

Selfless Assertions and the Knowledge Norm

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If a speaker selflessly asserts that p , the speaker (1) has good evidence that p is true, (2) asserts that p on the basis of that evidence, but (3) does not believe that p . Selfless assertions are widely thought to be acceptable, and therefore to pose a threat to the Knowledge Norm of Assertion. Advocates for the Knowledge Norm tend to respond to this threat by arguing that there are no such things as selfless assertions. They argue that those who appear to be selfless asserters either: believe what they assert, perform a speech act other than assertion, or assert a proposition other than the one that they seem to. I argue that such counterarguments are unsuccessful. There really are selfless assertions. But I also argue that they are no threat to the Knowledge Norm. There is a good case to be made that knowledge does not require belief. And if it does not, then the fact that some selfless assertions are appropriate does not tell against the Knowledge Norm. Indeed, I argue that selfless asserters know the propositions that they assert to be true.

1 | Introduction

If S selflessly asserts that p , then (1) S has good evidence that p is true, (2) S asserts that p on the basis of that evidence, but (3) due to non-epistemic factors, S does not believe that p .¹ (See Lackey

¹ Lackey does not say that p must be true, but in all of the thought experiments that she uses to illustrate selfless assertions, it either obviously is true, or else it is natural for readers to take it to be so. As my interest here is in the selflessness of selfless assertions, I will follow her lead. The Knowledge Norm must also, of course, be defended

2007: 599.) It is widely thought that at least some selfless assertions do not violate whatever norms govern the proper tokening of assertions. Moreover, if some selfless assertions are in order, this fact is important. Consider the Knowledge Norm of Assertion: one may assert that p only if one knows that p .² If there are permissible selfless assertions, it would seem that the Knowledge Norm—one of the most prominent and most promising accounts of the norm of assertion—must be false.

So, selfless assertions seem to pose a threat to the Knowledge Norm. The standard response to this threat is to argue that cases that seem like intuitively acceptable selfless assertions are not, in fact, selfless assertions at all. There are several ways in which this can be done. Consider that there are three moving parts, as it were, to a selfless assertion: the mental state of the speaker, the speech act that she performs, and the proposition that she asserts. If it can be shown that speakers who appear to engage in selfless assertions actually have a different mental state, perform a different speech act, or assert a different proposition, than they seem to, the Knowledge Norm can be defended from the threat posed by selfless assertions. And, in fact, arguments advancing each possibility can be found in the literature.

I agree that selfless assertions are no threat to the Knowledge Norm of Assertion. But I think that the advocates for the Knowledge Norm have taken the wrong tack. The examples of selfless assertions that are found in the literature are relatively straightforward, and are, I think, best taken at face value. If that is right, then those who wish to defend the Knowledge Norm of Assertion must show that a speaker might assert that p , fail to believe that p , and yet comply with the Knowledge Norm. Such is my task here.

against arguments that purport to show that there are acceptable false assertions, but that is a project for another day.

² The Knowledge Norm has many defenders, but Timothy Williamson is something of a standard bearer for the cause. See Williamson 2000, Ch. 11.

Selfless asserters are, in a way, alienated from their own beliefs. They hold beliefs that they do not, on reflection, endorse. So what attitude, or, more generally, what relation, do they bear towards the propositions that they assert? It cannot be that they believe them. This is both excluded by stipulation, and would, implausibly, require that selfless asserters incoherently believe a single proposition to be both true and false. A pair of more promising answers to this question will be surveyed below.

The first is that they might *accept* the propositions that they assert. Acceptances are propositional attitudes that are characterized by a willingness to take the proposition accepted as a premise in one's practical and theoretical reasoning. (See Cohen 1989: 368 and Lehrer 1990: 35.) Pascal Engel has argued that this is how selfless asserters should be understood. (See his 2008.)

Now, according to traditional accounts of knowledge, *S knows that p* entails *S believes that p*. However, Keith Lehrer and L. Jonathan Cohen, who each did pioneering work on acceptance, have argued that the belief condition on knowledge³ should be replaced with an acceptance condition: *S knows that p* entails *S accepts that p*. If *that* is right, then perhaps selfless assertions do not tell against the Knowledge Norm after all. If knowledge requires acceptance, and selfless asserters accept what they assert, then selfless asserters may be in full compliance with the Knowledge Norm.

As promising as this line of argument may be, I think that it is ultimately unpersuasive. Lehrer and Cohen are probably wrong: knowledge probably does not require acceptance. So the fact that selfless asserters accept the propositions that they assert does not insulate the Knowledge Norm from the threat posed by selfless assertions.

Here is the second suggestion: selfless asserters are *committed* to the truth of the propositions that they assert. There is, moreover, a case to be made that Lehrer and Cohen were right in arguing that

³ Cohen takes inferential knowledge to require acceptance, but holds that other kinds of knowledge do not. Lehrer argues that it is a condition on knowledge of every kind.

knowledge does not require belief. The only problem with their view is with their replacement for the belief condition on knowledge. Knowledge requires neither belief nor acceptance. What it requires is commitment. (See Tebben 2019 for an argument to this effect.) If that's right, then selfless asserters do know the propositions that they assert to be true. And hence selfless assertions are no threat to the Knowledge Norm. To show as much is the main purpose of what follows.

Here's the plan. The next section discusses selfless assertions in more detail. Some of the extant defenses of the Knowledge Norm against the threat of selfless assertions are also reviewed and are found to be wanting. The third section draws distinctions between beliefs, acceptances, and commitments, and argues that these distinctions provide a way to see the data concerning selfless assertions as consistent with the Knowledge Norm. Section four examines, and dismisses, reasons to think that one must believe what one asserts. Section five concludes the paper.

