the conversational upshot using the standard Gricean apparatus? This worry is simply an instance of a more general objection to the existence of indirect speech acts pressed by Rod Bertolet (1994). There are many things that one could say in response, but for our purposes it suffices to points out that (a) not many find this general attack convincing (even Bertolet is unsure if it succeeds: 1994: 335), and (b) even if successful, it does not undermine my conclusion. Regardless of whether we accept a specific theory of indirect speech acts, there clearly is a perfectly good sense in which the *point* of uttering statements like "Can you pass the salt?" is to make a request. The main claim I want to make is that, whatever the precise relationship between the question and the request in this case, an analogous relationship holds between "I don't know" and an opt-out. The upshot of my argument remains: the *point* of saying "I don't know" is to opt out of one's responsibility to respond.

Before concluding, I would like to highlight the significance of the fact that my explanation of how "I don't know" comes to function as an indirect opt-out relies upon KNA. If knowledge were *not* the norm of assertion, then uttering "I don't know" would *not* deny a prerequisite of giving a felicitous response, and it would be unclear how the targeted opt-out would be calculable or how "I don't know" would become standardized as an opt-out. This observation leads to a new kind of evidence in favor of KNA and against its rivals, for each of these other proposed norms would predict that a *different* response would be the standard way to completely opt out of the responsibility conferred by a question. In particular, some commonly defended

norms would make (something like) the following predictions. The Rationally Believe that One Knows Norm (Brown 2008) predicts "I don't rationally believe I know" or "I can't believe I know" as standard; the Reasonable to Believe Norm (Lackey 2007; McKinnon 2012) predicts "I can't reasonably believe" as standard; and the Rational Credibility Norm (Douven 2006) predicts "No answer is (rationally) credible" as standard. But it is a striking fact that *none* of these utterances are particularly natural or standard ways of opting out, especially when compared with "I don't know."[6] As always, KNA's strength lies in the naturalness and simplicity with which it explains the linguistic data.

IV. Conclusion

I began by raising an anomaly: KNA produces strange results when applied to utterances of "I don't know". Exploration of this issue led us to recognize that the opt-out is an under-appreciated type of illocutionary act, and in doing so we alighted upon an explanation of the data that supports KNA over its rivals. In sum: the knowledge norm *can* co-opt the opt-out, and it seems doubtful that other proposed norms will be able to offer as natural an explanation.

We have solved the puzzle for KNA, but in doing so we have also been led to further investigate the roles played by opt-outs. Could this investigation have broader implications? Perhaps. To mention just one possibility, the opt-out may help make sense of Pyrrhonian skepticism, which attempts to suspend judgment on all philosophical claims (Fogelin 1994). This view faces difficulties in its articulation (Sorensen 2004): how can you assert anything if you suspend judgment on everything? In particular, when the Pyrrhonian responds to a philosophical question by shrugging her shoulders and saying, "I don't know," is she thereby

[6] Further, I have been informed that this is not simply a quirk of English: in both Mandarin and German the direct translation of "I don't know" is often used in response to questions that one cannot answer. ("I don't know" = "我不知道" = "Ich weiß nicht.") This is what one would expect, given KNA and my opt-out analysis. Thanks to Tianqi Wang for help with this.

committed (by KNA) to the claim that she *knows* that she does not know? If so, then it looks like her entire position collapses as soon as she speaks! One suggestion that comes out of our discussion is that the Pyrrhonian is performing a *general, partial opt-out* – it is a partial (not complete) opt-out because she continues to speak, but since she applies it generally to all her statements, she can (perhaps) do so without committing herself to any knowledge claims.

I do not wish to push this line, but merely to illustrate one way in which our discussion may have broader implications. Just how much can we learn from the opt-out? I don't know.

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