

A Critical Appraisal of Lackey's "Norms of Assertion"

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In this paper I will analyze and challenge Jennifer Lackey's "Norms of Assertion" through a close-reading of the article itself, a summary of the major argumentation, and an appraisal of supposed objections that seem to counter Lackey's conclusion. Lackey's essay is a significant contribution to the philosophical literature to date, as it proposes a "middle road" between two dominant epistemological understandings of assertions (the KNA and TNA). Thus, this separates her from thinkers such as Timothy Williamson and other proponents of the KNA thesis. Lackey's work is profitable to the epistemologist seeking to understand exactly what assertions must contain or be used for in order to be epistemically proper. To begin, I will provide a roadmap through Lackey's article itself, starting with an attempted clarification of her example-driven argument against the *Knowledge Norm of Assertion* (heretofore referenced as "the KNA"). I will attempt to formally reconstruct her argument in its original form. Her finalized argument, the *Reasonable to Believe Norm of Assertion*, is here summarized as:

RTBNA: One should assert that p only if:

- (i) it is reasonable for one to believe that p, and

- (ii) (ii) if one asserted that p , one would assert that p at least in part because it is reasonable for one to believe that p .

Lackey defends her above theory's main tenets against responses from proponents of the KNA thesis. I will focus on Lackey's objection to the claim that the speech-acts performed by the agents in her case-study examples are not best framed as "assertions." I will attempt to show that this is in error and that the agents in her case studies can reasonably be understood as asserting truths using Lycan's theory of assertive content. Once her understanding of the KNA and what she finds lacking with the norm theory is made explicit and compared with a similar objection from Richard Feldman in his work *Epistemology*, I will make the claim that proponents of the KNA thesis have a considerable gap to fill in accounting for the second objection undertaken by Lackey in section three of her article. Lastly, I will attempt to show that Lackey's criticism of the KNA is successful in light of the considered counterexamples, revised definition of the KNA thesis accounting for various sorts of justification, and its relation to the specific examples in her article.

In section two of her article, Lackey lays out her main argumentation against the KNA (*Knowledge Norm of Assertion*), which can be stated as thus:

KNA: One should assert that p only if one knows that p .

This view is one held by many respected philosophers, usually taken to be the central norm of assertion, and it entails that "knowledge," whatever that may be, is required in

order for an agent to make a *proper* assertion. Lackey quotes Timothy Williamson as a summary of this traditional view: "...Only knowledge warrants assertion" (Williamson 2000, pg. 243). Lackey begins by asserting that the strongest counterargument to the KNA theory is grounded in phenomenon that she calls "selfless assertion." She begins with three distinct cases. I won't summarize each case here, but there are self-proclaimed similarities in each of these examples that lends to the aid of the author's main claims. The first case is that of a racist juror, the second a distraught doctor, and the third a creationist teacher, who assert the truth of a proposition, roughly, that they do not firmly believe but that they in fact see genuinely convincing evidence for and therefore have *positive motivation* for asserting that same proposition (which becomes an important point against later objections to the RTBNA). For Lackey, each of these cases are united in the fact that they are *selfless assertions*, meaning that the subject in each case offers an assertion without knowledge and is not subject to any sort of relevant or normative criticism. Lackey says, first, that there are three central components to these three examples: "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, pg. 599). Lackey's argument, as summarized at the bottom of section three, contains three major components. The first claim concerning knowledge and assertion

in her argumentation is that knowledge requires belief. The second, and potentially strongest, is that an agent can offer an assertion in the absence of a corresponding belief or beliefs. Lackey's third underlying assumption, and the most contested one, is that some assertions offered in the absence of corresponding belief are *proper*. She says that the last assumption is "intuitively compelling." Lackey's argument can be laid out as a brief and compact syllogism in the following way:

1. According to these three case studies, one can assert properly that *p*, in the absence of knowing *p*, and be exempt from criticism *qua* asserter.
2. If one can properly assert *p* in the absence of knowing *p*, then these selfless assertions are assertions that do not *require* knowledge to be epistemically proper.
3. If selfless assertions are assertions that do not require knowledge to be epistemically proper, then the KNA does not account for these assertions *as a general theory* and is false.
4. The KNA does not account for these assertions *as a general theory* and is, therefore, false.