2 | Selfless Assertions

2.1 Preliminary Remarks

Jennifer Lackey has argued that for some persons S and propositions p , it may be permissible for S to assert that p even if S does not believe that p ; she calls such assertions 'selfless assertions'.⁴ The following is a representative example:

Stella is a devoutly Christian fourth-grade teacher, and her religious beliefs are grounded in a deep faith that she has had since she was a very young child. Part of this faith includes a belief in the truth of creationism and, accordingly, a belief in the falsity of evolutionary theory. Despite this, Stella fully recognizes that there is an overwhelming amount of scientific evidence against both of these beliefs. Indeed, she readily admits that she is not

⁴ See Lackey 2007: 598-600.

basing her own commitment to creationism on evidence at all but, rather, on the personal faith that she has in an all-powerful Creator. Because of this, Stella does not think that religion is something that she should impose on those around her, and this is especially true with respect to her fourth-grade students. Indeed, she regards her duty as a teacher to include presenting material that is best supported by the available evidence, which clearly includes the truth of evolutionary theory. As a result, while presenting her biology lesson today, Stella asserts to her students, “Modern day *homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*,” though she herself neither believes nor knows this proposition. (Lackey 2007: 599.)

Lackey’s intuition is that Stella’s assertion is in order: she does not violate the norms of assertion, whatever they happen to be, in asserting to her students that *homo sapiens* evolved from *homo erectus*. This intuition is widely shared. If *S knows that p* implies *S believes that p*, then the fact that Stella’s assertion is in order tells against the Knowledge Norm.

Attempts to insulate the Knowledge Norm from the threat posed by selfless assertions usually take the form of an argument to the effect that there are no selfless assertions. This could be done by demonstrating that those who seem to be selfless asserters either: (A) believe the propositions that they assert, (B) perform some speech act other than assertion, or (C) assert some proposition other than the one that they seem to. Arguments in favor of each possibility can be found in the literature. I will argue that none of them are convincing. The story of Stella—and those of other selfless asserters—should be accepted at face value.

2.2 The case for (A)

John Turri has experimental results that, he claims, indicate that putative examples of selfless assertions are not, in fact, selfless assertions at all. (These results are reported in Turri 2015.) Cases of “selfless assertion” are, he argues, really ordinary cases of assertion, in which a speaker believes, and, indeed, knows, what she says to be true. Since such assertions are licensed by the Knowledge Norm, thought experiments like those developed by Lackey do not tell against it.

Turri conducted two rounds of experiments. Both presented subjects with stories similar to those devised by Lackey, and asked them if the characters in the stories believed what they asserted, and if their assertions were in order. Lackey’s original stories all explicitly say that the speakers that they feature do not believe the propositions that they assert. In the first set of experiments that Turri conducted, he omitted this feature of the stories. (Turri 2015: 1227) The experimental subjects agreed with Lackey’s intuition, that assertions in these situations are in order, but they *also* largely attributed both belief and knowledge to the speakers. In his other set of experiments, the prompts that Turri gave to his subjects *did* say that the speakers in question do not believe what they assert, and subjects *still* largely attributed belief to the characters and judged their assertions to be in order. (Ibid. 1231)

Neither result is relevant to questions about the norms of assertion. The problem is essentially the same in both cases: experimental subjects did not interpret the characters as lacking belief in the propositions that they assert. In the former case nothing about the attitudes that the characters take towards the propositions in question was specified, and subjects were left to interpret their mental states as they saw fit. The in the latter case, the subjects simply rejected a crucial part of the prompt. Lackey does not appeal to her readers’ intuitions in support of a claim that her characters do not believe what they assert, she *stipulates* that they do not believe what they assert.

Turri says that “[a] selfless assertion is an assertion that supposedly has two crucial features. First, intuitively the agent should make it. Second, we naturally interpret the agent as neither believing

nor, as a result, knowing the proposition asserted.” (Turri 2015: 1231) But this is simply a mischaracterization of the phenomenon at issue. The reason that selfless assertions, if there are any, are supposed to pose a problem for the Knowledge Norm is that the speakers *really do not* believe what they assert; how they are naturally interpreted is not to the point. Compare Turri’s characterization of selfless assertions with Lackey’s:

There are three central components to [selfless assertions]: first, a subject, for purely non-epistemic reasons, does not believe (and hence does not know) that *p*; second, despite this lack of belief, the subject is aware that *p* is very well supported by all of the available evidence; and, third, because of this, the subject asserts that *p* without believing and, hence, without knowing that *p*. (Lackey 2007: 599; I have omitted one of Lackey’s notes.)

It may be *unlikely* that someone who behaves like Stella does would not believe the propositions that she asserts, but it certainly seems to be possible, and Turri’s experiments do not constitute evidence that it is not possible. Without a reason to think that it is not possible, Lackey is free to stipulate that Stella is one of those (perhaps rare) individuals who behaves in the way indicated but lacks belief. This is not to say, however, that empirical evidence is irrelevant to Lackey’s project. There are two ways in which an experiment could rebut arguments against the Knowledge Norm that are based on selfless assertions. The first would be if the test subjects did *not* reject the stipulation that the speaker does not believe what he or she says, and then judged their assertion to not be in order. The second would be if the experimental results were augmented with an auxiliary argument to the effect that *S is interpreted as believing that p entails S believes that p*. In that case, they would show that Lackey’s

stipulation, that Stella does not believe what she asserts, is inconsistent with the rest of her story.⁵ The required entailment, however, is very unlikely to hold.⁶

Absent such an argument, the experimental subjects' views about the characters' mental states is not relevant to Lackey's argument. The claim made by Lackey is not a claim about social cognition (*contra* Turri, see his 2015: 1232), it is a claim about the propriety of a certain kind of behavior, under stipulated conditions. If experimental subjects are not informed of, or reject, the stipulated conditions, then their reactions to the thought experiments do not address Lackey's argument.

2.3 The case for (B)

Several authors have suggested that selfless asserters engage in a speech act other than assertion, or, at any rate, that if they are asserting a proposition, they are not doing so on their own behalf. Turri has argued as much (on non-experimental grounds), and Engel suggests that supporters of the Knowledge Norm might try to interpret selfless asserters in this way. (See Turri 2014 and Engel 2008: 51-52.) Consider, by way of analogy, someone working in advertising, who writes copy for television extolling the virtues of his client's brand of toothpaste. Surely he did not assert that the toothpaste will freshen your breath, even if the script that he wrote says "this toothpaste will freshen your breath". Rather, the toothpaste company said that it will freshen your breath. The person writing the copy was instrumental to the assertion, but not, as it were, a party to it.⁷

The suggestion is that selfless asserters be seen in the same light. Consider Stella, as a representative example. Just as the man writing copy is speaking on behalf of his client, when Stella

⁵ To be clear: I am not attributing this view to Turri. I am only speculating about ways in which his experiments might be relevant to the dispute about selfless assertions.

