

On Maitra and Weatherson's "Assertion, Knowledge, and Action"

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Maitra and Weatherson provide strong arguments against knowledge as a norm of assertion. But there is a crucial ambiguity in the very statement of the knowledge norm. Williamson's knowledge norm can be interpreted as a pro tanto or as an all things considered norm. I will first introduce the distinction and argue that Williamson's knowledge norm is plausibly interpreted as a pro tanto norm. I will then argue that Maitra and Weatherson have refuted only the all things considered interpretation. I will show that the independently more plausible pro tanto interpretation knowledge norm is untouched by Maitra and Weatherson's arguments.

1. *Disambiguating Williamson's Knowledge Norm*

What is the distinction between pro tanto and all things considered norms? *Pro tanto norms* have the normative force of considerations that bear weight in providing reasons for action. But these considerations can be outweighed by other considerations that provide competing reasons for alternative courses of action. By contrast, *all things considered norms* have the normative force of absolute considerations that cannot be outweighed. All things considered norms are final verdicts that take into account all the pro tanto reasons for and against a given course of action. For instance, if a mugger holds a gun to your head and demands your wallet, you presumably have a pro tanto reason not to give up your wallet, but an all things considered reason to give up your wallet.¹

How does this distinction apply to Williamson's knowledge norm? Here is how Williamson states the knowledge norm:

Knowledge Norm: One ought to assert that p , only if one knows that p .

As stated, this norm is *ambiguous* between the following two norms:

Pro Tanto Knowledge Norm: One ought epistemically speaking to assert that p , only if one knows that p .

All Things Considered Knowledge Norm: One ought all things considered to assert that p , only if one knows that p .

¹ It is important to distinguish the *pro tanto/all things considered* distinction from the *prima facie/ultima facie* distinction. A pro tanto norm remains weighty even when outweighed, but a prima facie norm carries no weight when defeated. An agent with a pro tanto obligation to A but an overall obligation not to A must refrain from A -ing, despite still having some reason to A . But an agent with a mere prima facie obligation to A that is defeated has no reason whatsoever to A .

Note that in rendering the *pro tanto* knowledge norm I have introduced the phrase “epistemically speaking.” This is intended to serve as a placeholder for a certain type of reason—some sort of epistemic reason—for or against making an assertion, leaving open that there may be other competing reasons for or against making an assertion, such as reasons of relevance, etiquette, and instrumental value.

The all things considered knowledge norm is quite obviously implausible. Say someone holds a gun to your head and demands that you assert that $2+2=5$. Even though you have an epistemic reason not to make such an assertion, you presumably have an all things considered reason to make such an assertion. The evident falsity of the content provides a reason against making such an assertion, but this reason is outweighed by the countervailing reason that making such an assertion will save your life. So all things considered, you ought to comply and assert that $2+2=5$ in such a situation.

The more plausible interpretation of Williamson’s knowledge norm is the *pro tanto* interpretation. It may be—all things considered—permissible to assert what one does not know or even what one knows to be false, given sufficient countervailing reasons, e.g. saving someone’s life. Nonetheless, there is a reason—what I have labeled an “epistemic reason”—not to assert what one does not know or what one knows to be false. The *pro tanto* knowledge norm can perform the main tasks that Williamson’s knowledge norm has been recruited to perform. It can be recruited to explain what is defective about Moorean paradoxical assertions and what is bad about assertions of lottery propositions. It provides a reason against making such assertions. However, it allows that such reasons can be outweighed by other reasons. If someone holds a gun to your head and demands that you assert that your lottery ticket will lose, then you presumably have an all things considered reason to make such an assertion, despite its epistemic defectiveness.

Just to clarify: I have not defended the *pro tanto* knowledge norm. I have argued only that it is more plausible to interpret Williamson’s knowledge norm as a *pro tanto* rather than as an all things considered norm. Perhaps there are reasons for rejecting even the *pro tanto* knowledge norm. But I will now argue that Maitra and Weatherson have not provided any such reasons.

2. Diagnosing Maitra and Weatherson’s Cases

Maitra and Weatherson argue that their *Going to War* and *Buying Flood Insurance* cases require abandoning the knowledge norm of assertion. As I aim to show, these cases only require abandoning the all things considered knowledge norm. These cases do not show that knowledge has *no normative force* with respect to what one may assert. All they show is that, if knowledge has normative force with respect to what one may assert, *its normative force may be outweighed by other*

considerations. One can accept Maitra and Weatherson's cases while endorsing the independently more plausible pro tanto knowledge norm.