Lackey spends the rest of her following section defending her objections to the KNA from prominent epistemologists that support the view she is attempting to undermine.

In section 3, Lackey defends her above argument against the KNA against four potential replies that KNA proponents could make. The first of these objections

suggests that the subjects of each of these examples perform “speech-acts” that are best understood as *not* being “assertions.” Simply put, the objector here is claiming that these are not *genuine assertions*. The objection is dismissed by Lackey because it seems to contradict the surety that agents can assert lies, but the objection also demands that “S believe *p* in order to *genuinely assert p*.” Her argumentation here is neither helpful, extensive, nor clear, and she may indeed have represented this objection uncharitably. This objection does indeed engage Lackey’s argument against the KNA theory, but it doesn’t seem to do so in the way that Lackey imagines it does. The objection claims that the agents in each of these three cases did not make *genuine assertions* due to the fact that they were not speaking for themselves, but as a representative for some encapsulating whole or community. Lackey states the end of this objection as such: “Since the speakers in instances of selfless assertion do not personally identify with their proffered statements, it may be concluded that they are not therefore offering genuine assertions. Hence, the above cases would not be counterexamples to the KNA” (600). Where the author’s appraisal of this objection fails is during her assertion that this objection’s supposed thesis, that S must believe *p* in order to *genuinely assert p*, would entail that no agent could ever assert a lie. This objection does actually engage Lackey’s argument against KNA by showing that the agent’s assertions in her three chosen examples are not genuine assertions because the agents in question do not actually *believe* them and therefore are neither entirely convinced nor trustworthy as genuine asserters. The

equivocation between ‘assertion’ and ‘belief’ here lends an opportunity for Lackey to clarify the notions of “assertion” and “belief” that play such a critical role, but this opportunity is entirely glossed over. Lackey seems to lump together all of those questions into a *prima facie* rejection of the objection because of the concept of “lying,” which is generally unclear. The question at hand remains: do these subjects perform “speech-acts” that are not forms of assertion? William Lycan’s *Philosophy of Language* seems to assert, *prima facie* convincingly, that every utterance has an aspect of performance or illocution (“doing an action” or simply “what was done”) in it and that there is *no real distinction* between performative utterances (sentences that describe reality as well as change the social reality that they describe) and ordinary declarative sentences. If Lycan is right, then the objection given above may have to be reframed to account for the propositional content or assertive-descriptive qualities inherent in virtually any utterance. This proposes unsolved problems for the objector in this first proposed rejection of Lackey’s line of thought.

Following from the previous point, if Lycan is right in claiming that every speech-act has an element of performativity included in it, then Lackey is correct in her rejection of this first objection. For the proposed objector to be correct, then there must exist speech-acts which do not assert (do not have ‘performance’). The unsolved problems I have noted are various, especially in the realm of utterances which are intentionally misleading. If there are indeed no, or at best very few, cases in which

ordinary declarative sentences are not also assertions, then this objection to Lackey's project cannot stand, though I would also like to note that Lackey does not lay out a response to this objection in the way that I see most relevant to the objection itself.

Lackey's mistake here is in responding to a failed objection in a way which does not address or take into account what I see as the most pertinent and interesting responses.

The objection, though, does indeed fail in light of Lycan's theory of assertive content.

This point can be seen more clearly in the work of thinkers who have challenged the notion of a non-performative speech-acts, and especially the notion of a non-performative declarative sentence.

Lackey's theory is well-conceived in the form it takes within the given article, but there is much left to be said. Richard Feldman, in his student-workbook, *Epistemology*, deals with a similar (although, admittedly, simpler) objection to the Evidentialist project. A few interesting questions arise from a comparison of these two objections and Feldman's response to the latter, which also addresses the former. The objection, ominously entitled "The Accusation" that Feldman responds to can be framed as such:

A good friend is accused of a crime, and you are aware of some incriminating evidence. You know this friend as well and have evidence that it would be out of character for this person to commit the crime. Your friend is upset by the charges brought against her, and she calls you for support! Out of loyalty to your friend,

and given the mixed nature of your evidence, you believe that your friend is not guilty.