⁶ Some of Davidson's work seems to suggest a principle of this sort. But the 'interpretation' that Turri's subjects were engaged in is not similar to the attribution of a comprehensive set of interconnected beliefs and desires that Davidson has in mind.

⁷ On this point see Lackey 2017: 38.

says that *homo sapiens* evolved from *homo erectus*, she is speaking on behalf of the educational establishment. And so *she* does not assert that *homo sapiens* evolved from *homo erectus*, although she performs a speech act by which her school, or perhaps the educational establishment at large, makes this assertion. (See Turri 2014: 194.)

Now, Lackey does consider the possibility that selfless asserters are not really tokening any assertions, and she rejects it. (Lackey 2007: 600-603) But her reason for rejecting it is not particularly compelling. She claims that the only difference between cases of selfless assertion and cases of assertion in which a speaker has knowledge, is that in the latter, but not the former, the speaker believes what she asserts. So, she says, if defenders of the Knowledge Norm want to argue that Stella (and those like her) are not really tokening any assertions, they must take it that in order to assert that *p* one must believe that *p*. But, she concludes, this is absurd; we can, after all, tell lies. (Ibid. 600-601)

The reason that this response is not compelling is that whether or not they hold a belief is not the only difference between Stella and ordinary speakers. In particular, Stella is standing in front of her classroom and speaking *as a teacher*. Indeed, Turri argues that it is just this feature that drives the intuition that she is speaking appropriately. (Turri 2014: 196) Moreover, some of Lackey's own remarks undermine her response to this line of argument. Later in the same paper Lackey admits that she is concerned that a selfless asserter might not be able to "coherently or rationally accept" that her own beliefs are irrational. (Lackey 2007: 622 n22) She addresses this concern by saying that the speaker might take it that there are non-evidential considerations that make her belief rational. For example, she suggests that Stella might think that beliefs based on faith are fully rational, even if all the evidence tells against them. (Ibid.) Lackey is not helping her case with these remarks. If Stella took it that beliefs based on faith are rational, it would then be mysterious why Stella would assert that *homo sapiens* evolved from *homo erectus*. And this seems to lend support to Turri's argument: one plausible explanation of why she would say that evolutionary theory is true despite thinking that her denial of it is

rational, is that she is not speaking on behalf of herself, but is, instead, the mouthpiece of her employer.⁸

I do not share Lackey's concern. There is nothing irrational with taking it that some of one's beliefs are irrational. Consider Bruno. Bruno is depressed, and consequently believes that his life will inevitably be one of frustration and sorrow. But he is also aware that he is depressed, and so is aware that this belief is not based on his rational consideration of the evidence before him. Rather, he is aware that it is a product of his mental illness. But recognizing a mental illness for what it is does not cure it. And so realizing that his belief is irrational may not cause him to surrender it. Similarly, a psychologist studying implicit bias may recognize its perfidious effects on her own judgments; such recognition may allow her to refrain from acting on her biases, but it need not allow her to prevent them from having their characteristic effects on what she believes. Far from being difficult to 'coherently or rationally accept' that some of one's own judgments are irrational, in some situations the only rational course of action is to recognize the limitations of one's own rationality.

Lackey's arguments against the Knowledge Norm are stronger if selfless asserters are taken to recognize that some of their beliefs are irrational. And even if Lackey herself does not favor this reading, her thought experiments can, with only a little elaboration, be read this way. Plausibly, what is happening in at least some cases of selfless assertion is that a brute psychological process is producing or sustaining the speaker's belief, even though the speaker knows better than to accept the content of her own belief. The speaker "knows better" not in the sense that she recognizes the responsibilities that

⁸ It is true that this line of argument, like that in §2.2, involves denying one of Lackey's stipulations. But it is plausible that the nature of the speech act performed can be read off of the vignette that Lackey provides, in a way that it is not plausible in the case of the mental state of the speaker. Hence it is plausible that Lackey's stipulation that Stella asserts a proposition in her own voice is incompatible with Stella's story, even though it is not plausible that her stipulation that Stella does not believe what she asserts is incompatible with it.

she has in virtue of the social roles that she plays, but because she appreciates, say, the evidence against her beliefs, and so voluntarily refuses to endorse their content.⁹

Although this is not how Lackey tells it, her story about Stella could be amended to illustrate this point. Perhaps Stella appreciates that, were she rational, she would believe in the theory of evolution; indeed, she might desperately wish that she believed in the theory of evolution, recognizing that basing her beliefs on faith rather than evidence is a cognitive failing. But it does not follow that she believes in evolution. Human psychology being what it is, her religious upbringing may be too strong of an influence for her sober deliberation to overcome.

If Stella's story can be told this way, then we can see that it is possible for selfless asserters to speak for themselves and not merely on behalf of institutions or groups that they represent. Indeed, although the thought experiments that Lackey originally used to illustrate selfless assertions all involve speakers who, in one way or another, represent some corporate body, this is not essential to the phenomenon of selfless assertion. Surveying the advantages that he enjoys—a loving family, a stable job, and so on—and in an earnest effort to tell her the truth, Bruno may assert to his wife that he has a successful and happy future in front of him. But, of course, he does not believe that he does.

If Stella's story is open to the interpretation suggested above, or if Bruno's story could possibly be true, then selfless asserters should, in at least some situations, not be taken to be speaking on behalf of someone else. Stella and Bruno speak for themselves. Hence their behavior is best interpreted as constituting genuine assertions, and to not be analogous to the ad man writing copy for his client.

⁹ Engel suggests that those who suffer from self-deception can also be profitably seen in this way. See Engel 1998: 149.

2.4 The Case for (C)

Finally, it might be the case that Stella, and other speakers like her, do assert propositions themselves, just not the ones that they seem to. If that's the case, then there might not be any selfless asserters. And if there aren't any selfless asserters, then the Knowledge Norm is, at least insofar as this issue is concerned, in the clear. And, indeed, Ivan Milić has argued as much. (See Milić 2017.) I think, however, that this argument is susceptible to a counter argument very similar to that employed in §2.3.