Indeed, endorsing the pro tanto knowledge norm allows for an even better diagnosis of the *Going to War* and *Buying Flood Insurance* cases than the one Maitra and Weatherson provide. The diagnosis I would like to suggest is that knowledge has normative force with respect to what one may assert, but in these cases its normative force is outweighed by other considerations. This alternative diagnosis of the cases yields at least two crucial differences to Maitra and Weatherson's diagnosis. First, the alternative diagnosis entails that there remain reasons against the assertions in these cases, even if these reasons are in the end outweighed. This seems a good consequence of the diagnosis as the following three points illustrate. First, the Prime Minister of Indalia speaks out of ignorance and that's regrettable, even if overridden by other reasons. Second, if one removes the ignorance of the Prime Minister, then the Prime Minister would be doing better. Compare Maitra and Weatherson's cases to counterpart cases in which the speakers in fact speak knowledgeably. Arguably the speakers in these counterpart cases have less to regret. Third, if one adds on to the ignorance of the Prime Minister, then she would be doing even worse. Compare Maitra and Weatherson's cases to counterpart cases in which the speakers are even farther away from knowledge. Arguably the speakers in these counterpart cases are doing even worse. For instance consider:

Wishing for War: Imagine that a country, Norselandia, finds itself in a situation where the thing to do, given the evidence available to its leaders, is to go to war against an enemy. But the leaders do not know about the evidence. They simply want to go to war. So while going to war is the thing to do, the leaders of Norselandia don't know this. The President of Norselandia gives a speech to the House of Commons setting out his reasons to go to war. Not having any reasons, the speech is very short. The President just says "The thing to do in the circumstances is to go to war."

Arguably, the President of Norselandia's assertion is normatively worse than the Prime Minister of Indalia's assertion, and the natural explanation is that the President of Norselandia is in an even worse epistemic position with respect to what he asserted.²

Secondly, the alternative diagnosis entails that when the remaining considerations are sufficiently light, the epistemic reasons not to assert can outweigh them. When matters of war

² Strictly speaking the knowledge norm does not include any measure of distance from knowledge, or correlate such a measure with the degree of norm violation. But I take it that such an idea is a natural generalization of most norms. In any case one can think of the knowledge norm as generating a host of derived norms for asserting truly, with justification, and with belief that is properly based on justification. One might then think that the President of Norselandia has violated more of these derived norms than has the Prime Minister of Indalia.

and peace are at issue, practical reasons may often outweigh epistemic reasons (this is one of the morals I take from Maitra and Weatherson's cases). But when less is at stake, then practical reasons are less likely to outweigh epistemic reasons. For instance consider:

Walk in the Park: Imagine that a family, call them the Schellenschaffs, have gone for a pleasant walk in the park. The Schellenschaffs find themselves in a situation in which the thing to do, given the evidence available to them, is to walk on the leftmost path. But it is a close call. The rightmost path is nearly equally good. And in any case virtually nothing is at stake. So while taking the leftmost path is the thing to do, the Schellenschaffs can't know this. So our family is in a delicate position here. One member of the family—let's call her S—thinks that they should walk on the leftmost path, and gives the other member of the family—we'll call him J—a speech explaining her reasons, concluding with the bold assertion that the thing to do is to walk on the leftmost path.

It seems that all things considered, S has gone a bit too far. While it is hardly a big deal, she still should not have made her assertion.

So I conclude that what is happening in Maitra and Weatherson's cases is that there are competing reasons for and against assertion, but all things considered reasons for assertion. In particular there is an epistemic reason not to assert, which is outweighed by practical reasons to assert. Acknowledging this requires endorsing the pro tanto knowledge norm.

3. Disambiguating Maitra and Weatherson's Master Argument

Maitra and Weatherson's master argument against the knowledge norm, in its final form (p. 4), involves normative claims about what S can properly assert. Like Williamson's knowledge norm, these normative claims can be interpreted *pro tanto* or *all things considered*.

Maitra and Weatherson's first premise reads "If doing X on basis B is what to do for agent S, then S can properly, on basis B, assert that X is what to do (assuming this is relevant to the conversation)." This premise is plausibly true on an all things considered interpretation. But it is false on a pro tanto interpretation. The fact that doing X on basis B is what to do does not give S an *epistemic* reason for asserting that X is what to do. Indeed, this fact does not even concern S's epistemic standing with respect to the claim that X is what to do. It might give S some other non-epistemic reason for making such an assertion, and that other reason might (if sufficiently weighty) outweigh the epistemic reason against making such an assertion.

Maitra and Weatherson's conclusion reads: "So, it is possible that S properly can assert that X is what to do, even though she does not know, and is not even in a position to know, that X is what to do." This is again plausibly true on an all things considered interpretation. Just consider the case of the person who points a gun to your head and demands that you assert that

a given action X is what to do. However, Maitra and Weatherson's conclusion shows only that the all things considered knowledge norm is false. Given that their first premise is false on the pro tanto interpretation, the more plausible pro tanto knowledge norm is still in the running.

To conclude: Williamson's knowledge norm of assertion is most plausibly interpreted as a pro tanto norm. On this interpretation, it can explain what is bad about Moorean paradoxical assertions and assertions of lottery propositions. Moreover, Maitra and Weatherson's cases do not support giving up the pro tanto knowledge norm and indeed are best interpreted in light of this norm. So I think that the valuable lesson to be learned from Maitra and Weatherson's paper is not that the knowledge norm of assertion is false, but merely that the knowledge norm of assertion is best understood as a pro tanto norm which may be outweighed.