It may be helpful, given the nature of the objection, to define exactly what Evidentialism *is* and how we ought to understand Feldman's response.

Evidentialism, classically, is expressed by the seemingly simple principle that believing p is justified for S at a given time, t , if and only if S 's evidence at t supports p . The case listed above, "The Accusation," is intended to show that evidence is not *all* that any given subject or agent, S , needs to be justified in believing a given proposition, p . In this case, you would be justified in believing that your friend is not guilty due to an account concerning loyalty, friendship, and the likes. This objection seeks to provide a problem for Evidentialism in showing that "evidence alone" doesn't fit the truth of everyday situations where agents are legitimately justified in acting. Feldman denies that this counterexample is successful.

Feldman's response shows that Evidentialist epistemology simply does not deal with questions of morality. Feldman says that epistemology, generally, and Evidentialism specifically, deal with the nature of rational belief *alone*. In this given case, the rational attitude for an Evidentialist would be to *suspend judgment* or at best believe that your friend is guilty. The fact that a "morally good" agent may set rationality aside here is neither here nor there applicable to the *epistemically* rational attitude of the agent.

The question now arises after analyzing the aforementioned objection and Feldman's response as to whether or not the proponents of the KNA thesis can defend against Lackey's argument in a similar way that Feldman defends Evidentialism, considering that many philosophers have noticed strong similarity between these two cases? The first step in clarifying the KNA thesis is to ask ourselves which sorts of justification it concerns. A reconstruction of the original KNA thesis may help:

KNA: A subject, *S*, is *epistemically justified* in asserting a given proposition, *p*, only if *S* knows *p*.

It may be valuable in our reconstruction of the KNA thesis and the comparison of this rephrased claim with the Feldman reply to go deeper into the notion of justification. It seems to me that the KNA thesis is concerning a justification that is totally indifferent and not concerned with questions of *morality*, as well, and potentially is not even concerned with matters of professional propriety (as will become important in our analysis of the Lackey's second objection). The word "should" in the original formulation of the KNA thesis at the beginning of this essay may hold more weight than originally thought, especially if transformed into something with a more explicitly epistemological context and connotation. Lackey's article attempts to clarify something like this recapitulated and rephrased argumentation in the second objection within section 3. Lackey considers this objection, which states that the various positions and various "role responsibilities" (601) of the agents render these selfless assertions

problematic as *general* counters to the KNA thesis, writ large. Lackey replies first by acknowledging that this objection may not concern one of her three examples (not listed in detail in this essay), which we will not test here. Lackey simply points out that the KNA thesis is taken to be a *general* claim concerning the justification of agents in assertion. The responsibilities of agents are existent in any conceivable social class or position (priest, doctor, lawyer, groomer, etc.). The KNA thesis would have to admit that responsibilities only apply to agents when they fill a responsible role. Does Lackey's reply to this objection supply defeater to the new counterexample given above to the KNA, inspired by Feldman's defense of Evidentialism above? It would seem so. Proponents of the KNA thesis, if this is a charitable representation of their position, must account for the existence of role responsibility in assertions for any given person, *S*, being epistemically justified in asserting a proposition, *p*.

It seems, finally, that the proponents of the Knowledge Norm of Assertion thesis have found a considerable challenge in Lackey's work. Beginning with Lackey's argument against the KNA, we framed the debate in terms supplied by the article itself and saw her project in a charitable way that was faithful to the text itself, hopefully. Afterwards a clear explanation of Lackey's argumentative moves as she defended her theory's main tenets against prominent responses against it by KNA proponents yielded clarification and allowed for a fuller picture of Lackey's dismissal of this counterexample due to the "lying" incident. Using Lycan's work, the proponent of the

KNA thesis has been left with a considerable semantic difficulty to unravel concerning the content of propositions and genuine assertions, writ large. After this recapitulation, an objection to Lackey's argumentation against the KNA schools yielded in a defeater, constructed by Lackey and her work, for the KNA proponent considered in the final two paragraphs of the essay. Lastly, it seems that proponents of the KNA thesis, if this is a charitable representation of their position, must account for the existence of role responsibility in assertions for any given person performing an utterance.

Works Cited

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