At the heart of Milić's argument is the claim that a speaker asserts those propositions that, due to her assertions, she is obligated to defend. I propose to grant this principle, if only for the sake of argument. Milić argues that in uttering the sentence '*homo sapiens evolved from homo erectus*', Stella asserted not the proposition that *homo sapiens evolved from homo erectus*, but rather the hedged proposition that *according to the best available evidence, homo sapiens evolved from homo erectus*. (Milić 2017: 2287)

In support of this claim he notes that if she is challenged, it would suffice for her to defend the hedged claim, that it would not be odd for her to add that she personally prefers an alternative story about human origins, and that it would be improper to attempt to force her to defend the unhedged claim. (Ibid.) If what Stella asserts is that *according to the best available evidence, homo sapiens evolved from homo erectus*, then Stella is in compliance with the Knowledge Norm, as she *does* believe that hedged claim, and, indeed, knows that it is true. So if Milić's strategy is any good, then Stella (and, arguably, others like her) do not pose a threat to the Knowledge Norm.

Now, it is not obvious to me that, when delivering lessons on well-established scientific findings, teachers are not obligated to defend the truth of those findings. Of course in defending the truth of those findings, what one does is advert to the fact that they are supported by the best available evidence, but from that fact it does not follow that by citing this evidence one defends only the weaker claim. Moreover, Stella can produce selfless assertions even in the absence of her professional role.

As before, imagine that Stella recognizes that basing her beliefs on religious faith is irrational, and desperately wishes that she could do otherwise. Furthermore, imagine that, in an effort to tell them the truth, she asserts to her own children that *homo sapiens* evolved from *homo erectus*. One way to challenge her assertion would be for the children to say “but Mom, you don’t even believe that!” In order for her to properly rebut this challenge, she would need to not only point out that the best available evidence supports the theory of evolution, she would also need to say something to the effect that it is empirical evidence, not religious faith, that indicates the truth in matters like these. Without some claim such as this, identifying the evidence in favor of evolutionary theory would not address her children’s concerns. But if a claim such as this is essential to defending her assertion against this challenge, then the proposition that she is obligated to defend (and hence that she asserted) is that *homo sapiens* evolved from *homo erectus*, not the hedged claim that the best available evidence indicates that they did. If that is right, then even if Milić’s test for the contents of one’s assertions is a good one, there are cases of genuinely selfless assertion, and, indeed, Lackey’s original thought experiments can, with a bit of elaboration, be taken to provide examples.

3 | Belief, Acceptance, and Commitment

3.1 Preliminary Remarks

If a selfless asserter asserts *that p* they must take *some* attitude, or, in general, stand in *some* relation, to the proposition *that p*. By stipulation, this attitude or relation cannot be that of *belief*. But there are substantive arguments to this effect as well. Consider that Stella believes that creationism is true, and that she selflessly asserts that it is false. If selfless asserters were to *believe* the propositions that they assert, she would believe that creationism is both true and false. Considerations of charity counsel against interpreting her in this way. Indeed, it is hard to imagine what it would be for her to believe that it is both true and false.

The alternative is to take it that selfless asserters bear some other attitude or relation to the propositions that they assert. Two possibilities are surveyed below. Selfless asserters might *accept* the propositions that they assert, or they might be *committed* to the truth of those propositions. Both are plausible. Moreover, Lehrer and Cohen have argued that *S knows that p* entails that *S accepts that p*. If they are right, then the Knowledge Norm can be insulated from the threat posed by selfless assertions. Speakers accept the propositions that they assert, and so may know them to be true. As promising as this line of argument is, I think that it is ultimately unsuccessful. Building on some of my earlier work (see Tebben 2019), I suggest that *S knows that p* entails neither that *S* believes, nor that *S* accepts, that *p*. Rather, it entails that *S* is committed to the truth of *p*. I go on to argue (see §3.3) that selfless asserters are committed to the truth of the propositions that they assert, and, since they also meet the other conditions on knowledge, are in compliance with the Knowledge Norm.

3.2 Acceptance

Acceptance is a propositional attitude that is characterized by a willingness to use the accepted proposition as a premise in practical and theoretical reasoning. Lehrer says:

If a person accepts that *p*, then the person will be ready to affirm that *p* or to concede that *p* in the appropriate circumstances. They will also be ready to justify the claim that *p*. If they accept information received from the senses or retained in memory, they will regard such information as correct and proceed accordingly in thought and action. ... To accept the information that *p* implies a readiness in the appropriate circumstances to think, infer, and act on the assumption that the information is correct. (Lehrer 1990: 35)

Cohen provides a similar¹⁰ account:

to accept that p is to have or adopt a policy of deeming, positing, or postulating that p ... as a premise in some or all contexts for one's own and others' proofs, argumentations, inferences, deliberations, etc. Whether or not one assents and whether or not one feels it to be true that p . Accepting is thus a mental act ... or a pattern, system, or policy of mental action (Cohen 1989: 368)

We should not construe Stella as believing the proposition that she asserts. But construing her as *accepting* it is less problematic.

Engel (2008) suggests that selfless asserters accept the propositions that they assert for pragmatic or role-based reasons. For example, Stella is contractually obligated to teach her students about evolution, and so she may accept that evolution is true for practical rather than epistemic reasons—because she desires to not be fired, because she needs to pay her rent, and so on—and may therefore assert to her class that *homo sapiens* evolved from *homo erectus*, regardless of what her own opinion of the matter may be. I have two reservations with this suggestion.

First, it is not clear to me that, if this is what selfless asserters are doing, they are really speaking on their own behalf. If Stella's reason for accepting that creationism is false and evolutionary theory is true, is that she would be fired otherwise, it seems that when she asserts that evolutionary theory is true, she is not speaking for herself. Rather, it seems that Turri's suggestion would be correct: she would be speaking for the educational establishment. And we have already seen problems (in §2.3) with interpreting selfless asserters in this way.

¹⁰ To note their similarity is not to deny their differences. Engel does a good job summarizing the ways in which Lehrer and Cohen differ in their accounts of acceptance. (See Engel 2012: 19.) But the differences between their views will not be relevant to my argument and will be ignored below.

Second, it is not clear to me that acceptance for purely pragmatic reasons warrants the name. If Stella is willing to teach her class about evolution only because she is afraid of getting fired, it seems better to say that she pretends to accept it, or that she acts as though she accepts it. Consider that she would not use the proposition *evolutionary theory is true* as a premise in her reasoning; rather, the premise that plays a role in her reasoning is *if I don't act as though evolutionary theory is true, I will be fired*. Given that she does not want to be fired, the behavioral consequences of using one proposition in her reasoning would be identical to those of using the other. But there is still a difference in the identity of the proposition that features in her reasoning, and so a difference in the proposition that she accepts.

All that said, there is considerable promise to the suggestion that selfless asserters accept the propositions that they assert. Realizing that she ought not base her beliefs on faith, Stella can accept that *homo sapiens* evolved from *homo erectus* on epistemic grounds. If she does so, she can genuinely accept that proposition, rather than the proposition that *if she doesn't accept it, she'll be fired*, and she will be able to assert that proposition on her own behalf, rather than that of the educational establishment. That selfless asserters accept the propositions that they assert should, then, give us a coherent way to describe them: selfless asserters believe that p , accept that p is false, and so assert that not- p .

Moreover, the way in which Lehrer develops the notion of acceptance makes it clear that expressing one's acceptances is, in a way, a more authentic expression of one's views than is expressing one's beliefs. On his view acceptances are "meta-mental" states, which involve evaluation of the contents of one's first-order mental states. By their nature, such meta-mental states are responsive to evidence in a way that first-order states (like Stella's belief in creationism) need not be. (Lehrer 2000: 217)

Finally, there is a case to be made that if selfless asserters accept the propositions that they assert, then the fact that selfless assertions are sometimes proper does not tell against the Knowledge

Norm. Traditional epistemology holds that *S knows that p* entails that *S believes that p*, but traditional epistemology is not sensitive to the distinction between belief and acceptance. And a number of philosophers have argued that *S* must accept that *p*, rather than believe that *p*, if she is to know that *p*.

Claims of this sort come in varying strengths. Cohen, for example, distinguishes between knowledge attained through inference and knowledge attained through direct acquaintance, and argues that the former requires acceptance whereas the latter requires belief. (Cohen 1989: 387) Other claims about the connection between acceptance and knowledge are stronger. Lehrer does not draw the distinction between kinds of knowledge that Cohen does,¹¹ and argues that acceptance, rather than belief, is necessary for knowledge of any kind.¹² He says: “*S* knows that *p* if and only if (i) it is true that *p*, (ii) *S* accepts that *p*, (iii) *S* is completely justified in accepting that *p*, and (iv) *S* is completely justified in accepting *p* in some way that does not depend on any false statement.” (Lehrer 1990: 18. Later he adds the further proviso that *S* must accept that *p* with the aim of accepting what is true rather than what is false.)

If knowledge requires acceptance, rather than belief, then selfless assertions are not counterexamples to the Knowledge Norm. Stella does not believe that *homo sapiens* evolved from *homo erectus*, but she does accept it. Moreover, she has good evidence that it is true, this evidence is connected to the facts of the matter in an appropriate way,¹³ and, of course, the proposition is true. So, if knowledge requires acceptance, Stella *does* know that *homo sapiens* evolved from *homo erectus*. And in asserting as much, she is in compliance with the Knowledge Norm.

¹¹ He does, however, have a complicated story to tell about the role of experience in shaping a system of justified acceptances. For the most recent formulation of this story, see Lehrer 2019.

¹² Turri does not talk about acceptance, but he does suggest that a belief-like state, rather than belief itself, may be necessary for knowledge. (See Turri 2014: 194.)

¹³ It does not, as Lehrer would have it, ‘depend on any false statement’.

3.3 Commitment

As promising as that line of argument is, there are some reasons to be concerned with it. In particular, there is reason to think that knowledge requires *neither* belief *nor* acceptance. In this section I distinguish between acceptance and commitment, and argue that in order to know that p , one must be committed—in a sense to be specified below—to the truth of the proposition *that* p , rather than believe or accept it. I will then argue that selfless asserters are committed to the propositions that they assert. If they are, then selfless assertions pose no threat to the Knowledge Norm. I will begin by discussing the nature of commitments.¹⁴

Commitments are normative statuses. Characteristic of commitments are two features: *properly* undertaking a commitment requires that one have standing to do so, and, having undertaken a commitment, the range of actions that one is then permitted to perform is restricted in certain ways. Consider an illustration. Buying a shirt with a credit card involves undertaking a commitment to pay one's credit card bill. This commitment has both of the features mentioned above. To *properly* undertake this commitment requires that one, among other things, meet the lending criteria of the card's issuer (rather than have engaged in fraud). And, having undertaken it, one is then obligated to mail a check to the credit card company by the first of the following month. Prior to using the card, it was permissible to not mail them a check, but after using it, one's range of permissible actions shrinks. (See Tebben 2019: 323.)

The commitment involved in taking out a loan is a practical commitment, but there are also, to borrow a phrase from Robert Brandom, *cognitive commitments*. (Brandom 2000) A cognitive commitment is a commitment to the truth of a proposition. As with commitments more generally, properly undertaking a cognitive commitment requires that one have standing to do so. To have

¹⁴ The following discussion about the nature of commitments, and the relationship between commitment and knowledge, draws heavily from Tebben 2019.

standing to undertake a cognitive commitment is to have an indication that the proposition in question is true. Moreover, just as with practical commitments, undertaking a cognitive commitment restricts one's range of permissible behavior. If I am committed to the truth of p , I am thereby prohibited from acting and reasoning as though p is false, and, whenever the question of *whether* p would be relevant to my practical or theoretical reasoning, I am required to reason as though p is true. (See Tebben 2019: 323-324.)

There is, of course, a close connection between beliefs, acceptances, and commitments. Usually, an individual will believe, accept, and commit him- or herself to all the same propositions. But despite this connection, it is worth emphasizing the differences between these states. In particular, it is worth emphasizing that commitments differ in kind from beliefs and acceptances. The latter are psychological states, and hence theoretical entities posited by an empirical science (namely, psychology).¹⁵ Commitments are not. A commitment is a normative status, not a psychological state. Some have argued that beliefs share many of the normative properties of commitments. (See, for example, Shah and Velleman 2005.) On such a view, beliefs are composite states: they are psychological states to which a particular norm has been 'applied'. (Ibid. p. 511) There is an obvious affinity between this normative construal of beliefs and cognitive commitments, but so long as beliefs have a psychological component, there is still a distinction to be drawn between them.

Elsewhere I have argued that *S knows that p* entails *S is committed to p*, rather than *S believes that p* or *S accepts that p*. The argument that knowledge requires neither belief nor acceptance is rather simple. Consider that it is possible that eliminative materialism is true. Eliminative materialism is, in part, the thesis that there are no psychological states. It is, therefore, possible that there are neither beliefs nor acceptances. Now, eliminative materialism is an empirical hypothesis, and the truth or falsity

¹⁵ Beliefs, of course, play a role in folk psychology just as they do in psychology proper. But in each case, beliefs are adverted to as a means of explaining observable phenomena (behavior) in terms of unobservable phenomena (mental events).

of an empirical hypothesis is to be established scientifically. And scientific investigation, when it is successful and conducted well, yields knowledge. If eliminative materialism was true, it would be possible for this fact to be discovered scientifically. Hence it is possible to know that there are neither beliefs nor acceptances. And if that's possible, then *S knows that p* entails neither that *S* believes that *p*, nor that *S* accepts that *p*. (Tebben 2019: 324-326)

But in order for *S* to know that *p*, *S* must, in some sense, *endorse* the proposition that *p*. For reasons lately rehearsed, this endorsement must not take the form of being in a psychological state. One promising alternative—and one that seems quite likely given that neither belief nor acceptance is necessary for knowledge—is to take it that endorsing a proposition, in the relevant sense, amounts to taking up a cognitive commitment towards it. (Ibid. 327) And if that's right, then the fact that selfless asserters do not believe the propositions that they assert does not entail that they violate the Knowledge Norm.

Now, there may be more than one kind of cognitive commitment. Cognitive commitments that answer to epistemic considerations are the paradigmatic kind, and this is the kind of commitment contemplated above. But there may be commitments to the truth of a proposition that do not answer to epistemic considerations. Consider practical commitments. Perhaps I have standing to commit myself to the truth of *p* in a practical way if I have, say, been offered a lot of money to undertake this commitment. If there are commitments of this kind, I take it that they are the wrong kind of thing to constitute the basis of knowledge. Notice, however, that selfless asserters have a sincere concern for the truth, and an active interest in the evidence. It seems that their commitments are of the right kind to constitute the basis of knowledge.

The balance of this section is dedicated to showing that selfless asserters are, in fact, in compliance with the Knowledge Norm. The first step in this argument is to recognize that the Knowledge Norm is ambiguous. It can be given one of two readings:

The Truth-Conditional Reading

One must not bring about the following combination of states: one asserts that p and one does not know that p .

The Regulative Reading

One must not assert that p unless one *first* knows that p .

The Regulative Reading is perhaps most natural, but there is good reason to believe that the Truth-Conditional Reading is to be preferred.¹⁶ Consider that there are some propositions that one can come to know *by* asserting them. For example, it seems that the sentence ‘I am now asserting this sentence’ should be assertible, but under the Regulative Reading, it would be forbidden by the Knowledge Norm, as, prior to its assertion, the proposition *I am now asserting this sentence* is false (and hence not known). There are many propositions that have this profile. Battlefield promotions work the same way. General Brown turns to heroic Private Smith and says: ‘you are now Lieutenant Smith’. Upon asserting this proposition, the General knows it to be true.¹⁷ But under the Regulative Reading, the Knowledge Norm would prohibit him from asserting it.¹⁸

¹⁶ Turri (2011) argues that one ought to assert a proposition only if, in so doing, one would express one’s knowledge of the proposition that one asserts. His arguments suggest that the Knowledge Norm, whichever reading it is given, is unsatisfactory. But notice that his view can *also* be given both a regulative and a truth-conditional reading, and that the same considerations surveyed here support giving it a truth conditional reading. If I assert the sentence ‘I am now asserting this sentence’, I express my knowledge that that is what I am doing, but I do not express any knowledge that I had prior to making that assertion.

¹⁷ Of course, General Brown engages in more than one speech act when promoting Smith. One of those speech acts effects the promotion. But he is surely *also* asserting that Smith is a Lieutenant. Consider that if Brown does not have the authority to promote Smith, he can be accused not just of issuing a misfiring performative speech act, but also of having said something that is false.

¹⁸ Drawing a distinction between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ propriety will not help support the Regulative Reading. (On this distinction see Williamson 1996: 493.) An assertion is proper in the secondary sense if the speaker has evidence that it is proper in the primary sense. But prior to asserting the sentence ‘I am now asserting this

If propositions of this kind are assertible, then the Knowledge Norm should be given the Truth-Conditional Reading. Moreover, if this is right then selfless asserters pose no threat to the Knowledge Norm. One way—perhaps the paradigmatic way—to take up a cognitive commitment is to assert a proposition.¹⁹ So if Stella asserts that *homo sapiens* evolved from *homo erectus*, and if she does so on her own behalf rather than that of the educational establishment, she thereby becomes committed to the truth of the proposition that *homo sapiens* evolved from *homo erectus*.²⁰ She is, of course, right about this. And since she also has good (and non-deviant) evidence for it, she therefore *knows* that *homo sapiens* evolved from *homo erectus*. So, although Stella is a selfless asserter, she is also in compliance with the Knowledge Norm.²¹

One might be concerned that this standard for commitment is too liberal. Imagine that Leroy surveys all the evidence for and against the proposition that *p*, determines that it shows that *p* is false, and asserts that *p* anyway. He has, then, acquired a commitment to the proposition that *p*. It is, however, a commitment with a source that is, epistemically speaking, of low quality. The concern is that it should not be possible to acquire the substrate for knowledge from such a low-quality source.

If this is a problem, however, it is a common one in epistemology. It is possible to acquire a belief through brainwashing, or as a result of the use of drugs, and these sources of belief are of

sentence' the speaker does *not* have evidence that they know that it is true. Indeed, prior to asserting it, they know that it is false.

¹⁹ Brandom argues that to assert a proposition simply is to take up a commitment to it. (See his 1983 for an early statement of this view.) If, as Williamson holds, the Knowledge Norm is *constitutive* of the speech act of assertion (see his 2000), then Brandom's view is in tension with the Knowledge Norm. (On this point see Shapiro 2018.) I would like to offer two responses to this observation. First, one need not, and probably ought not, take it that the Knowledge Norm is the constitutive norm of assertion. (See Kelp and Simion 2020.) Second, and more importantly, one can take it that when one asserts that *p* one thereby takes up a cognitive commitment to the proposition that *p* without agreeing with Brandom about the nature of assertions.

²⁰ She may, of course, have been committed to it prior to asserting it. Perhaps willingness to assert a proposition commits one to it. But it suffices for this argument that asserting a proposition commits one to it, and so I will not discuss other means of commitment.

²¹ Notice, moreover, that nothing analogous to the problem of selfless asserters can arise if knowledge requires commitment rather than belief or acceptance. Since asserting a proposition is the paradigmatic way to take up a cognitive commitment, if *p* is true, one asserts that *p*, and one has good evidence for *p* (that is not connected to the fact of the matter in a deviant way), then one knows that *p*.

similarly low epistemic quality. What is important is not that an epistemic theory not allow the substrate of knowledge to come from a low-quality source, it is that it not allow *knowledge* to come from a low-quality source. And from the fact that it is possible to acquire a commitment from a low-quality source, it does not follow that it is possible to acquire knowledge from such a source. Leroy, for example, does not know that p because he does not satisfy the justification condition on knowledge.

Notice, moreover, that Leroy's position is very different than that of a selfless asserter. Stella asserts a proposition that she believes to be false, but her assertion is not based on a low-quality source. On the contrary, it is based on her appreciation of the evidence before her.

4. Must one believe what one asserts?

Proponents of the Knowledge Norm have one more response to the problem of selfless assertions, that was not reviewed above. Most of the arguments offered in defense of the Knowledge Norm purport to show that there are no selfless asserters, but others attempt to directly show that one must assert only those propositions that one believes. In section 4.1 I review some of John Turri's arguments to this effect, in section 4.2 I examine one of Christopher Kelp's arguments that may seem to support the same conclusion.

4.1 Turri's arguments

Turri (2014) says that the hypothesis that one must believe p if one is to properly assert that p nicely explains:

- why saying 'do you really believe that?' is always an appropriate challenge to an assertion,
- why saying 'I have no opinion on the matter' is always an appropriate response to a question,

- and why, if a speaker asserts that p and their audience responds by asking ‘do you really believe that?’, it would be ‘feeble and evasive’ (Turri 2014: 198) for the speaker to say that what they believe is unimportant, and if they say ‘no’, their audience will naturally regard this as a retraction of their assertion.

Two remarks are in order. First, if, as I have suggested, knowledge does not require belief, and if properly asserting a proposition requires that one know it, then the suggestion that it *also* requires that one believe it, is suspiciously *ad hoc*.²² Knowledge is connected to other aspects of our practical and theoretical lives²³ in a way that gerrymandered conjunctive states are not. And there is theoretical utility to be had if an account of the norm of assertion can be given in terms of properties that play significant theoretical roles elsewhere.²⁴

But more importantly, if knowledge requires commitment, it may be possible to explain the data that drives Turri’s arguments. When someone challenges an assertion by saying ‘do you really believe that?’, they perform a different speech act than someone does when they merely *ask* ‘do you really believe that?’. The challenge is not a request for information. Notice that, *qua* challenge, it functions like ‘is that really true?’, or ‘what’s the evidence for that?’. The person issuing the challenge is not interested in the speaker’s mental state, nor in their mere assurance that what they’ve said is true. Being assured (by a speaker whose reliability or trustworthiness is in doubt) that they believe what

²² Notice that the argument that knowledge does not require belief is independent of any considerations concerning the norm of assertion, and so it is not question begging to assume that knowledge does not require belief as a part of an argument to the effect that one need not believe a proposition in order to properly assert it.

²³ Consider Hawthorne and Stanley’s arguments in their 2008.

²⁴ The Knowledge Norm specifies a necessary condition on proper assertion, but some (see Simion 2016, for example) suggest that knowing that a proposition is true is also sufficient for one’s assertion of that proposition to be permissible. Notice that if S knows that p does not entail that S believes that p , then an argument to the effect that properly asserting a proposition requires that one believe it also amounts to an argument against this stronger version of the Knowledge Norm.

they've said is not reassuring. What the questioner is asking for is some indication that what has been said is true. Responding to this challenge by saying 'yes' would not allay the audience's concern, but a response like 'yes, and here's why...', might.

Indeed, an adequate response to this challenge need not make any reference to the speaker's mental state. It is typically just the evidence that is desired. Imagine that Archibald asserts to his wife Beatrice that their son Cornelius will win a spot on his school's baseball team. To which Beatrice, knowing that Cornelius is not much of an athlete, responds: 'do you really believe that?' If Archibald were to respond 'well, he's been practicing all spring *and* he started lifting weights last fall', he would have adequately responded to his wife's challenge, even though he did not say anything about what he believes.

I would like to move on to Turri's second argument. He is right that saying 'I have no opinion on the matter' is an apt response to a question, but one ought not to infer from this fact that one must believe a proposition in order to assert it properly. The distinction between belief and commitment is an abstruse philosophical one. Usually a person will believe and be committed to the same set of propositions, and there is rarely any harm in treating the two notions interchangeably. And so it is not a distinction that we should expect to be reflected in ordinary usage.²⁵ Given that 'I have no opinion on the matter' is an expression of colloquial English, and colloquial English usage does not recognize a distinction between belief and commitment, the evidence that Turri identifies does not tell against the hypothesis that one must be committed to the truth of a proposition, rather than believe it, in order to properly assert it.

Next, consider how a selfless asserter can respond to the challenge posed when someone asks 'do you really believe that?'. Turri is right that saying 'well, what I think is unimportant' would come

²⁵ Indeed, it is a distinction that is rarely drawn even by philosophers. Tebben (2018) explains why philosophers have largely failed to recognize the distinction between beliefs and commitments.

across as evasive, and that saying 'no' would amount to retracting the assertion. But both data points are consistent with the hypothesis under consideration. Because the distinction between belief and commitment is not reflected in ordinary speech, talk of 'what I think' can be read as either talk about one's beliefs, or talk about one's commitments. On the view under consideration, saying 'well, what I think is unimportant' is evasive because it reflects an unwillingness to reaffirm one's commitment, and saying 'no' retracts an assertion because it amounts to repudiating one's commitment.²⁶

4.2 Kelp on legitimate criticism

Kelp argues that if one asserts a proposition without knowing it to be true one is therefore justly subject to criticism, and that this fact supports the Knowledge Norm. In particular, he says: 'For any performance type, φ , that is governed by a rule to the effect that one must: φ only if one meets C , if we criticize an agent who φ s without satisfying C for φ ing without satisfying C , our criticism will be *prima facie* legitimate.' (Kelp 2018: 413; call this 'Kelp's Principle'. I have reformatted portions of this selection.) Moreover, he adds that, if φ is *not* governed by a rule of this sort, then such criticisms are *prima facie* illegitimate, and may be rebutted as 'misplaced or irrelevant'. (Ibid. 414) These considerations seem to tell in favor of the Knowledge Norm.

Now, Kelp notes that when a speaker asserts a proposition that she does not know, it is often not obvious that she does not know it, and so a *prima facie* legitimate criticism must often be accompanied by an explanation of why the speaker fails to know the proposition in question. One might, for example, explain that the speaker's judgments are likely to be unreliable in the present environment. Of particular interest, in this context, is that saying 'you don't believe that yourself' also seems to be an adequate explanation of why the speaker's assertion is subject to criticism. (Ibid.) This

²⁶ In connection with this point, see Baldwin's work on Moore's Paradox (Baldwin 2007).

suggests that one is subject to criticism if one asserts a proposition that one does not believe, and hence that one must assert a proposition only if one believes it.

Although *most* speakers who assert a proposition that they do not believe are subject to criticism, I will argue that selfless asserters are *not* subject to criticism on the same grounds, and so Kelp's argument does not entail that the norm of assertion requires speakers to believe the propositions that they assert. Central to my argument is the fact that most speakers who assert propositions that they do not believe intend to assert *false* propositions.²⁷ Most of them are not selfless asserters, they are liars. This fact explains why those who assert propositions that they do not believe are, typically, subject to criticism. And it explains why such criticism cannot simply be dismissed as irrelevant: such criticism carries with it the implication that what the speaker has said is false. But selfless asserters are a (very rare) exception to this rule. They do *not* intend to assert false propositions, and so are not vulnerable to the same criticism. They are selfless asserters precisely because the best way for them to inform their audiences of the truth is to assert a proposition that they do not believe. (See Lackey 2019: 248-250.)

Notice that, although the criticism in question cannot *simply* be dismissed (because to dismiss it is to defend liars), it *can* be shown to be illegitimate by showing that one is a selfless asserter. That is, if one can demonstrate that one's testimony is more reliable than one's beliefs, this demonstration adequately responds to the criticism. For example, if Stella's students accuse her of asserting a proposition that she does not believe, it is just fine for her to respond to them by explaining that beliefs should be based on evidence instead of faith, but that, for idiosyncratic reasons having to do with how she was raised, she is unable to take her own advice. Their criticism cannot be simply dismissed as

²⁷ Even if the proposition that they assert happens, by chance, to be true, they are still subject to criticism, if for no other reason than that they are attempting to violate the Knowledge Norm. (They are almost certainly also actually violating it, but that does not need to be shown in order to show that they are subject to criticism.)

irrelevant, because most criticism of this sort *is* relevant. But selfless asserters *can* show that they are not legitimate targets for it.

It is worth noting that Kelp is aware of the limitations of this line of argument. Writing with Mona Simion, he says that his account of criticizability (and related accounts of blameworthiness) cannot protect the Knowledge Norm from the threat posed by selfless assertions. (See Kelp and Simion 2017.) Now, one *might* try to argue that since Kelp's Principle requires only that criticism be *prima facie* legitimate, the fact that criticism of selfless asserters is not *ultimately* legitimate does not tell against the hypothesis that proper assertion requires belief. I doubt, however, that such an argument would be successful. I take it that a performance that violates condition *C* is only *prima facie* subject to criticism because the performer might have an excuse for her performance. That is, if a performance is *prima facie* subject to criticism, and not excusable, then it *really is* subject to criticism. But it does not seem that being a selfless assertor is an *excuse* for violating the norm of assertion, and, moreover, it is not treated as one in the literature.²⁸ Assertions of false propositions that a speaker believes and for which the speaker has justification may be excusable, because the speaker reasonably (although mistakenly) takes herself to know that they are true. But this is not the situation in which selfless asserters find themselves. If belief is necessary for knowledge, then selfless asserters *obviously* do not know the propositions that they assert, and so their assertions cannot be excused in the same way as assertions of false but justified propositions. On the other hand, if knowledge does not require belief, then their assertions may not be impermissible at all. And so, I take it that the arguments lately reviewed do not indicate that speakers must believe a proposition in order to properly assert it.

²⁸ A number of authors discuss excusable assertions. See, for example, Williamson 1996, DeRose 2002, and Reynolds 2013.

5 | Conclusion

Selfless assertions are often taken to be counterexamples to the Knowledge Norm. There are a number of ways in which a defense against these apparent counterexamples might be mounted. One might show that those who appear to be selfless asserters either:

(A) believe the propositions that they assert.

(B) do not perform the speech acts that they seem to.

or

(C) assert a proposition other than the one that they seem to.

All of (A) through (C) involve denying that there really are any selfless asserters. But another strategy is available, and one that does not involve denying that there are any selfless asserters. One might argue for:

(D) Selfless asserters know the propositions that they assert to be true (although they do not believe them).

Option (A) is not very promising. Turri argues that his experimental data supports it, but they really indicate that his experimental results are not relevant to the question at hand. Turri has also argued, on other grounds, in favor of (B). This line of argument is more promising, but I have suggested that, with only a little emendation to Lackey's original story, Stella can be seen as speaking on her own behalf. Milić attempted to show that (C) is true, but some of the same considerations that tell against (B) also show that Stella is asserting what she seems to be asserting.

My preferred option is (D). If knowledge requires commitment, rather than belief, then the Knowledge Norm can accommodate the propriety of selfless assertions. It seems that selfless asserters are committed to what they assert, and given that they meet the other conditions on knowledge, it seems that they know that what they assert is true. There is, therefore, good reason to think that selfless assertions are not counterexamples to the Knowledge Norm.

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